

## “Should I not Pity Nineveh?”

### Sermons on the Minor Prophets: The Book of Jonah (4)

*Texts: Jonah 4:1-11; Revelation 7:9-17*

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What pleased God (the repentance of Nineveh), only made Jonah mad<sup>1</sup> – a rather ironic sentiment from someone called to be YHWH’s prophet. Why was Jonah so upset that YHWH brought salvation to pagan Ninevites? Jonah, you’ll recall sought to flee YHWH’s call to preach in Nineveh, but YHWH took him on an unexpected detour—a great storm arises, Jonah is thrown overboard and then spends three days and nights in the belly of a great fish. But Jonah eventually fulfilled his prophetic calling, and preached to the Ninevites. The result of his preaching? Many Ninevites believed Jonah’s message. Even their king believed Jonah’s warning, and he ordered a time of mourning and fasting, even exhorting his people to call upon God and cease their violent behavior. But as we read in chapter 4 of his prophecy, Jonah is angry with God. The prophet is perplexed by the fact that the Ninevites were spared from YHWH’s judgment even as his own beloved people, Israel, are about to come under God’s covenant curse. In the closing chapter of Jonah, we find the prophet right back where he was when first called to preach. His disdain for the Ninevites surfaces again. “Why was Nineveh spared when Israel will not be?” As his prophecy concludes, Jonah is given yet another lesson in God’s mercy.

With this sermon, we conclude our study of the book of Jonah. As we work our way through the final chapter, once again we discover that in the Book of Jonah, irony seems to jump off every page. You would think that YHWH’s chosen prophet would be thrilled to witness huge numbers of people believe in YHWH and spared from judgment, through his own preaching. Yes, pride is a sin, but there is a certain allowable sense of satisfaction about witnessing people come to faith, repent of their sin, and then amend their ways. Jonah should have been thrilled to witness what God has done in Nineveh—extend salvation to countless Gentiles beyond the confines of his covenant with Israel. But as we have come to expect in the Book of Jonah, the ironic becomes the norm.

The closing scene in Jonah chapter four takes place after Jonah has completed his mission of passing through the city of Nineveh and proclaiming YHWH’s call to repent with remarkable success. But instead of being thrilled to be YHWH’s agent in bringing the Ninevites to repentance, the opening verse of chapter 4 reveals that Jonah is angry. Why? What has happened? Why is he back where he started, angry that the people of Nineveh repented? Irony appears again—God relented in his anger toward Nineveh, while Jonah renews his anger towards the Ninevites. Why would the same evil that YHWH attributed to the Ninevites (the Hebrew text of Jonah 1:2) now be attributed to Jonah (4:1). The Hebrew text literally reads “it [the repentance of Nineveh] was evil to Jonah with great evil.”<sup>2</sup> The ESV translates the passage as “*but it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry,*” trying to capture the raw emotion Jonah felt at what the prophet perceived as a divine injustice. Jonah hated what YHWH had done. It is hard to imagine a great evangelist preaching to a huge crowd, seeing many of them respond in

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<sup>1</sup> Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Jonah 4:1.

<sup>2</sup> Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Jonah 4:1. Wiseman, Alexander, and Waltke, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah, Jonah 4:1.

faith, and then getting mad at God because people actually responded—but this is the scene in Jonah 4.

Why would Jonah react like this? There are several reasons for Jonah’s anger which we have already mentioned. The first is that Jonah is a loyal Israelite. He is a Jew, a prophet of YHWH, and loyal to the Northern Kingdom, long at war with both Syria and Assyria to the north. We know from the books of the Kings that YHWH used Assyrian aggression to weaken Syria to the point that in the days of Jeroboam II, Israel actually defeated Syria and was enjoying a period of relative peace. But just to the north of Syria, Assyria was growing stronger by the day. The empire was but one generation away from the time when the armies of king Tiglath Pileser III will sweep down from the north and virtually wipe Israel off the map. Nineveh was in the very heart of the Assyrian empire. The first reason why Jonah reacted as he did is racial and cultural—the Assyrians are not my people. They are my enemies. How could God call them to repentance? Doesn’t he know how bad they are? That they are outside the covenant?

As a loyal Israelite, Jonah also very likely worried that without YHWH’s help, Assyria’s technologically advanced army could easily defeat Israel. But if that were the case it would mean—at least to Jonah’s way of thinking—that Assyria would be God’s agent of judgment upon the disobedient, idolatrous, and faithless Israelites. Why would YHWH save Assyrians in Nineveh, yet bring judgment upon Israel, Jonah’s people? Even worse, YHWH called him (Jonah) to be the preacher through whom he secures Nineveh’s repentance. Jonah thinks this is grossly unfair. Because of this he does not see the bigger redemptive history purpose behind his own call to Nineveh—God’s purpose is to save his elect, this includes both Jews and Gentiles, even Ninevites.

