

Bible Study – Jonah

Chapter 4

Nineveh is saved, but someone is not happy about it (**v1**). The repeated language gives us an indication of Jonah's indignation; he complains to God, 'I knew this would happen', revealing this to be the reason he ran away to Tarshish in the first place (**Jonah 1:3**). Jonah then quotes **Psalms 86**, stating that God is "*merciful and compassionate... slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love*" and is always eager to turn back from destroying people (**Psalms 86:5,15**) (**v2**). Which may come across to readers as slightly odd... If Jonah knew that God was merciful and compassionate and would relent on his threat of destruction if the people repented, why is Jonah mad?

The logical conclusion is that Jonah was angry because God granted a reprieve to the Ninevites. Remember that the Assyrians were enemies of Judah and Israel. Jonah wanted God to bring judgment upon the people he hated. Jonah ran to Tarshish not because he was afraid that he would be ineffective, but he was worried that he would be *effective*!

Jonathan Swift, writer of *Gulliver's Travels* and later Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, once wrote a short poem that may express Jonah's frame of mind:

*"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."*

Jonah himself called on and experienced the mercy of God when it was extended to him. But here we see Jonah resenting it when it is extended to others. We may see parallels with the 'older son' in Jesus' parable of the 'Prodigal Son' – the older son resents the party that is taking place to celebrate the return of the prodigal and refuses to join the celebration (**Luke 15:25-32**). The repentance and salvation of the people of Nineveh is so painful to Jonah that he would rather die than think about it (**v3**). Interestingly he asks God to take his life, rather than Jonah take his own life – a symbol of how Jonah still accepts that his life is God's and not his to take.

Some have taken the wording of **v3** to suggest Jonah was worried about being labelled a false prophet, although, from what we have already seen, my feeling is Jonah's hatred for Nineveh is so strong that he would rather die than see Nineveh saved.

Then God questions Jonah; "*Is it right for you to be angry?*" (**v4**)

Jonah, although he was being honest about his feelings, is questioned about the motives behind them. Anger in itself is not sinful, but the motives behind it can be and often the results of that anger, if we are not careful, can have terrible results. When you are angry, ask yourself whether it is right, and if the answer is still 'yes' then ask yourself how you can turn it into something productive. As James says, "*Human anger does not produce the justice God desires*" (**James 1:20**).

Through the Bible we can see that God likes to ask us questions because they often reveal our heart and our motives:

- *Where are you? Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree...? What have you done?* (**Genesis 3**)

- Where is your brother Abel? What have you done? (**Genesis 4**)
- What have you done? (**1 Samuel 13:11**)
- Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? (**2 Samuel 12:9**)
- Where have you come from? (**Job 2:2**)
- Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? (**Isaiah 6:8**)
- Who do you say that I am? (**Matthew 16:15**)
- What do you want Me to do for you? (**Matthew 20:21**)

In every question, God knows the answer, He knows our hearts and our minds, but He asks the question because He wants us to bring it out of ourselves.

Tellingly, Jonah doesn't answer. Instead, he storms off to the east side of the city (**v5**). Which poses two questions: Why didn't Jonah go home? And why east?

Whether it produced the results he wanted or not, Jonah's work was done. Jonah himself has also come to Nineveh from the west – his home is near Nazareth. Why does he then head east? Maybe this was a sign that he was never going back?

We can find a partial answer in the rest of **verse 5** where we read that Jonah built himself a shelter to sit under while he waited to see what happened next. Jonah seems to hope that the repentance of Nineveh was a knee-jerk reaction and would soon fizzle out. Maybe he still hopes that he will see the city destroyed after all, so he leaves the city for his own safety.

Jonah made three errors that angry people often make.

- He gave up
- He separated himself from others.
- He became a spectator.

While Jonah sits and stewes, God arranges for a leafy plant to grow – we must assume this wasn't an instant 'miracle grow' moment as the text tells us that "*soon*" it spread its leaves over Jonah to shade him (**v6**) – So Jonah may have been sat there for a while! The plant may have been a castor-bean plant (*Ricinus Communis*), which grows rapidly to a height of 12 feet in hot climates and has large leaves.

