

# The Prophet's Rebuke

## Jonah 4<sup>1</sup>

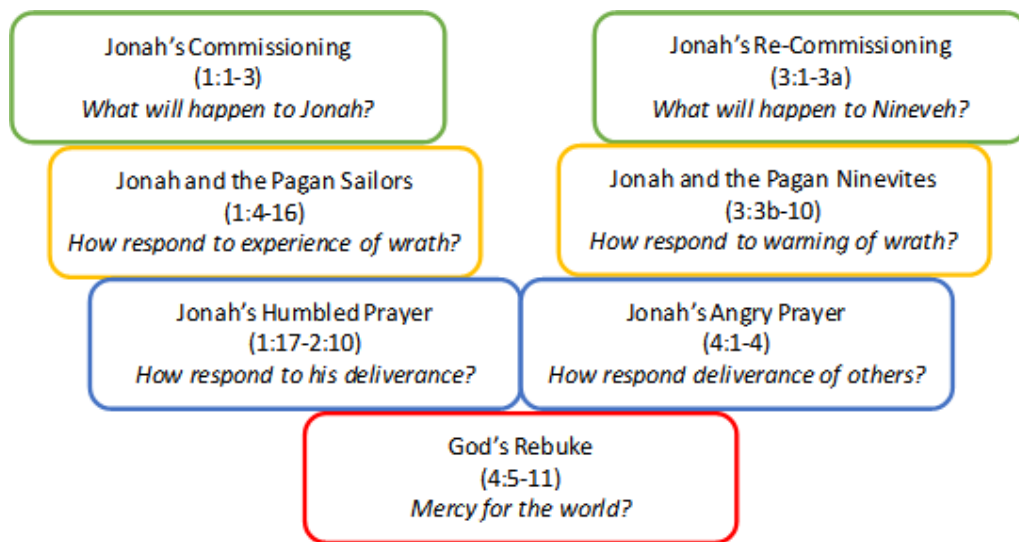
*Russ Kennedy*

People have many motivations for their actions. The Bible teaches us both the simplicity of our beliefs and wants as the dynamics for our emotions and actions. The Bible also explains how complex the interaction between these can be. This makes understanding why people feel and act the way they much more difficult.

That complex motivation is often illustrated in the stories of the Bible. From Eve's first sin to Israel's grumbling and complaining to their dissatisfaction with the rebuilt Temple the Bible is realistic about people. People suffer. People sin. People struggle with deep heart issues that overflow in fruit and harvest. People are perplexed by God and the world. They want to be in control. They want God to do what they want. They struggle mightily with submitting to God's will.

Kings, priests and prophets struggled in the same way. They often had big dreams, large purposes and more clarity about what God wanted them to do. But then things did not turn as they wanted or hoped. These crashing dreams led to being downcast, or as we would say, being depressed. Or, they became angry with God and justified themselves.

This is a toxic mix in the heart. A good theology, misapplied. A belief in one's uniqueness before God. A craving to control. A refusal to accept God's will. A lack of submission to God and His Word. A grudging minimal obedience. A surprising and magnificent work of God. An anger over such mercy of God. This is Jonah. This is some of you...



Jonah is a foil for the character of God and the message of the book.

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## Jonah's Displeasure (v.1-4)

The people and the king of Nineveh turn from sin and idolatry to the Lord. This may be the greatest 40-day revival in history. One man's preaching has been the instrument of that great work of God. What an amazing joy that must have been! Well, not so much...

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?"

### *Sulks over Nineveh's Repentance*

What an incredible surprise. This is not at all what we would have expected. Yes, he fled from his responsibility and it took the deliverance of God through judgment to get to obey. This is the prophet who declared, "Salvation is of the Lord!" Now those great words sound hollow and empty.

This great repentance has displeased Jonah. Other words here are irked, annoyed, upset. In our modern language, Jonah is having a melt-down, a freak out. Literally, the Hebrew reads, "It was evil to Jonah." Our translators are wanting to convey something from the Hebrew. This is the most intensive form you can have. He was excessively displeased that the Ninevites had repented. This is not saying it caused Jonah to do evil; no, Jonah viewed their repentance as an evil thing.

He was angry. He is angry that all those people avoided the wrath of God. He is angry that sinners are turned from wickedness. He is angry that the people are grieved over their sin. He is angry that the king has repented. He is angry that the king has stepped down off his throne and is sitting in sackcloth and ashes. He is angry, angry, angry.

### *Blames God for his Disobedience (v. 2)*

Now frankly this prayer took some guts. Well, no it didn't. When people are thoroughly, deeply and self-righteously angry, they will say and do the most appalling things. Jonah is spitting mad. He spits out a very disrespectful, accusatory speech at God.

