

Angry messenger. Merciful God

Jonah 4:1-11

Intro:

Well this is our last look at the book of Jonah. We will cover the whole of the last chapter today. So let's recall what has happened in this short prophetic book and review the main themes.

In chapter 1 of course God called Jonah to go and preach against the great city of Nineveh, in Assyria. God had seen the wickedness of these people and so he sent Jonah to go warn them of God's judgment. But Jonah, who was the Son of Amittai (Amittai which means faithful) was completely unfaithful to God's call and he fled away from Nineveh, towards Tarshish.

It's not immediately clear in chapter 1 why the prophet refused to go to Nineveh, we're simply told that he tried to flee from the presence of Yahweh. But what we see very clearly is that God was determined to send Jonah as his messenger to Nineveh. So God brings a great storm upon the sea with the end purpose of turning Jonah around. And both Jonah and the pagan sailors who are with him end up in perilous danger.

The sailors, in contrast to Jonah, recognize that God does as he pleases, something the prophet needs to learn. And by the end of chapter 1 it's actually the pagans who cry out to God for mercy, who end up fearing him, and who make sacrifices to the Creator of heaven and earth. Meanwhile, Jonah is thrown overboard and it seems he will sink to his death in the sea.

But then Jonah remembers God and finally cries out for mercy. And rather than allowing Jonah to die as he deserves, God has mercy on Jonah and rescues him. A great fish that God had appointed swallows Jonah alive and then at God's command spits him onto dry land again.

Then in chapter 3 we saw Jonah obey God and go to preach God's word to Nineveh. The wicked people of Nineveh, who deserved God's judgment, actually believed God's word and they repented of their sins. And the last verse of chapter 3 tells us that when God saw that Nineveh turned from her evil ways he himself turned from the disaster that he threatened against them and they were not destroyed. It's really one of the most amazing stories of God showing mercy to sinners who deserve judgment.

But how does Jonah respond? Would he be happy that God is a forgiving God, and that he forgave Nineveh? Would Jonah be excited that God spared these people from judgment? No, as we begin in our text today, we see the opposite, Jonah was absolutely livid!

Our goal then for today then is to look at Jonah's anger and then to see how God teaches Jonah that he must have a heart after God's own heart. And so, we will look at this in two points:

1. Jonah's Anger
2. God's Answer
 - a. God's answer by illustration
 - b. God's answer by instruction

Jonah's Anger

4:1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.

Of all the prophets of the OT, Jonah witnessed the greatest positive response to his ministry. The largest and most wicked city on earth just believed and repented, and God showed them mercy. And Jonah responds in fury. He is exceedingly "displeased." This word for "displeased" was the same word used to tell us in 1:2 that God saw Nineveh's "evil." And it's the same word that is used at the end of chapter 3 first to tell us that God saw how the Ninevites turned from their "evil" deeds, and then of how God himself turned from the "disaster" he had said he would bring. And now, ironically, this whole thing is one great "displeasure" to Jonah, and he becomes angry. The idea behind this "anger" can be the idea of heat or of burning. In English we might say something like, this really boiled Jonah's blood, or he flipped his lid. God, you see, has mercy on wicked pagans and Jonah's anger is stoked like a fire. In fact, Jonah is so angry that in v. 3 we are told that he asks God to take his life away. He would rather die than be a part of God's salvation plan for these pagans.

It's interesting that Jonah, in vv. 2-3 refers to himself no less than 9 times: "Isn't this what I said when I was still back home. That's why I fled, because I knew," and on he goes.

Ever seen a child in a store throwing a complete temper tantrum? Maybe mom or dad didn't want to buy him or her that particular box of cereal he wanted so badly. Maybe they're not going to get the cool new Lego Star Wars set with the new Mandalorian and baby Yoda characters. And so the kid stomps his feet, crosses his arms and starts yelling so everyone in the store notices, "I want it, it has to be mine!" When a kid throws a temper tantrum like this they're thinking only of themselves aren't they? They're just concerned with their own desires and how the present situation doesn't fit with their agenda. And as our text moves along Jonah begins to look like our tantrum child more and more. And when God confronts him in v. 4 and says, "Hey, is it okay for you to be angry?" Jonah doesn't even answer a word back to God, but his actions speak loud enough.

