

Jonah 4:1-11

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[0 : 00] As we jump back into Jonah, I'm going to read all of chapter 4 for us, but we're going to take two weeks to marinate in this passage, because there's a lot going on.

So, would you follow along with me as I read from Jonah chapter 4? But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

And he prayed to the Lord, and he said, O Lord, is this not what I said when I was yet in my country? This 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.

Therefore, now, Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. And the Lord said, Do you do well to be angry?

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.

[1 : 09] 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.

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. 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.

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?

[2 : 14] And also much cattle? Friends, this is God's word, and he gives it to you because he loves you, and he wants you to know him. What do you do when you dislike the things that God decides are good?

The things God decides to do? Well, for Jonah, he got angry, right? He got not just angry, he got really angry. It is almost comical if it wasn't so pathetic, you know?

Verse 1 literally reads this way. It's kind of a funky English translation. Here's what it literally says in Hebrew. And it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and it burned him.

It was so evil, it burned him. You know, there's so much irony in that first sentence. I mean, think about it. First irony. It is, remember in chapter 1, God comes to Jonah and he says, the evil of Nineveh and their violence has come up before me.

God called Nineveh evil, but here Jonah is saying that it is evil for God to have compassion. It's ironic. It's ironic because Jonah just had the most spectacularly successful ministry that any preacher has ever had.

- [3 : 33] I'd love to have, you know, a tenth of that. He preaches and immediately a whole city is converted. And yet he's pouting. He goes and sits outside of the city to look down on it.
- It's ironic. The third thing is, when he was, you remember when he was in the belly of the fish and he prayed to God, he prayed and said, you know, God is the one who has saved my life. And yet now here when he prays, he's asking God to take his life.
- What is going on with Jonah? He's angry. He's so angry. He's seething with anger. Anger is repeated six times in this passage.
- It's the focal point of the passage. And so what I want to do today is dive in, do a deep dive into Jonah's anger. And then next week we'll look at this part and all the other stuff that's going on.
- But I just want to look at a deep dive into his anger. I want to ask three questions. Okay. First one is, why was Jonah angry? Why was he angry? Second one is, what effect did Jonah's anger have on him?
- [4 : 34] And then third, is there any hope for Jonah's anger? Why is he angry? What effects did it have? Is there any hope for his anger? Why was he angry? Well, it's really simple. He was angry because God had compassion on Jonah's enemies.
- I mean, this has been Jonah's problem from the beginning, right? Look at verse two. This is why I ran off to Tarshish. I knew that you were going to do this. This is why I didn't want any part of your game.
- You're telling me to go preach to these people. I know you're going to be nice to them. I don't like them. I don't want them to get any sort of mercy. I don't like this. Jonah disliked that God was going to save Nineveh.
- The people of Nineveh, and let's just be really clear about this, the people of all Assyria were evil. They were profoundly evil people, wicked, violent, cruel.
- We could compare them to a modern terrorist state. They were brutal. In fact, I've used the comparison the last couple of weeks. This is as though God is calling a Jew to go stand in the center of Berlin in 1941 and tell the Nazis how evil they are.
- [5 : 44] It's not going to work out very well, and yet in this story what we find is the Nazis repented. And so Jonah's standing there and he's like, well, wait a minute.
- These Nazis who are so bad repented and you're not going to do anything about it, God? Like what are you going to do? You're just going to let them off the hook? Look at all the people that they've killed.
- Look at the injustice. What are you going to do about this? You can be sympathetic to the dilemma that Jonah is wrestling with, right? How can God bless his people Israel and also have compassion on the enemies of God?
- If Israel's enemies are going to flourish, how can the people of God flourish? It's an irreconcilable dilemma for him.
- How can both of these things be true at once? I think these kinds of irreconcilable problems are the most difficult things that I deal with pastorally. You know, when God takes away something that you have adored, a spouse, a job, a city, a friendship, when something disintegrates and there's nothing that you can do about it, it just is.
- [7 : 04] It's gone. You can't change it. When God gives somebody else the thing that you want. You know, like when infertility becomes not just a kind of a momentary irritation for you, but it becomes a multi-year struggle.
- When all your friends are getting pregnant and you can't do anything about it. Or when things like when your feelings for a person become so strong, you love them so much, and yet you look at the scriptures and you realize that this is out of bounds.

This is not what God has called you to. That sense of division between what you desire and what you know is right, it feels irreconcilable.