He says, "This is exactly why I did not go when you told me to go to Nineveh. This is what I said then." We have often pointed out that when people blame their situation or circumstances for their sins, they are effectively blaming God. Jonah is not even subtle. He ran, he fled in the opposite direction because he knew exactly what God was like.

Jonah takes good theology and uses it to bad effect. He knew that God was gracious, merciful and slow to anger. This is the message of the prophet Joel in **Joel 2:12-14**: <sup>1</sup>

<sup>12</sup> "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

<sup>13</sup> and rend your hearts and not your garments."

Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

<sup>14</sup> Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him,

a grain offering and a drink offering  
for the LORD your God?

Most of the prophecies by Old Testament prophets declared God's outpouring of wrath on the nations. They focused on both the near and the last days judgments. They also spoke of a future hope of mercy for Gentiles in the context of God's promise to Abraham. But Jonah has not misunderstood the character of God. He is utterly clear about who God is and what He is like. It is not that Jonah did not expect Nineveh to repent. He knew this is just exactly what God was like. He fully expected that God might show grace and mercy and be long-suffering. He just did not want it.

This is stunning. Jonah's anger is against what God is like. He believed Nineveh deserved the wrath of God because of their wickedness. He wanted Nineveh punished. He wanted it so badly he was displeased and angry. This is so common even among believers today. Despite what God says in His Word, you want or don't want something different. When God requires what He commands or when He gives what you do not want, you are frustrated, disobedient, and depressed. You eventually become angry with God and will blame shift your own disobedience to God. Unless there is genuine repentance, this will not end well.

Keddie warns us: "If we are tempted to shrug off such an attitude as 'a passing phase' – as we can too easily do with our own children – then we should remember that this was lethal for the Jews of Jesus' day. Rejecting God is, in its very nature, a totally irrational business. It is the end of all reason and sense. It involves, of necessity, the victory of utter foolishness and a self-destructive passion." (Keddie, pp. 112-113)

### ***Joins the Roll of Suicidal Prophets (v. 3)***

There is a dishonorable roll of prophets who have sought to escape their responsibilities through suicide.

#### **Moses - Numbers 11:10–15**

<sup>10</sup> Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the LORD blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased. <sup>11</sup> Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? <sup>12</sup> Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,' to the land that you swore to give their fathers? <sup>13</sup> Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' <sup>14</sup> I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. <sup>15</sup> If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness."

#### **Elijah - 1 Kings 19:1–5**

<sup>1</sup> Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." <sup>3</sup> Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

<sup>4</sup> But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." <sup>5</sup> And he lay down and slept

under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat."

Jonah's displeasure and self-pitying depression and blame shifting now become self-destructive and suicidal. Oh, this could be dramatic overstatement. That would not be unusual and God's treatment of it seems to dismiss it like we would a childish temper tantrum.

For Jonah, it was better to die at God's hands than to live and see the mercy of God.

Notice that every one of these prophets ask God to kill them. They will not do it themselves. What does this mean? Why would someone reach a point that they would ask God to take their life? It seems to me that this happens when people are suffering so much that they see no way out. The sad fact is that Moses, Elijah and now Jonah are not really suffering. Elijah feels alone and threatened. Moses feels overwhelmed and unable to continue his task. Jonah is displeased because he didn't get what he wanted. But none of them are truly suffering. Their own heart words, wants, cravings and desires are so amplified that they are absolutely certain their suffering needs to end now.

You are not so different. You can rebel against God's clear providence for our lives. You can amplify your terrible situation and its pain. You can magnify the fear of future trouble and future suffering. You then can blame God for the causes of your suffering. Finally, you seek for an escape. Suicide is a kind of escape. But it is not the only escape. Divorce is a kind of escape. Moving can be a kind of escape. Self-destruction is the ultimate form of escape.

In every case, God sustains the person and then speaks into the person's life. God is patient. God will provide. God is persistent.

### ***Is Questioned by God (v. 4)***

God also prosecutes...

<sup>4</sup> And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

God often responds to sinning and attacking people with careful and calculated patience. God is the master at asking questions that expose the heart and probe the conscience. The sinning and hiding Adam was brought out into the open with a sequence of short, pithy questions. Jesus was adept at adroit questions that exposed motivations and folly of religious people's attacks.

God asks Jonah a simple, penetrating question. Our translation catches both the meaning and the nuance.

God does not ask, "Why are you angry?" Jonah has made it abundantly clear why he is angry. He wanted Nineveh to be punished. He is disgusted that God has shown mercy. Why is not in question.