Jonah's had it. Look at v. 5, he goes out of the city and sits on the east side of the city. There he makes a shelter for himself and sits under it in the shade to watch what will become of the city.

Jonah is still expecting, or at least hoping, for judgment on Nineveh.

The booth he builds was probably something similar to what soldiers or farmers would build for a temporary stay under the hot sun. It would be a simple lean-to made of some brush and foliage. As we will see, it's helpful for a while but it's not entirely sufficient.

You can notice that the word for city is used 3 times in v. 5. So, while our attention is drawn to Jonah's anger, we are not to forget that this whole thing is about the pagan city of Nineveh and how God had mercy on them.

The irony here, of course, is that the king of Nineveh, when he heard about God's judgment, humbly relinquished his throne before God and sat in ashes, hoping that God might have mercy on him. But while the king got uncomfortable in sackcloth and ashes, Jonah goes out of the city, fuming with anger at God's mercy. And the narrator invites us to watch him get comfortable under his little self-sufficient shade and waits to see whether God will still bring down brimstone on the city.

But why should Jonah be so furious? He's so angry that he will again tell God in v. 9 that he's angry enough to just die! Why this burning anger against God? Well we're given the answer in v. 2 where Jonah prays to God and says, "Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. 3 Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"

This is one of the most powerful statements about God's character in all the OT. It's given like it's a formula for God's name. And this statement, with minor variations, shows up in a number of places in the OT. You'll find it in Joel 2; Neh 9; Ps 86; and Num 14. But the first time that we see this description of God's divine name is in Exodus 34:6. It's in the context of when God's people Israel make a golden calf that they worship instead of God. And when Moses intercedes before God on their behalf, God relents from the evil that he would have brought on them. And God then shows Moses a glimpse of his goodness and declares to him his name.

Ex. 34.6-7 reads, "The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

keeping steadfast love for thousands,[a] forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'"

As soon as Moses hears this the text says that he hurries to bow his head and he worships God! The God who is merciful and gracious to sinners who deserve judgment. The God who is patient with our sinful hearts. The God who forgives those who ask for pardon.

But here in our text today, angry Jonah doesn't bow his head, he doesn't worship this God, he sits under the shelter he made and points his finger at God and says, "When you first called me to go to Nineveh I didn't want to go precisely because I knew that you would show mercy to these filthy pagans!" Jonah in his anger resents God's mercy, and in his resentment he removes himself from God's service. Just like in chapter 1, while the sailors were desperately praying to their gods and doing everything in their power to return the ship and her passengers to safety, the rebellious prophet meanwhile, didn't lift a finger to help, didn't send up a prayer to his God. In fact, the captain of the ship had to go and wake him up from his nap. Now here again in chapter 4 we see clearly that the prophet is unwilling to give any spiritual guidance to sinners in need of salvation. He sits waiting to see if any kind of judgment will still come. He sits there, angry and passive.

Application:

1. Jonah's anger is unfounded

- Jonah's anger is entirely unfounded. He had no right to be angry. It is sinful anger. But of course, we might want to sympathize with Jonah at first. This is after all Nineveh that we are talking about. These people were guilty of some of the most horrific crimes against humanity. They built their empire on the blood of others. Their armies were known for their brutal war tactics. You and I might not want them saved either. But is this story not like so many others that we find when reading through gospels where even the worst of sinners find forgiveness in Jesus' name. Think of the woman who was known in the city for being a prostitute. Would we want her saved? What about the tax collector? He had cheated his own country men and probably pushed some of them into poverty. He was a traitor to his own people. Should we be angry that God might save these kinds of people? Think closer to home. What if an abortionist started coming to church? What about someone who cheated you, or cheated on you? Maybe the bully in your class, or your co-worker who made up lies about you so that you wouldn't get that promotion? Maybe even someone who mugged and killed someone close to you? As awful as that would be. Would you or I be right to be angry if such a person repented and believed the gospel? And if we knew they weren't going to face hell for the nasty things they've done? And if they started living their life for Jesus and became part of our congregation?
 - Remember what Scripture says, we are all guilty before God, we all deserve God's judgment (Rom 3). Not one of us deserves God's mercy. David, in his great Psalm of repentance, Ps 51, after he committed adultery with another woman and killed her husband, he says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."
 - All people are equally guilty before God, but all people may equally find forgiveness under Christ's blood. And if God were to save even the worst of sinners, let us rejoice and not be resentful when God shows mercy to those who repent.