I mean, even when it feels like you're in one of those irreconcilable moments, and then it feels like God has abandoned you and he's left you. He's absent. You pray, but you can't hear anything.

In those moments, that's where you feel it most of all. And you might get angry. Like Jonah, you might find yourself really, really angry. But here's the thing.

[8 : 18] Eugene Peterson talks about this. He says it this way. Anger is a diagnostic tool. It's a signal that something is wrong. Something isn't working right, you know, like a light on the dashboard, that evil or incompetence or stupidity is lurking in the neighborhood.

The problem is, evil or anger can tell you that something is wrong, but it's very bad at telling you what exactly is wrong. See, Jonah is angry at Nineveh receiving mercy, but it actually represented a failure on Jonah's part to see God for who he really was.

It was a failure on Jonah's part to see him, who he really was, to be able to see the things that were going on in his own soul. And so Jonah's anger, well, like Chris said, it was kind of like a window.

It opened up to show the things that Jonah loved most, the things he couldn't live without. It was a window into the dysfunction of Jonah's soul. Jonah was angry, and it's going to reveal something.

What is it revealing? What is this? What's this effect, the effect or the revelation of Jonah's soul? I think there are three little effects here. I'll go through them as quickly as I can.

[9 : 35] There could be more. I'm not saying this is exhaustive, but I found three. Here they go. The first one is this. Excuse me. It revealed that Jonah was self-righteous.

It revealed that Jonah was self-righteous. We read earlier, Matt read earlier, Jesus saying that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Boy, Jonah's angry outburst at God, boy, it reveals a lot, doesn't it?

It wasn't just that he hated Nineveh. It was that he thought he was spiritually superior to them. You may remember a couple of weeks ago when we were looking at Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish.

I was pretty hard on Jonah. I didn't let Jonah off the hook very much. I said that I didn't really think his prayer was all that repentant. You see it in the last two lines of that prayer if you have your Bibles open.

The very last line is beautiful. Jonah says, salvation is of the Lord. Salvation is from the Lord. Yes, yes, yes. A thousand times yes. But the sentence right before that, the two lines felt kind of odd to me.

[10 : 44] He says this. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will pay.

That seems an odd prayer from the belly of a fish. You know, I'll give you thanksgiving. I'll sacrifice to you. I'll do what I've said. It's almost like he's saying, you know, those idol worshipers, those pagans, they're bad.

But you know what? I've had some trouble. I know. I've had some trouble. But really, I've got it together. I'm getting it together. It reminds you of Jesus' other story about that Pharisee who looks down on the tax collector and he says, I thank you, God, that I'm not like these other people, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or like this tax collector.

It's ironic. From the belly of the fish, Jonah was looking down on people. From the bottom of the sea, he saw himself above them, superior to them.

He looked down on the pagans. He looked down on the enemies of God. He looked down on the foreigners. He looked down on the unclean people. Those pagans, they may have idols, but not me.

[12 : 00] Not me. Sure, I need some mercy, but I don't need it as much as Nineveh. That was his attitude. He felt like God's compassion was something that he had already earned.

You know, he followed the Torah. He was circumcised. He was a big-time prophet in Israel. Surely, God's grace and mercy was for him, but not for those people. Not for Nineveh.

See, that's what self-righteousness looks like. Self-righteousness invents ways to mark yourself as deserving of God's love and blessing and looking down on the people you don't think deserve it.

Self-righteousness is a kind of idolatry, isn't it? It says, it's the belief that I'm okay because I've invented a standard that I know I can live up to.

Unfortunately for Jonah, the message for Nineveh is a lot simpler. Anyone can gain the compassion of God through repentance and faith.

[13 : 06] Even Nineveh. And that doesn't work with Jonah's self-righteousness. That doesn't fit. The enemies of God don't get a pass for Jonah.

See, for Jonah, his self-righteousness is racial, it's cultural, it's religious, right? I can't deal with the enemies of God.

They are outsiders and they got to get out. But we do this in other ways, don't we? The ways that we look down on other people, we do it in ways that are moral, right?

You might hear people say, well, those sexually deviant people, you know, the things that they do, they're abominations. You hear people that use that word?

Or those greedy rich people, I'm not like them. Or we do this in our, not just our moral, but our cultural things.

