

MBC - 2/17/2019 - Pastor Doug Thompson  
*Jonah: A Story of God's Relentless Grace*  
 #5: "God in the Hands of an Angry Sinner"  
 Jonah 4

Turn with me to Jonah ch.4. This morning we will finish our study of this little book.

This has been much more than a just a fish story, hasn't it? It is about the very heart of God toward lost sinners. He is "*a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*" And He showed that on a massive scale by relenting from the judgment He proclaimed through Jonah, and instead granting repentance and mercy. Maybe half a million people were granted salvation instead of the judgment they deserved. And I believe that this was a true conversion, because Jesus confirmed this when He said to the Jews who rejected Him—

- Mat 12:41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for *they* repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

When we all finally arrive at that great banquet table for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, you might be seated next to a Ninevite! This was the greatest revival in human history. You and I should read this and drop to our knees to praise God for His mercy!

We hear weekly about horrible mass murders, shootings, bombings, innocent civilians being gassed by their own govts. And we believe it - it's the new normal. But do we believe it when we read about this mass conversion by God? A complete reversal of what half a million people deserved? But that is the very heart of God! This is the God we worship? Look again at—

- Jon 3:10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, *and he did not do it.*

God didn't give these cruel, idolatrous, evil Assyrians what they deserved - He gave them what they didn't deserve. They will receive all blessings that Christ purchased by His blood for His people - just like you and me!

But here is another irony - and we've seen so many in this story. This is exactly the same Hebrew wording that we find in another passage that Jonah knew very well. Let me read it—

- Exodus 32:14 <sup>14</sup>And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

Exodus 32: what had God's people just done? Aaron and the golden calf, remember that story? Gross, blatant idolatry. God said to Moses, "Step back while I wipe out the whole nation and start over!" Moses interceded and begged God to relent, and He did. That's what God is like. So Jonah was fine with God relenting from judgment and showing His *own* people mercy. But he had a completely different reaction when God chose to show mercy to Israel's enemies.

That's what this last chapter explores, and I would venture to say that a lot of folks don't know this part of the story! They think the story ends when Jonah gets barfed out of the whale - or maybe after he preaches to the Nineveh. But this last chapter is the most important part of the story because it ends with a question hanging in the air. And the only ones who can answer it are the readers. Us.

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Let's pick it up in—

- Jonah 4 <sup>1</sup>But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. <sup>2</sup>And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. <sup>3</sup>Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>4</sup>And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?” <sup>5</sup>Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. <sup>6</sup>Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. <sup>7</sup>But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup>When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>9</sup>But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” <sup>10</sup>And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup>And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

### I. Why is this man so angry?

The 4th chapter of Jonah could be entitled, “*God in the Hands of an Angry Sinner!*” Jonah is smokin’. He is angry enough to *die* - why?

- According to Rabbinic writings, Jonah was concerned about his own skin because Dt. 18 prescribed the death penalty for false prophets - Jonah had announced that God would destroy Nineveh, but they repented and God relented, so he could be seen as a false prophet.

But that’s not why he was angry. He had been angry with God since He commissioned him to go to Nineveh in the first place—

- V.2: “*That is why* I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I *knew* that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”

Jonah knew that implicit in any warning from God is a promise to relent of judgment if the people will turn and repent. God might just show mercy to these wicked Ninevites! And Jonah knew this because God had so often warned His own people, Israel, that the warning might move them to repent and His judgment be averted. God took Jeremiah to a potter’s house to show him this lesson—

- Jeremiah 18:5-11 (ESV) <sup>5</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>6</sup>“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. <sup>7</sup>If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, <sup>8</sup>and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. <sup>9</sup>And if at any time I declare concerning a na-

tion or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, <sup>10</sup>and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

<sup>11</sup>Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. (Now notice what God says next): Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.’

Why? So that He might not carry out His judgment! And the history of Israel is God doing that very thing, isn't it? The only reason Jonah was alive to preach was that God had spared His people time and time again. And that was OK with Jonah. That was righteous of God to do so. That was fair. But not fair or righteous of God to do the same for Israel's enemies. It was actually evil of God to do so—

The last verse of ch.3 says that God saw that the Ninevites turned from their *evil (ra'ah)* way, and God relented from the evil (*ra'ah* - same Heb. Word) that He had said He would do to them. Now look at Jonah's reaction—

- Jonah 4:1 <sup>1</sup>But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

In the Hebrew it uses this same word twice (*ra'ah*), “*But it was evil to Jonah with great evil.*”

To Jonah it was morally *evil* for God to be patient and merciful to Israel's enemies. He was attributing evil to God! Do you see how blind he is? It's right for God to show mercy to Israel. It's even right for God to show mercy to him as disobedient as he had been. But it's evil to do the same for Assyrians. God shouldn't be like that. Wow. That is the pot talking back to the Potter.