Surely both of these things are in Jonah’s mind and are the root of his anger. Sadly, in Jonah’s reaction we may see our own sinful prejudices. God may chose to save people whom we do not think he ought to save. His grace may extend to places where we do not think he ought to extend it. Jonah obviously knows the Psalter—since he quoted from it or alluded to it many times in his “song” from chapter 2. Perhaps he (and we) ought reflect upon the words of Psalm 145:9: “*The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.*” Jonah turns what ought to be a time of joy and reflection upon YHWH’s mercy, into a snit arising from his Jewish nationalism. His politics win out. Jonah is flat out mad that God saved a whole bunch of Ninevites with whom Israel will go to war.

So angry is Jonah we read in verse 2 that 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.’*” Jonah gives us an explanation as to why he sought to flee YHWH’s call in the first place. We also learn the motive behind his comments in the preceding verse about the repentance of the Ninevites being such a terrible thing—at least in his estimation. Although Jonah is angry, he does the right thing and complains to God in prayer. He does not complain about God to his readers—a huge lesson for all of us.<sup>3</sup> It is not as though we can hide our thoughts from God. He is big enough to take it when we complain to him, and merciful enough not to cast us away when we act like spoiled children. Yet, we must be careful not to allow our anger or frustration with the Lord or his purposes to become an occasion to cross the line into sin—cursing him or blaspheming his name. Jonah complains to YHWH but does not curse God in his anger, nor take YHWH’s name in vain. He pours out his heart to God.

We saw from Jonah’s “song” that he knows the Psalter—his speech resonates with the Psalms. He also

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<sup>3</sup> Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Jonah 4:2.

knows the Torah (the five books of Moses). When Jonah asserts that YHWH is a merciful and gracious God, his words echo the words of Moses from Exodus 34:6–7: “*The LORD passed before [Moses] 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, 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.’*” Jonah knows that YHWH is merciful—he himself is the proof, having survived being cast from a ship during a raging storm. He survived three days in the belly of a great fish. But Jonah laments that God’s grace and mercy have been directed toward the wrong people. It is not stated, but we can but wonder if when reciting YHWH’s attributes Jonah wishes that YHWH’s love and mercy would continue to be extended to Israel, despite his own people’s continual descent into idolatry and abandoning YHWH’s ways.

Jonah feels so strongly about this that he prays (v. 3), “*therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.*” Now Jonah’s complaint crosses the line from asking that God grant him understanding and a change of heart, into a plea to die. To paraphrase, “just kill me and get all this over with.” Knowing that the pagan Gentiles of Nineveh who commit great evil will likely soon invade his own beloved homeland, Jonah laments he would rather die than see that terrible thing happen. Jonah is not alone in this. Moses pled to die in Numbers 11:15. The prophet Elijah did the same thing as recounted in 1 Kings 19:4. How much easier to seek to escape life’s difficulties than face the fact that God transforms and sanctify us by taking us through the trials and tribulations of life.

In Jonah’s case, his plea to die is an indication that he is unwilling to accept the fact that God’s mercy would extend beyond his own people (the Jews of the Northern Kingdom) to pagan Gentiles. Again, there is a great and powerful irony in this. When Jonah mentions that God is gracious, merciful, loving, slow to anger, and will relent in bringing judgment, Jonah, no doubt, knows this first hand especially considering the miraculous way in which YHWH has rescued him from certain death. Why should YHWH reflect the same attributes when dealing with the Assyrians whom Jonah regards as his own personal enemies? In Jonah’s mind, these same attributes of God are now viewed negatively. “I know that you are gracious, merciful, patient, so you’ll probably just save the Ninevites!” This is the great paradox in the Prophecy of Jonah. What Jonah accepts from YHWH he wants withheld from others.

But YHWH does not let Jonah continue to wallow in his self-pity. We read in verse 4, “*and the LORD said, ‘Do you do well to be angry?’*” YHWH does not rebuke Jonah, he ignores Jonah’s plea to die, and instead asks Jonah a question—a question which forces the prophet to take his eyes off his own navel and gain much needed biblical perspective. In questioning Jonah in this way, YHWH demonstrates his grace, mercy, love, patience, and willingness to relent—the very attributes just mentioned by Jonah. In effect, YHWH asks, “Jonah, it is good for you to burn with anger, to kindle the fire already within you?” “Look within yourself and examine your own heart to see if your anger is justified.”<sup>4</sup>

Jonah cared deeply for his people, Israel—YHWH understands this. It is not sin for Jonah to be patriotic. But it borders on sin to do what Jonah is doing—to understand his own national/racial identity as an Israelite to be more fundamental to who he is than his calling as YHWH’s prophet. Burning with anger, Jonah cannot see God’s greater redemptive purposes. Yet, Jonah has no right to be angry with YHWH merely because YHWH’s greater purpose includes extending his saving grace beyond the boundaries of

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<sup>4</sup> Estelle, Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy, 127-128.

his covenant with Israel. Neither should we be angry when God extends his grace to those in different socio-economic groups, cultures, ethnicities, or political parties.