[14 : 06] We look down and we say, well, those people, the way that they dress, the way they act, they're always on their phone. They're so disrespectful, they don't know how to talk to people. The people who live in that neighborhood, they're so unsophisticated, you know?

Do they even read? So dirty. We do this in all kinds of ways. See, here's the thing. You want to find out your own self-righteousness?

Follow your anger. When you start to get angry, let that anger lead you down into your soul and you'll see that you think you're better than other people. That's the first thing.

It shows Jonah's self-righteousness. The second one is that Jonah distorts God's words. Look at verse 2. He prays to God, I knew that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, relenting from disaster.

He's quoting from Exodus 34. Now, he adds in relenting from disaster, but that's a good thing, right? In Exodus 34, the people of Israel are standing around Mount Sinai and God comes down and God says, here's the deal, I'm going to show you what I'm like.

[15 : 16] I'm going to tell you exactly what I'm like. I'm gracious. I'm merciful. I'm slow to anger. I'm abounding in steadfast love. Here's the other thing that God says in Exodus 34, though. He says, I will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.

Wait a minute. Hold on. So Jonah is quoting God's words. He's quoting all the good things, right? All the grace things. He's gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

But he leaves off that God will by no means clear the guilty, that God also will demand justice. He will make things right in the world. What is he doing?

What's Jonah doing? Here's what Jonah's doing. Listen to this. Jonah was trying to use God's own words against him by misquoting him.

See, Jonah wanted justice to fall on Nineveh so badly that he was presenting God as kind of one dimensional. Basically, what Jonah was doing was saying this.

[16 : 17] You know what? I get it. You're kind. You're gracious. You're slow to anger. You're so nice. You know what? You're not. You need to have some justice on these people. You are weak.

You are spineless. You're not willing to do what it takes to win here. You are unwilling to destroy the enemies of God. You're just being nice to them.

That is what Jonah is doing here. It's amazing. Jonah was trying to create this simplistic picture of God, of a God who loves everybody without any judgment on evil.

And he's using Exodus, God's very words, to do it. See, Israel's victory was so central to Jonah that he couldn't imagine life without it.

He couldn't imagine a world where Israel could flourish and the enemies of God could repent and flourish as well. It didn't make sense to him. See, it made him distort and twist God's words to justify his anger.

[17 : 23] Let's just talk about this for a minute. You do realize that just because somebody quotes a Bible verse doesn't mean anything. You can use God's words to justify just about anything you want.

You remember that one guy. You may have heard of him. His name is Satan. You know, he used God's words to tempt Jesus. You know, there is a sense in which what Jonah is doing here by distorting God's own words is Jonah is becoming satanic.

Using God's words to justify his own hatred of other people. It begs the question, are you conscious of the ways that we allow God's words to get twisted in our heart to justify our hatred of other people?

Do you allow other people that you listen to or follow on social media or whatever to throw Bible verses at you without you thinking about it? You know, there's an old adage.

You might like this. An old adage that goes like this. If God hates all the people that you hate, if God is angry at all the same people that you're angry at, then you can be certain that you have made a God out of your own image.

[18 : 46] And you are not worshiping the God who made you in his image. Because let me just tell you, there is not one of us who has the moral and the spiritual consistency to just look at people without sin in the way that God does.

We cannot and do not judge people perfectly rightly. So if God never disagrees with you in his word, then you've got something wrong, not him. And that's a good thing for us to remember.

Jonah distorted God's words. He's self-righteous. He distorted God's words. Here's the third thing. Jonah was in spiritual danger here. Jonah was in danger of becoming the very thing that he hated.

Look at the question in verse 4. Do you do well to be angry? You know, it's as though he was asking, you know, are you justified in your anger, Jonah? Is your anger good?

Are you all right, Jonah? Everything okay for you, man? This doesn't look very good. Sean Slate is a pastor friend of mine. He's in Knoxville. We've been preaching.

[19 : 50] We've been working together as we've been preaching through this. And he pointed out another question that I hadn't thought about. There's questions all through the Bible. God constantly asks his people questions. But do you remember the one in Genesis chapter 4 with Cain?

God comes to Cain and he confronted Cain. Now, you remember the story. Cain and Abel are two brothers. They're the brothers of Adam and Eve. And they both bring sacrifices. And Abel's sacrifice was accepted by God.

Cain's was rejected. Cain was jealous. He was angry. And God comes to Cain and he says, Do you do well to be angry? How you doing there, buddy?