You know you have a spiritual problem when you talk back to God like that. But let me tell you what Jonah's problem was. He was an idolater and didn't recognize it. Remember what he said in—

- Jonah 2:8 <sup>8</sup>Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

“Those other people. . . those pagans, who bow down to idols.” But Jonah had an idol - something that was more important to him than obedience to God - patriotism. *Patriotism*. Remember how he identified himself to those sailors? He was a *Hebrew* - 1:9, and the status and security of his people was more important to him than the salvation of Israel's enemies. Jonah couldn't see how Israel could be safe if God blessed Assyria. It was one or the other to Jonah.

- Tim Keller said that years ago when he was preaching on Jonah, a man came up to him afterwards and was very unhappy. He actually said, “You shouldn't have criticized Jonah, he was just being a good patriot. We should all be patriots.”

Patriotism is a good thing, but if your loyalty to your country leads you to justify your country's sins, or to hate other people who you view as a threat to your country - you have put something before obedience to God, and that is *idolatry* by any definition.

- Let me step out on some thin ice and give you an application for you and me: illegal immigration. That is wrong, because it is against our laws. As far as I know, it's probably against *every* country's laws. So according to Romans 13, Christians should support controlling illegal immigration. But illegal *immigrants* are *people* who bear the image of God. They are your “neighbors,” and God commands you to *love* your neighbor as

yourself, and treat them with dignity and compassion. Whether they are here legally or illegally, is completely irrelevant to that!

Our country might view Russia or China or North Korea or Iran as enemy nations. As a patriotic citizen, you can agree. But if you ever meet a Russian or Chinese or N. Korean, or Iranian *person*, that *person* is your neighbor, and you are to love them as much as you would love any native born American.

- If your politics or patriotism ever gets in the way of that, then you have the problem Jonah had, and it's idolatry.

And it had blinded Jonah to the glory of God - this is the greatest news in the universe, that our God is a God of compassion and mercy, "*not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance,*" (2 Pet.3:9). Is that your heart too? Jonah had slipped so far that he called that *evil*.

And look at how he prayed—

## II. Jonah's awful prayer.

- 4:2-3 <sup>2</sup>And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. <sup>3</sup>Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Martin Luther said that if he was God and a prophet talked to him like that, he would have knocked his socks off! Sounds like Luther, huh?

Jonah is totally self-centered in this prayer. In the Hebrew some form of "I" or "my" occurs 9 times. It sounds so much like that Pharisee's prayer in Luke 18: "God I thank you that I'm not like other men, I, I, I." And it's bursting with self-pity: "Oh, Yahweh, I am so miserable over Your mercy that death would be better than life - just take me now, Lord!"

Think about that - Jonah was angry and mourning over God's compassion to his enemies. So we need to wrestle with this question—

### **\*Are you ever angry at the sovereign mercy of God?**

Remember the question we asked at the beginning of this story: Do you have God's heart toward all undeserving, lost sinners, or do you have Jonah's heart, which only wanted mercy for some people, like him?

In the Scriptures, it is one of the most grievous sins in the sight of God, to cherish God's mercy and forgiveness for yourself, but withhold it from others. (repeat) Those who have received mercy from God *will* extend mercy to others. Let me just give you a few examples of this:

#### **1.) Matthew 5:7**

- Mat 5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Jesus was saying that those who *are* merciful show that they have received it already, and at the judgment, their mercy to others will be the evidence that they were His kingdom citizens. And He says that these are happy people! The implication is that those who don't show mercy are miserable.

## 2.) *Matthew 6:12,14,15*

The 5<sup>th</sup> petition of the Lord's prayer is:

- Mat 6:12 and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Jesus is talking about our sins here, not finances. And He is *assuming* that *forgiven* people are *forgiving* people!: "as we also, *of course*, have forgiven our debtors." Or, "*in the same proportion as we have been forgiven.*"

You say, "I don't think I'm withholding forgiveness from anyone." But you are if you are holding a grudge - hoping that other person gets what they deserve for what they have done? Withholding friendship, kindness? Maybe even giving a bad report about them to others?

That's not the way God has forgiven you. We need to pray this prayer - daily, don't we? It's so important that it's the only petition in the Lord's prayer that Jesus elaborates on at the end of the prayer—

- Mat 6:14-15 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Jesus is saying if you are habitually, characteristically, an unforgiving person, then you are not a *forgiven* person. You are self-deceived about your salvation. Do you see that?