In verse 5, we learn that *“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.”* We do not know how long an interval between the time he finished preaching and the interchange between Jonah and YHWH in verses 1-4 of this chapter. It appears as though Jonah still has not sufficiently wrestled with YHWH’s question. Jonah remains stubborn and camps outside the city to the east to sit and wait to see if YHWH relents yet again and actually does bring judgment down upon the city. Jonah’s has completely missed the point. YHWH’s question was designed to change Jonah’s attitude. Instead of learning the lesson YHWH intended, Jonah builds a shelter, and waits in the hope that YHWH will eventually see things Jonah’s way and bring down his judgment upon the city. Talk about stubborn!

One of the theological foundations we discover throughout the Minor Prophets is YHWH’s sovereignty over the doings of people and nations. In the Jonah Story God’s sovereignty is revealed in very specific ways. Jonah fled, but YHWH sent the storm (literally he “threw” the storm). Jonah was thrown overboard, but YHWH sent the fish who swallowed Jonah. Now, as Jonah bakes in the heat of Syrian desert in his little hut to the east of the city, waiting for YHWH to destroy the place, we are told in verse 6, that *“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.”* The Hebrew for plant is “vine,” so this was some sort of a leafy plant (ivy? gourd?) which YHWH caused to grow rapidly and shelter his pouting prophet from the scorching heat of the desert sun.

Why the vine? What does it mean? The vine may mean nothing symbolically, other than the fact that it obviously comes from YHWH and made Jonah exceedingly glad. Recall, the reason Jonah is camped out in the hot, dry desert in a shack shaded by a vine is because of his anger that Nineveh repented, and up to this moment, YHWH has spared the city from his judgment. That Nineveh still stands makes Jonah mad. But the shade YHWH sent makes Jonah happy, proving that he can wait long enough for YHWH to change his mind. More irony. Personal comfort while he’s waiting to see Nineveh destroyed means more to Jonah than rejoicing in God’s graciousness to Gentiles in sparing them.

This is why the otherwise odd account we find in these verses takes on great significance in terms of the big picture. We read in verses 7-8, *“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.”* For the fourth time in the Prophecy of Jonah, YHWH directly intervenes—this time sending a worm which withers the plant which YHWH raised up the day before, leaving Jonah fully exposed to the sun. Then YHWH sent a hot desert wind—a sirocco, which like a Santa Ana wind quickly raises the temperature and drops the humidity. Able to rest in the shade one day, Jonah is so hot the next, he’s afraid he might die from the heat.<sup>5</sup>

Remarkably, the only thing destroyed in the Book of Jonah is this leafy plant. Not the ship in the storm. Not Jonah, when he’s thrown over board. Not even the city of Nineveh, which Jonah was hoping to see wiped out—so much so that he built a tent to get a ringside seat to watch what he was hoping YHWH would do to the city. No, the only thing wiped out is the vine YHWH raised up the day before—a vine

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<sup>5</sup> Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Jonah 4:7.

which, by the way, is the only thing in Jonah's entire prophecy which is said to bring Jonah great joy. Meanwhile, Jonah is once again in bodily peril, this time from the desert heat with little water. "It is better for me to die" he says to YHWH, than to wait any longer to see judgment come upon Nineveh. "Just kill me already if you are going to spare Nineveh."

Again irony jumps off the page at the reader. In verse 3 of this same chapter, Jonah questioned God's right to deliver Nineveh from his judgment. Why should YHWH save *them*? Now Jonah questions YHWH's right to take his (Jonah's) life. Why doesn't YHWH just kill *me*? By reading these events through the wrong lens—his own cultural and political views—he completely misses out on seeing the wonderful blessing of witnessing countless Gentile pagans believe in the God of Israel and then repent of their sins. If Jonah was just able to step back for a moment—and wrestle with the question YHWH put to him previously—he could see God's gracious and merciful sovereign purpose in everything that has happened. Jonah has been delivered in miraculous ways that go beyond all human expectation. But his stubborn anger has gotten the better of him. Now, he's out in the desert east of Nineveh hoping to die, caring more about a dead vine than the eternal fate of 120,000 Gentile pagans.