2. Jonah is again passive (like chap 1).

- Let us not be passive towards God's saving mercy. While the Ninevites on the one hand are uncomfortable in their sackcloth and ashes, and are fasting and crying out to God for mercy, Jonah is outside the city, getting comfortable under his shade. He doesn't stick around these people to disciple them in the ways of the Lord or to assure them that if they repent and believe they will find God to be merciful. He is passive.

- o Beloved, Do you spend your time and energies and resources to ensure that people are discipled and taught to obey Christ in all things? There are a multitude of ways we can fulfil the great commission. But let me give you just a few thoughts. Do you take time to teach your kids, to train them in the fear and admonition of the Lord? Or is work or entertainment more important? Do you study Scripture so that you'll know how to teach others about Christ and about life in his kingdom? Do you invite people over or go for dinner or coffee with others so you can talk about how Christ's mercy applies to their heart and how we can live more godly lives in this crooked and perverse world? Do you pray and give of your resources to ensure that those in fulltime gospel ministry have what they need to carry on their work? Are you active in the building of God's kingdom, being an ambassador of reconciliation for Christ your king?

Jonah's anger is unfounded and his passiveness is both selfish and sinful. Now what is God's response to Jonah's burning anger and displeasure?

2. God's Answer

God answers through illustration:

Well in v. 4 God basically asks Jonah very plainly if it's okay for him to be so furious. The question is phrased as a rhetorical question and a negative answer is expected. But Jonah in his burning anger responds with action not words. He goes out of the city to the East. Going eastward is often a bad thing in Scripture [Jonah goes eastward=judgment/exile, see Gn 3.24; 4.16; 11.2]

And we watch Jonah sitting in his shade, fuming, and not speaking to God. And as the day progresses the sun gets warmer. Then God in his mercy prepares a plant which grows up, in a Jack-and-the-beanstalk-fashion, and shelters Jonah from his poor miserable situation. We wouldn't want Jonah to get sunstroke or anything.

The identity of the plant is uncertain. It could be some type of gourd plant with big leaves, or otherwise some type of vine or ivy. But at God's command it gives shade to Jonah [to protect him from his 'evil']. And Jonah is just thrilled at this. The language is emphatic and it parallels v. 1. Verse 1 could literally read something like, "it was displeasing to Jonah, a great displeasure." Here in v. 6 it could be, "Jonah rejoiced, a great rejoicing." It's very similar language. The ESV captures the consistency by saying, "It displeased Jonah exceedingly," and then in v. 6, "Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant."

But this great joy is short lived, because at the crack of dawn God prepared a worm to attack the plant so that it withered.

- *This continues one of the great themes of the book of Jonah. Three times in our text God "prepared" nature to do his bidding, just as God sent the storm and the fish in chapter 1. God is in control of all things. And he is able to do as he pleases and he is able to intervene in time and space to accomplish his purposes. Brothers and sisters, this is the God who is portrayed throughout all of Scripture, and who has ultimately revealed himself to us through the person of Jesus Christ. What a powerful reminder. Your God is the God who reigns over all things, who controls every aspect of his creation. And he orchestrates all things to accomplish his purposes of salvation, whether through blessing or through discipline. All things, says Paul, are being brought under the feet of Christ. And this God will safely guide you to your eternal rest. Never forget this.*

Then when the sun comes up, and with the extra shade gone, God then also prepares, says v. 8, an east wind which scorches Jonah. Our translation says it is a vehement wind. This is probably the much feared scirocco of the Mediterranean, a famous, brutally hot wind, which often brings sand and dust particles with it. Here's Jonah, in his hot anger, the plant that brought him such ecstatic joy is wilted and dead, and here he sits in this pitiful little shelter with the hot wind breathing on him like a fiery dragon, and the sun roasting him from above. Poor Jonah, that shelter probably felt more and more like an oven every minute, until the point in v. 8 where we read that Jonah grows faint. [he is on the brink of death.]