## 3.) *Matthew 18:23-35*

This is Jesus' parable of the man who had been forgiven of an outrageous debt, but then he refused to forgive another of the pocket change that he owed him. Listen to Jesus' words:

- Mat 18:32-35 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your *fellow servant*, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Look at v.33 again, "fellow servant" = another undeserving human being, just like you. But if you received undeserved mercy from God, shouldn't you freely give it to another, even if that fellow servant is a really bad person: a radical Muslim - sex trafficker - child molester. James 3:9 says that even the people we are tempted to curse "*are made in the likeness of God.*" And God asks us: "*Should not you have had mercy on them as God had mercy on you?*"

## 4.) *Matthew 20:1-15*

We see the same principle in Jesus' parable of the workers hired at different hours of the day in Mt.20. Those who worked all day were pouting and angry - like Jonah - because those who just worked the last hour of the day were getting the same wage they received. That wasn't fair! So Jesus has the master (who represents God) ask these complainers a question:

- Mat 20:15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?

Didn't we sing it earlier? - You will save who You will save?

Do you ever challenge and question God's sovereignty? Especially when that sovereignty is expressed in mercy toward the "undeserving?" Do you ever say like Jonah, "That's not fair!"

Oh my brothers and sisters, it's *not* fair - it's *grace!* Was it fair for God to treat Jesus Christ on the cross as though He had lived your sinful life? And is it fair for God to now treat you as though you had lived Jesus' sinless life? No it's not fair, it's grace! And aren't you glad that God gives you grace instead of what is fair?

Back to Jonah. Look at how God mercifully deal with His unmerciful prophet—

- Jonah 4:4 <sup>4</sup>And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

God is so patient and gentle - this reminds me of what God said when Adam and Eve sinned and were hiding from Him, "Adam, where are you?" In both cases, God wanted them to think about their actions and look at their hearts - "Is this the right response? Where is your heart?" And Jonah gave the answer—

- Jon 4:5 Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.

He's thinking, "Who knows? Maybe God will feel sorry for me and *relent of His mercy* - and wipe out the city after all!" Wow. He even wrote a little poem while he was there, made a paper airplane, and flew it down to the city:

*We are God's chosen few,  
All others will be damned;  
There is no place in heaven for you,  
We can't have heaven crammed!*

So if he is going to act like a whiny, pouting child, God will treat him like one. God treats Jonah like a little kindergartner and pulls out a couple of object lessons.

### III. Jonah in God's kindergarten.

#### A. A shady plant.

- Jon 4:6 Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.

Remember that Jonah is still healing from soaking in the acid of that fish's stomach. His skin is still tender, he has no sunscreen, and it can get up to 110 degrees over there. But here is Jonah, crossing his fingers, hoping that God's mercy to Nineveh could still be lost, and God supernaturally intervenes - to make him more comfortable! "Can I get you a sweet tea, Jonah?" Amazing.

- And note Jonah's reaction: he is finally happy! Exceedingly happy! God just rescued him from his "discomfort" = "ra'ah" = evil. In 3:10 when God rescued the Ninevites from "ra'ah" Jonah thought that was evil of God: It didn't make him happy that thousands of people have just been saved from the judgment of God, oh, but he's ecstatic that he is more *comfortable*. This is a guy who can't connect the dots.

What lesson was God trying to teach His little kindergartner? That His kindness is always undeserved. Jonah deserved a spanking, not a shady plant! But God will have mercy on whom He has mercy, and it is *always* undeserved. It's just kindness. The same way that God causes the warm sun to shine and the cool rain to fall on people who hate Him.

But the kindness of God didn't lead Jonah to repentance, so God brought another object lesson—

### **B. A hungry worm.**

- Jon 4:7-9 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."

God appointed the *plant*, now He appoints a *worm*, and then a scorching *wind* to roast Jonah. This wind is called a *scirocco*. Let me read you a description:

- "During the period of a sirocco the temperature rises steeply, sometimes even climbing during the night, remaining about 16-22 degrees above the average (which is 110), at times, every scrap of moisture seems to have been extracted from the air, so that one has the curious feeling that one's skin has been drawn much tighter than usual. Sirocco days are peculiarly trying to the temper and tend to make even the mildest people irritable and fretful and to snap at one another for apparently no reason."

Comfort didn't get Jonah's attention, so now God takes away the comfort, and turns up the heat. Maybe this will do it? Nope. Jonah's whining again: "I'm mad, and I just wanna die, whaaaaaaa . . . !"

- And God is still so patient with His prodigal prophet. Again, he asks Jonah a question: "Do you do well to be angry about this plant?" "Oh absolutely! Angry enough to die!"