We read in verse 9 that "*God said to Jonah, 'Do you do well to be angry for the plant?'*" YHWH shows himself to be the gracious, merciful, and loving God, who relents in his judgments, and who in his better moments, Jonah knows him to be. Instead of rebuking Jonah, YHWH teaches him, asking him a version of the same question asked of Jonah in verse 4. "So, Jonah, are you glad I judged the plant?" "Are you glad I killed it?" When questioned earlier like this, Jonah said nothing, but went out into the desert and built his tent. This time he actually responds to YHWH's question. "*And [Jonah] said, 'Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.'*" Jonah has come to the end. He still expects that YHWH will relent of relenting, and that YHWH will see Nineveh for what it is—Israel's enemy. YHWH should have destroyed the city—like he did the vine. Jonah is thoroughly confused. YHWH has provided him shade, only to kill the vine which sheltered him. Jonah is hot, thirsty, and seemingly out of his right mind. How can YHWH bring comfort and then cause him misery? Losing biblical perspective, Jonah is asking the kind of question that we all ask when we lose sight of God's mercy and will. "Why does God extend mercy to people whom I do not like, nor think worthy of his grace, but not to me?" "God answered their prayers, but not mine." "God did "xyz" for them, but not for me."

Jonah's eyes are so focused upon himself he cannot feel anything but self-pity. He wants to die because God withered a plant. He's angry because God did not destroy Nineveh. YHWH will not allow Jonah, his chosen prophet, to continue in this way. According to the closing verses of the prophecy (vv. 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. 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?'*" With these words the main theme of the Jonah story—and our application—comes into view. YHWH's purpose is to save his elect from every corner of the world, even from Nineveh, a place which happens to be Israel's current enemy and the object of Jonah's disdain.

Ironically, Jonah's Jewish nationalism blinded him to the fact that as an unworthy sinner himself, Jonah has no right whatsoever telling YHWH whom he must save and whom he must judge. Jonah was YHWH's prophet. He goes where YHWH sends him. His prophetic calling means that he preaches the words YHWH gives him. Israel's long history of rejecting God's prophets, explains why in Luke 13:34 Jesus says of Israel, "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*" Prophets have a very difficult calling because YHWH gives them very

difficult marching orders—“deliver my covenant lawsuit to Israel. Warn them of the covenant curses about to come upon them, lest they repent.” In their role as divine process servers, they are hated.

There is one way in which Jonah is an important example to us. Not in the usual moralizing sense typically assigned to the Jonah story. “Obey God when he calls you or suffer the consequences like Jonah.” No, Jonah is an example to us of a very flawed man being God’s chosen agent to preach to the Ninevites so that they may repent, thereby fulfilling God’s greater purpose. Jonah is not a super saint who earned his ticket to be God’s chosen preacher, whose preaching gets a great response. This is a man with an agenda. He is sinful. He truly repents and is thankful, when he has to be. In this, Jonah is just like us. Flawed in every way, yet Jonah is the one whose preaching converts an entire city—120,000 who knew nothing of the ways of the Lord until Jonah preached to them. Many who heard Jonah preach will be called as witnesses on the day of judgment because they believed his preaching!

There is no such thing as free agency among Israel’s prophets. God calls them and they go. If they do what Jonah did—attempt to flee—God ensures that they go anyway. God will accomplish his saving purposes. Paul’s words from Romans 9:14-16 come into view here. *“Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For [YHWH] says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”* Under the new covenant—wherein God extends his saving mercy beyond Israel to the ends of the earth—the principle that God saves whom he wills becomes even clearer. He will save whom he wishes to save, because apart from God’s saving mercy in Jesus Christ, we cannot save ourselves. We are dead in sin and unable to come to faith in Jesus until called to trust in him through the gospel.

Because the power resides in God’s words (and message) not in the preacher, God uses weak and fallible men and women to be messengers of his gospel—the means by which he calls people to saving faith. As Paul puts it in Romans 9:22-24. *“What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”* God saves whom he wills—using us as the means of sharing Christ with our Ninevite friends, families, and neighbors. We don’t “save” anyone. God does that. But he uses us to expand and further his kingdom. He uses us, as he used Jonah—except for the storm, the ship, the whale, and the leafy plant.

But when all is said and done, because God saving purpose is accomplished, and God’s grace and mercy have been extended to the ends of the earth, we read these wonderful words in Revelation 7:9-17, and listen for echoes from the Jonah story as we do so:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his

temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

That, beloved is the true message of the prophet Jonah.