Jonah repeats what he said in v. 3, that he would rather die than live.

And now God responds to Jonah again and asks him the exact same question as v. 4, "is it okay that you're angry?" Except in v. 4 we knew Jonah was angry about God sparing Nineveh. But now God's plant, worm, and wind, have served the purposes for which God appointed them: and in God's question to Jonah we realize that the prophet is now furious because the plant is gone and his little bit of comfort has left him. God has illustrated Jonah's foolishness right before his eyes.

And now the Lord presses him on this. Is it okay for Jonah to be angry over the plant? Remember that we noted before, this is a rhetorical question. And the expected answer is "No." But Jonah shows his true colors. In v. 9 he justifies his burning anger and for the third time he wishes death upon himself.

And in vv. 10 and 11 we find that God raised the plant, and the worm, and the scorching wind and hot sun, in order to teach Jonah a very crucial lesson.

God answers Jonah by instruction:

10 But the Lord said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which [c]ame up in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?"

Jonah, in his selfishness and self-righteousness, has more pity on a measly little plant than on the great city of Nineveh.

But God is the great creator of both the plant and the people of Nineveh. Jonah has no right to say who God saves or doesn't save, God is the Maker of heaven and earth and he does as he pleases [the sailors confess this in ch 1]. Jonah was overjoyed when he was shaded from his discomfort by God's plant. Meanwhile, he's sitting outside of the city of Nineveh hoping that these people will face the

heat of God's wrath just like Sodom and Gomorrah. And God has shown him, and now tells him, "Jonah, you were more concerned for this little plant, that you didn't do anything for, than for the Ninevites. People who I created. This multitude of people who are lost in the darkness of their sin. Should I not have mercy on these people, and on their livestock?"

- *Now, before we conclude, let's consider why these animals are mentioned. You will remember how in chapter 3 the animals shared in the fasting and mourning of Nineveh. And the question arises, Does God save animals? Some people think so. And so they host funerals and church services for their pets. But what we need to keep in mind is that when Adam and Eve were created they were to have dominion over all of creation. And so when they sinned, all creation was subjected to the curse. Christ's one time sacrifice on the cross was to redeem mankind, not animals. But Christ, as the greater and the better Adam, will make all things new when he returns and Creation will no longer be under the curse of the old Adam.*

We've seen Jonah's anger. We've looked at God's answer in the illustration and God's answer through instruction. What other things can we learn here?

Application:

1. Do you ever find yourself to be unmerciful like Jonah? The temptation of Jonah and the Jews was to think that they were God's people and therefore were better than anyone else. The temptation for Christians is sometimes to think we are God's people, and therefore, we are better than those filthy sinners outside. We can think we are better. This was the attitude of some of the people in Luke 13 who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had offered with his sacrifices. And like the 18 people in Siloam were crushed by a tower that fell. They thought, ah these people must have been terrible! But Jesus's response was, "Do you think those people were worse? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." God's lesson to Jonah is a lesson to you and I. God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy. Do we think we are better off than those who are outside of the church? Is it true that often we don't want to go tell some people about Christ because we don't 'want to be associated with those people'? Beloved, do you think you deserve Christ's atoning blood more than someone else?
2. Christ is perfectly merciful. And you and I must have a heart after his own heart. The lesson of the plant is simply that God is a merciful God. This is really the main theme of the whole book of Jonah: God is determined to send his message to sinners because he is loving and gracious and he alone is able to save. This is why God sent Jesus. To seek and to save the lost. To die a brutal and shameful death on a cross, because you and I needed to hear the message of God's mercy. And having received grace in Christ, does your heart burn with compassion towards those who are broken and lost? Do you have the heart of Christ, who had compassion on the sick, the needy, the destitute, the worst sinners of society? Do you know the heartfelt love of Christ? There are many people we might be tempted to want God's judgment to fall on, from the schoolyard bully to the terrorist, from the child sex offender to the wicked politician. But do you know in your own heart, the love of Christ which brings healing and forgiveness to people who are lost in the darkness of their sin and didn't know their right hand from their left?