And then he warns Cain. He says, Beware, because evil is crouching at your door and it seeks to master you. He gave him a warning.

But instead of repenting, do you remember what Cain did? He went out and he killed his brother Abel. And you remember the punishment? The punishment was he got sent to the east.

[20 : 48] He got sent to live in the desert places. And what we're told is the descendants of Cain became these people who were violent and wicked. They were vengeful.

But they were also very productive. They went out to the east and they started building cities. They built cities that you might remember like Shinar and cities like Ur of the Chaldees where Abraham came from.

They started building cities like Babylon. And eventually they built cities like Nineveh. So what we're seeing is the Ninevites that have become the enemies of Israel are the descendants of Cain.

And now God is standing with another man who should be a worshiper of God who is asking questions and is angry at what God has given him in life.

And all of a sudden he's wanting vengeance to fall down on these enemies out east. What does that tell you? What it says is that Jonah is in danger of becoming the very thing he hates.

[21 : 54] See, this question exposed something. That Jonah's anger at Nineveh receiving God's grace is the same anger that Cain had when Abel received God's grace.

Neither of them could take it that God loves somebody else. Jonah was in danger of becoming the very thing he hated. There is a spiritual danger because it revealed Jonah's idolatry.

Jonah is not motivated by a pure love for God. Jonah is motivated by the greatness of Israel. By the power and the victory of the people of God.

Jonah can only live if Israel is victorious. And he can't see any way through this. It's idolatry.

He's got an idolatry of the people of God. An idol, as we've talked about, is anything that if you don't have it would make life not worth living. And for him, if the people of God fell apart, he doesn't know what he could do.

[23 : 04] He doesn't see a way through it. Okay. So is there any hope? Is there any hope for Jonah's anger? I know we're running a little long today, but I really want you to see how this works in our lives.

And so I want to bring this close to home. This might be too close to home. Okay? I'm just warning you. When Donald Trump was elected in 2016, I know you're not supposed to talk about Donald Trump in church.

When Donald Trump was elected in 2016, you remember that there were some Christians who were angry about that. They were bitterly angry. So angry they could die.

But you also remember that when Donald Trump lost in 2020, there were some Christians who were angry.

Bitterly angry. So angry they could die. You had, in these two events, two different groups of smart, well-meaning Christians who found themselves angry.

[24 : 10] Angry. Angry. Bitterly angry. People who have the tendency, who have had the tendency, to look upon the other side with disdain.

You know, those people who were on the other side, they are not just misguided. They're probably foolish. They might even be evil. They might be a threat to my way of life.

They're angry. And so for many Christians, those two events represented these irreconcilable dilemmas. How can God be good and one or the other outcome happen?

Bring that to today. You do realize that there are think tanks and ad agencies who are making millions of dollars. Literally, millions of dollars.

Today, somebody is sitting in a conference room talking about how to phrase political wedge issues in a way so that they can drop them into a group like this and divide you one side or the other.

[25 : 14] They're spending millions of dollars. They're spending millions of dollars to make you angry. To make you disdain the people who you disagree with.

To pit you against one another so that you will feel threatened and you will accuse the people who are on the other side of you. And because if they can wedge themselves in, they will win.

What will they win? It's actually really simple. They'll win your clicks. It's not even about elections. It's about clicks. Because when clicks come, then ads come.

And when ads come, then money comes. People are making money off of our anger. And we let them. We let them do this.

There was a documentary a few years back called The Social Dilemma. I hope that you've seen this. It should be required viewing for everyone in our day and time. But one of the most haunting lines of that documentary was this.

[26 : 15] If you can't see the product that they're selling, then that means that you are the product. If they're not selling, you know, like laundry detergent or a car or a vacation, what that means is they're selling and buying your attention, your clicks, your eyeballs, your views, your engagements, your anger.

And they're doing whatever they can to grab a hold of it. They want to play on your emotions and your deeply held convictions. The things that you can't even admit to yourself, but if you lost them, life would not be worth living.

They're playing on our idolatry. And they're making money off of it. And as you can see in the Christian church in America, we're letting them.

Because we're not so much united around Christ. We're united around these other things. You see, anger puts you in danger of being manipulated. It destroys churches. And this is not just about politics.

Some of you do not care about politics at all. I realize, and that's great. Thank you. You know, some of you, you fly off the handle when somebody disrespects you on the road.