Notice what is not said. Most of us would have said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Why not ask that? Because Jonah absolutely believes has the right to be angry. He has passed judgment on the Ninevites and God has overturned his judgment. He most certainly feels he has the right. Asking that question that way is a basic counseling mistake.

God basically asks, "Is it good for you to be angry? Is this proper for you to be angry." Is Jonah well when he is angry? This is almost a question about how Jonah is doing personally. Is this good for Jonah to be angry in this way over this issue?

To us, the answer is obvious. Of course, he is not doing well. This is not a good thing. It is always wrong to challenge God. It is always unwise to assert your rights in the face of God's power and providence. Is Jonah doing well to openly say, "I do not like what you are doing? You are acting exactly like I suspected. And God, I don't like it"

How do we know that this is defiance, insubordination, rebellion not just childish petulance?

## **Jonah's Exposure (v.5-11)**

Forty days have passed. Where do we find Jonah? In the city ministering to new converts? Preaching the Word? Nope...

### ***His Cynical Watch (v.5)***

<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.

Where do we find Jonah? Is this his answer to God? Jonah is boycotting God's gracious and merciful deliverance of Nineveh. He doesn't like it. He didn't like God's decision, so he goes outside the city on the east side of the city. The destruction that is coming will come from the Holy Temple, from the direction of the God's throne and His Holy Dwelling. Yes, the destruction will from the west, from Jerusalem. This is not about prevailing winds. This is about an expectation of God's might. Moving, judging power rolling out from His dwelling place on earth.

Our author tells us that here, Jonah built a booth. He is outside the city in the blazing sun of the Assyrian (Iraqi) landscape. Of course, he is going to provide himself some shade from the elements. But why a "booth"? There are lots of words that could be used.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, the Israelites were to build booths to stay in during the festival week. These would have been small shacks made of palm fronds. Jonah has built a small shack to shelter himself. The author has used the word "booth" to connect to the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Feast of Tabernacles was a few weeks before the Passover. It was intended to celebrate Israel's deliverance from Egypt and the wilderness while also anticipating the coming of Jesus. Jesus is God dwelling in a human body. He dwelt or tented among us and we saw the true glory of God, full of grace and truth.

Why is he there? "He stayed there until he would see what would happen to Nineveh." He has left the city, gone to a place of safety and built a shelter. He is here to see what will happen. He is here because he expects that maybe God will judge the city in spite of their repentance. After all, it is what he would do.

Here is the madness of religious people who do not think Biblically. Like Jonah, you know what God says. You may even act on that knowledge. But your own desires, idols and cravings cause a kind of emotions and actions that appear unreasonable, illogical and, in its worst case, irrational.

Jonah is all about self-salvation projects. He flees from God and is delivered through the judgment of the storm and the great fish. He now flees from Nineveh and the judgement that he thinks, hopes will fall. His booth will shelter him from the present sun and the future wrath.

Israel would have caught the allusions immediately. But they would have wondered about the connections. This scene should cause a wry smile and nervous laughter among them. Frankly, most would have entirely sympathized with Jonah.

### ***His Childish Reactions (v.6-8)***

God's counsel and correction of Jonah moves from words to deeds. All through the book we have observed the author's humor and irony. Don't miss it here...

<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."

Once again, the sovereign God appoints a plant to grow near and over Jonah's shack. God had appointed a great fish and now appoints a large plant. This is miraculous. The language points to overnight the plant grew up. It was huge. It covered Jonah's shack and provided a deep and comforting shade.

Look at the language. This was provided to "save" Jonah. Save? Save from what? This plant was to save Jonah from his "discomfort". This is magnificently ironic. The great fish was appointed to save Jonah from the storm of God's wrath. It took him into the depths in a grave-like death and resurrection. But now, God appoints a plant to come up and save Jonah from his discomfort. Now, I dismiss out of hand the people who say this shows the amazing love and care of God for even foolish, sinning people like Jonah. To do that is to read your own agenda into the text and not read the evident irony of the text.

Jonah was exceedingly - there is that word again - glad for the comforts the plant provided him. He reveled in the good and mercy of God for him. Sitting out on the hillside hoping for the destruction of repentant Gentiles, he sits under the shade of God's goodness and grace. Do you see it? Israel was reveling in the comforts of God's mercy while relishing wrath of God for the Gentiles. This is part of the message of the book. But it is also the message to us. It is extraordinary easy to be comforted by that which God has given us while totally rejecting what God has chosen to give to others.

Ah but in the morning light, the plant is withered away and dead. God had appointed a worm to eat away the plant so that it wasted away. Another of God's appointments. God is at work in all of this. So Jonah wakes to find his comfort removed. Furthermore, God appointed a sirocco, a scorching east wind - come on, see the irony - and a scorching wind to buffet and to burn down on Jonah's head. This is not just discomfort, but now he is fainting. He is withering.