The provision of a shade pleases Jonah and actually, this is the first time in the story that Jonah is recorded as being happy, as the theologian James M. Boice excellently puts:

"Jonah was pleased because at last, after all the compassion of God for other people, God was finally doing something for Jonah"

(James M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2002).

But Jonah's happiness is short-lived. God arranges for a worm to come along, and in a scene that would not be out of place in *The Hungry Caterpillar*, the worm eats its way through the stem of the plant, killing it (**v7**). God then arranges an easterly wind to blow on Jonah, ramping up the heat (**v8**).

In some translations, including the New Living Translation, the word used in for these instances is 'arranged', other translations use 'prepared' or 'provided'. The Hebrew here is *וַיִּמָּן*, meaning 'appointed', which personally I prefer as I think it's more effective in demonstrating the providence of God in the whole narrative; that God showed His mercy to Jonah time and time again through His own appointments throughout creation – that God knew how this was all going to play out, so had everything in place:

- The Lord appointed a great fish (**Jonah 1:17**).
- The Lord appointed a plant (**Jonah 4:6**).

- The Lord appointed a worm (**Jonah 4:7**).
- The Lord appointed a wind (**Jonah 4:8**).

Jonah is not impressed, he exclaims that death would be better than living like this – hot, alone, and bitter (**v8**).

God repeats his question from earlier but frames it around the death of the plant (**v9**). To which Jonah replies ‘yes’ and again repeats his desire to die (**v9**). Even now Jonah feels totally justified in his anger about the death of the plant that was serving him, even though he’d had no personal interest or investment in the plant except what it provided for him.

Jonah does not speak again in this book, or in the rest of the Bible, but thankfully his closing words are not the last words of the book. God will always have the final word, and the final words of this book are another reminder of God’s mercy and compassion.

God reminds Jonah that he did nothing to create or nurture the plant and that it came and went quickly, symbolising the triviality of becoming attached to temporal things (**v10**). God then tells Jonah that Nineveh is a city of over 120,000 people who are ‘living in spiritual darkness’ (**v11**). The original Hebrew of this verse says that Nineveh is full of people ‘*who cannot discern between their right hand and their left*’, suggesting that they are unable to make moral judgments. God compares Jonah’s distress over the loss of a plant to His passion over the saving of a city.

Extrabiblical Jewish tradition says that after God said the words of **Jonah 4:11**, Jonah then fell on his face and said: “Govern your world according to the measure of mercy, as it is said, ‘*The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against Him*’” (**Daniel 9:9**). However, this must have been a later addition to the narrative, or a piece of artistic licence, as Daniel doesn’t say these words for least another 220 years!

Matthew Henry ends his commentary on Jonah with these words:

“Do we wonder at the forbearance of God towards his perverse servant? Let us study our own hearts and ways; let us not forget our own ingratitude and obstinacy; and let us be astonished at God’s patience towards us”

The book of Jonah serves as a reminder that the provision and mercy of God extends to everyone. It has been suggested that there are parable-like messages about the nation of Israel through the behaviour of Jonah, who was dependent on the grace of God, but refused to accept that same grace and mercy extends to other nations.

It is argued that this book, alongside the book of Ruth, is used as a protest against the idea that the purposes of God could be confined to one nation or people group. As God reminds us in Exodus; “*I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose*” (**Exodus 33:19**) This is the same message God made clear to Peter, “*I see very clearly that God shows no favouritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right*”. (**Acts 10:34-35**) As Jonah proclaimed himself: *Salvation comes from the Lord alone* (**Jonah 2:9**), and is based on our race, culture or class.

Michael Lloyd, in his book, *Café Theology*, provides a helpful summary of the message of the book of Jonah:

“The book of Jonah teaches us that God is active in His world in real ways, through the human agency of Jonah and through the very fabric of creation – the whale gets Jonah to Nineveh and the plant teaches him a lesson when he gets there”.