[27 : 30] You know, road rage. You're just yelling. All kinds of things come out of your mouth. Some of you, you get angry, bitterly angry when a teacher at your kid's school seems to be in the wrong.

When you read about an abuser that has not been brought to justice. When somebody you admire fails you. When a friend doesn't live up to their side of the bargain and they kind of leave you out in the cold.

Or when Taylor Swift shows up on a football game. You just anger, anger, anger. You see, the problem is, is that all of us are susceptible to this kind of anger that leads us to this self-righteousness.

And it leads us to this place where we distort God's word to justify ourselves. And then it puts us in this spiritual danger because our anger reveals our idolatry.

It's not just the guy who cut you off. It's the fact that you deeply need this respect. It's the fact that life is not going right. You are overwhelmed.

[28 : 43] You're angry. You feel out of control. You feel put out by everyone around you. Nobody seems to have your back. And all of a sudden, this person cuts you off and you fly off the handle. It's not about the person.

It's about the idols of your soul. Friends, this is such an angry time. It is such an angry time. And you may be feeling that a lot.

There is an invitation here for you to look at your anger. And let it lead you to a place of hope. Here's the thing about our anger. Here's the thing about what God is doing here.

Look at the question he asked Jonah. God didn't ask this to shame and humiliate Jonah. You know, he's not coming at him sarcastic.

You know, what's your problem, you idiot? That's not what God is doing. God is exposing his soul. He's revealing his idolatry.

[29 : 42] He's breaking him out of his self-righteousness, his distortion. God is saving Jonah from his sin. Look at what God does. God didn't come and strike Jonah down in his foolishness and his disrespect.

God actually, he showed himself to be what he said he was, slow to anger. He was slow to get angry with Jonah. He even let Jonah yell at him and accuse him and misapply his own words back at him.

Like Cain, God was giving Jonah a way out, an escape from the slavery of his anger. God had compassion for Nineveh, but he also had compassion for Jonah.

And here's the beautiful thing. Have you ever wondered where we got this story from? You know, there doesn't seem to be anybody else around. Now, it's an argument from silence.

We can't know for sure, but scholars speculate that it is possible that after this, Jonah found a means of awakening.

[30 : 51] That this was an epiphany for him. That there was repentance that came from it and that Jonah was telling his own story for the benefit of all of us. It's just speculation.

But wouldn't that make sense that what God does is he brings his people to their senses? This is the season of epiphany where things are revealed. Perhaps in your own soul, things are being revealed right now.

And it's scary. But it is the only way to hope. It is the only way to life. God is inviting you and me to let those anger and lust and division and self-pity and all of these things that come up out of us, like he talked about, those are the things that exit us and defile us.

But he's inviting you to let those things out, to bring them to the foot of the cross and to be healed by them. Or not by them, but in them. You know, the path for Jonah is the path for all of us.

The path of submitting to God's own assessment of your anger. Letting him reveal the ugliness to you to repent. You know, this is kind of what Jesus talked about when he talked about the sign of Jonah.

[32 : 10] He was going to give the sign of Jonah three days in the belly of the fish. It's the sign that you need to come to him. In many ways, I think the sad, tragic thing about this story right here is that Israel, as you look through the years, Israel became like Nineveh, didn't they?

What do we learn about Israel when it comes to Jesus? They were willing to do anything to get rid of Jesus. In fact, the apostle Peter on Pentecost Sunday, here's how he proclaimed it.

He said, What Peter is saying is, You people of God became the very thing that you hated.

You became violent and evil and wicked, and you killed the one who has come to save you. And yet, the beauty of the gospel is that Jesus still came.

Knowing that his people would become the very enemies of God, he came anyway. And he came so that you would know that you do not have to follow the path of Jonah.

[33 : 25] You can follow the way of Jesus, the invitation of Jesus into life. You know, the story of Jonah, this is not a story that essentially is, you know, a great preacher wins a great conversion.

That's not the story of Jonah. The story of Jonah is a total failure is rescued. A total failure is rescued. There's such hope for you.

Let that drive you to Jesus. Okay, we have to stop. I've got to stop. I can keep going. We've got to stop. Let me pray. Father, I pray that you would allow those ugly parts of us, our self-righteousness, our selfishness, our anger, to drive us to you that we might know the fullness of your grace.

Would you do that for the glory of Jesus? Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34 : 39] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.