Instead of appealing to God for help, instead crying out to God from the midst of his misery, he whines that it is better to die than to live. He, like Elijah, continues his victimization. He continues to complain.

### ***His Callus Heart (v.9)***

And he is angry at God for the destruction of the plant.

<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."

God challenges Jonah again. Was it good for his soul to be angry over God's mercy to Nineveh? Was it good for his soul to be angry over God's appointment of a worm to destroy the plant?

God, once again, is not asserting His sovereign right to appoint whatever the Lord chooses to do. That is not the point here. Nor is it an open question. The author simply says that God appointed judgment for Nineveh. God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. God appointed a shade plant for Jonah. God appointed a worm to destroy the plant the next day. That God appoints all these things, that God appoints everything that happens in your life, is not an open question. To deny that is to deny the Bible. I know that that there are many Christians and many theologians who deny that - they are, and I say this emphatically and categorically, wrong.

What then is God saying? Let's invert the question and ask it this way: Is it destructive for Jonah to be angry over the plans, purposes and providences of God? The answer absolutely is, yes. We see right in the text how destructive it is. Jonah's rejection of and lack of submission to what God is doing has led him to be agitated, depressed and suicidal.

The point of this is to aim that question at Israel. Their answer was just like Jonah's: "Yes, it is right and good for me to be angry that I have lost the comfort you have provided me." 100 to 120 years later Israel went into Neo-Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. The very mercy of God at this moment preserved Assyria. They eventually conquered the then northern tribes and carried them away into captivity into Samaria and Assyria.

This question is aimed at each one of us. You, all of you, are living through the "appointments" of God. You are living under His providences. You may make your plans, but God has laid out the path and the steps. Some of you are struggling with your current situations. Some of them are hard. Some of them have brought great changes. Some of them are the mercies and grace of God to others. Some of them are the withdrawal of your own comforts and ease. How will you respond? Will you whine, complain, play the victim, become depressed, angry, escapist? Will you assert your own rights? Will you refuse the evident providence of God? Do you do well to not want what God has given you? Where will such rebellion lead?

### ***God's Challenging Questions (v.10-11)***

God's challenge turns Jonah's talk on its head.

<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?"

God is being ironic, maybe even sarcastic. "You pitied the plant..." Did he? No, he pitied himself. Jonah's self-pity blinded him to withering destruction of the plant. God's own words are a withering rebuke of Jonah. You had nothing to do with the planting, cultivating or success of the plant. You did not labor for it. You can take no credit for it. You were sound asleep when it sprung up and when it flourished. It was the great surprise of the dawn. And you were sound asleep when it was destroyed. Yet, because it provided

for your own comforts, you pitied the poor plant shriveled and withered beside your booth.

That would be enough on its own. But all this is an object lesson for Jonah and for Israel and for us. If we revel the rise and pity the loss of small comforts, how much more should we align ourselves with God's mercy, grace and long-suffering patience? We pity plant-like things. God pities people and even the animals who suffer because of people's repentance.

Look at this. Stop. Let this sink in. Jonah pitied a plant. God pitied a great and wicked people and all their livestock. What is wrong with Jonah? What is wrong with us? But that focuses the question on us. What piercing question focuses on God. God's mercy is greater than: Jonah's anger and Jonah's petulance.

What do we do with such an abrupt ending. This dramatic question ends in silence. A long drawn out moment of introspection and conviction. And so does the Old Testament. As the Old Testament closes it closes into 400 years of silence. The silence is thunderous. The silence is portentous. The silence is interrupted by Word, the Son of God entering the world.

Where does this take us? There are many places in the New Testament that seem to draw from this story. But there is a scene in the gospel of Matthew that is compelling in its contrast. Speaking to rebellious religious leaders, Jesus laments. **Matthew 23:37-39**

<sup>37</sup> "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! <sup>38</sup> See, your house is left to you desolate. <sup>39</sup> For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' "

Here is the merciful heart of God over people who refuse and reject Him. Have you?

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## Reflect and Respond

How terrible it is to hate so much that God's mercy irritates, displeases and angers us.

The key is at the center of the book - "Salvation belongs to the Lord"

All the way down to Christ, Israel simply could not see how God would love and save the Gentiles.

Will you submit with joy to the providence of God?

Will you reach out with mercy and grace to the neighborhoods and to the nations?

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<sup>1</sup> Joel was written between 835 and 800 BC. Jonah took place around 680 BC. The quote from both the king of Nineveh and from Jonah both most clearly refer to Joel