Isn't it true that when our hearts are hard against God, we don't thank Him for the good things in our lives, but we sure complain against Him for the bad things! What a baby. But God graciously gets down on Jonah's level to reason with him—

- Jon 4:10-11 And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ("Jonah, that's just a plant!") And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

What was God saying? "Jonah, you have really slipped. You had no concern for the souls of half of million Assyrians, but you finally have concern for a plant? And you had nothing to do with that plant - I appointed it for your comfort, then I took it away. So how much more, should I as Creator God have compassion on the population of Nineveh all of whom bear my

image? (the 120,000 who don't know their right hand from their left might be a way of describing children). And at least you should have compassion on all the animals that would have been destroyed along with the city - since you had compassion for a plant."

Jonah has hardened his heart to the point of spiritual blindness. He is a complete contrast to the Lord Jesus, the One greater than Jonah—

- Jesus had pity on those who were spiritually ignorant: the prostitutes and tax-collectors and even those ignorant Romans soldiers who mocked Him as they crucified Him. What did He say? *"Father, forgive them, for they don't what they are doing."* They don't know their right hand from their left, Oh Father, have *mercy* on them!"

Jesus faced a city that was even more spiritually hard than Ninevah - *Jerusalem!* We know they were worse than Ninevah because Jesus said at the judgment the men of Ninevah will point the finger at them for not repenting when their Messiah came to them. They harassed Him and mocked Him and eventually crucified Him, but this was His heart toward them—

- Luke 13:34 <sup>34</sup>O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! (Listen) How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

And as He rode into Jerusalem for His final week, knowing what they would do to Him, Luke tells us—

- Luke 19:41 <sup>41</sup>And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it,

Those tears were for them, not for Himself. How unlike Jonah.

#### IV. The story that ends with a question.

So that's how the story of Jonah ends! What? It's not really an ending, is it? We're left wondering, "So? Did Jonah ever get it? Did he come around? Did he learn his kindergarten lessons?"

- I found out that the rabbis made up an ending to this story. This is how they say it ended, "And in that hour Jonah fell on his face and said, 'Govern Your world according to the measure of Your mercy, as it is said, 'to the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness.'"

But Scripture doesn't tell us that Jonah ever saw things God's way. It leaves us hanging.

Just like Jesus' parable of the prodigal son: The younger bohemian son is like pagan Nineveh, that goes far from God, but repents. The older son is like Jonah, who resents the repentance of the wild child. And the parable of the prodigal son leaves us hanging too: we are left wondering, "Did the older son ever get it? Did he finally stop his pouting, join the party and throw his arms around his repentant brother?"

I want you to get this: two stories, one from the OT, the other from the NT that parallel each other, and they both end leaving us hanging! Why? Because God wants the readers - us - to wrestle with the answer. I.e., "Don't wonder about Jonah or that older brother: What about you? Would you have rejoiced over Nineveh's conversion? Would you have joined the celebration party for your prodigal brother? Where is your heart for the lost - all the lost, every race, religion, whatever their culture, wherever their sin has taken them?"



“Are you merciful toward others as your heavenly Father has been so merciful to you?”

The test is this: would you rejoice to hear that some person who disgusts you, who has hurt you deeply, has just become a Christian - and now all their sins are forgiven? That person that you secretly hoped would get what they finally deserve in hell - will now get heaven - maybe right beside you! Would you rejoice - or would you react like Jonah?

- I’ve told you about Jeffrey Dahmer - the mass-murdering homosexual who killed 17 and cannibalized a number of them and then died at the hands of some fellow prisoners. But before he was murdered in prison, he professed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and was baptized. Dahmer’s chaplain said that there was no question in his mind that Jeffrey Dahmer was truly born again. Years ago when this happened I wrote an article saying that, assuming it was true, a person who wouldn’t accept this and rejoice in it, was very likely not saved. And a man in our church came to me, very upset that I would say that someone as bad as Jeffrey Dahmer could get into heaven! And honestly, I think I will see Jeffrey Dahmer in heaven, but I’m not so sure about that man.

Because those who won’t show mercy, haven’t received God’s mercy. Oh, if God has revealed this in your heart, confess it as sin, and repent. And God will show you mercy! Just as He showed Jonah mercy!

I said that Jonah is a story that ends with a question, but it also ends with a commission.

***\*The story that ends with a commission.***

Jonah is in our Bibles so that we will remember what Jonah forgot: That God is a missionary God. That His mercy and grace are meant for all the nations. What does our favorite verse in the Bible tell us? “For God so loved - *the world* - that He gave His Son!” Not just for the Jews, not just for white people in America, but God has His elect in Viet Nam, in Sri Lanka, in Cameroon. Maybe Paul was thinking of Jonah when he wrote:

- Rom 3:29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also.
- Eph 2:17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.
- Eph 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

When we ended the book of Matthew what were Jesus’ last words?

- Matthew 28:18-20 <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

And four chapters earlier He said that *once His church finishes this commission* - He will return. I’m ready - aren’t you? So let’s keep at the task Jesus has given us!

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- 1 Peter 2:9 <sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.