



6 | JONAH 4:1-11

THE WORST MISSIONARY IN THE WORLD

We did nothing to earn God's favor. We don't get what we deserve. We are saved not because we are good, but because in love he chose us and loved us. There's no difference between you and the people with hardest hearts. Salvation is all of God's grace.

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Call to Worship

Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. ² Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. ³ Full of splendor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.
—Psalm 111:1-3

Songs

By Faith (Gettys)
Lead On O King Eternal
Is He Worthy
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In Christ Alone

Announcements

WELCOME: We are glad you are here! Be sure to grab a Welcome Packet if you are visiting with us.

Introduction

For fifteen years **Jim Fixx, author of the bestseller, *The Complete Book of Running***, ran **eighty miles** a week. He appeared to be in tip-top shape. It didn't seem possible that a man his age could be in better condition. Yet at **age fifty-two Fixx died of a massive heart attack** while running alone on a Vermont road. His wife, Alice, later said she was certain that Fixx had no idea he suffered from a heart problem. Why? Because he refused to get regular checkups. After Jim Fixx's death, doctors speculated that **his heart was so strong he may not have had the telltale chest pains** or shortness of breath that usually signal arterial heart disease.¹

Jonah was one of those people who had everything going for him. He had great theology. He lived in prosperity. He heard from God regularly. But he didn't see his own pride. **He was self-deceived**. He was glad he was forgiven and redeemed by the Lord, but that's where it ended. His idol was earthly comfort. Sadly, we find that **his three-night stay in the great fish didn't strip him of his idolatry**.

I doubt if there ever has been a story of God's dealings with undeserving pagans that should give more cause for rejoicing than the story of Jonah. Yet Jonah gets mad at God. Jonah could be called **the worst missionary** in the history of the world. God used him to bring the **greatest revival in the Old Testament** to the baddest people in the ancient world, and he's not rejoicing. **He's angry**. He is the best illustration who ever lived of a man who did exactly what he wasn't supposed to do, who refused to do what God had called him to do. And when he did fulfill God's call, he was angry with God saving the people in Nineveh.

Of all the books of the Bible, Jonah has the **most unexpected and shocking final chapter**. Most people have heard the story of Jonah, but they think of it as ending at Jonah's repentance and release from the fish. A smaller number of people may be able to tell you that the story goes on and that Jonah went and preached successfully to Nineveh. Almost everyone thinks the story ends right there. Yet there is a final, startling chapter in which the real lessons of the entire narrative are revealed.²

It's not unusual that Jonah doesn't want to go to the city most notorious for cruelty. But when God brings revival, he's **angry!** That's a surprise. If there had ever been a **cause for rejoicing**, now was the time. He sees one of the most **profound revivals** in the history of the world break out. We should expect Jonah himself to be literally **leaping with joy and thanksgiving**. Instead, we find Jonah in the worst "blue funk" imaginable. In fact, he was angry about what had happened, **violently angry**. He was angry with God.³

For many years, I used to scratch my head about Jonah's reaction to this astonishing awakening in Nineveh. Jonah angry? **Why? How?** Doesn't he understand the mercy of God? **But then it hit me. I'm Jonah**. Jonah has a sin problem that keeps reappearing. Anger is often an outward symptom of an underlying idol.

Jonah thinks he knows better than God. He's full of pride in himself and unbelief in God. That's the recipe for the deadness of backsliding.

We are often like Jonah. Self-righteous. Filled with knowledge in the head but not the heart. **Rules without relationship**. **We want to choose** those who are worthy of saving. Jonah is a prophet, and he needs to grow in God's grace. As we see Jonah, let us exalt and worship the God who can break our hard hearts for the lost.

¹ Jane Gross, "James F. Fixx Dies Jogging; Author on Running was 52." *The New York Times*, (July 22, 1984), <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/22/obituaries/james-f-fixx-dies-jogging-author-on-running-was-52.html>.

² Timothy Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2018), 97-98.

³ *Ibid*.

Key Thought: We did nothing to earn God's favor. We don't get what we deserve. We are saved not because we are good, but because in love he chose us and loved us. There's no difference between you and the people with hardest hearts. Salvation is all of God's grace.

1. THE POISON OF ANGER (3:10; 4:1-3)

When we consider why Jonah is such a bad missionary, we have to dig into his heart. He's going to preach against the world's greatest idolators and sinners, but he doesn't realize he's an idolator himself. The poison of anger has infected his life.

Idol Indicators

What makes you mad? ... sad? ... despair? ... want to escape?

Sinful, self-centered anger is a massive idol indicator. What makes you mad when you don't have it? What makes you sad when you don't get it? What makes you despair? What makes you want to escape into foolish thinking? These are the **X-ray questions** that reveal what we are actually worshipping.

ANGER KEEPS US PARALYZED

Anger is like a paralytic drug that keeps **you unable to move** spiritually. Anger fed Jonah's prejudice, and it stopped him from following God's call the first time. **His anger from prejudice paralyzed him** from caring about the salvation of the world. They were just *too bad* to be saved. Jonah didn't want the Ninevites to repent. He wanted them to **burn up like Sodom**. But God saw the repentant hearts of the Ninevites and showed mercy.

Jonah 3:10-4:1 | When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. ¹But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

Jonah is gub smacked. As **the prophet Jonah waited the 40 days, he was sure God would still carry out his judgment.** Remember, "40 days and Nineveh is done for!" Those 40 days came and went, but God's wrath did not consume Nineveh. He did not treat them like Sodom and Gomorrah before. The text says simply and beautifully: "**God relented of the disaster**" he had planned. God is focused on *salvation*. Jonah is focused on *retaliation*. For Jonah, this was an **injustice of highest proportions**. Jonah's self-righteous anger makes him see himself as **more righteous than God**. Jonah was hurt because his nation and perhaps his own family had been hurt by the dreaded Assyrians. This would be like saving Osama bin Laden a month after 9/11. Would you want to forgive him? Would you want to worship with him?

Anger paralyzes us. Bitterness can overtake us and keep us from thinking at all rationally. We see it in Jonah, but we see it in ourselves.

Satan has a bag of tricks to torture you with the pain of bitterness and anger. It's so bad once you get stuck in it, it's hard to get out. Such pain from bitterness is engineered by Satan to attempt to bind and paralyze you through sin. You respond to a sin against you with sin against your offender. The offenses are real and hurtful, but they are not unforgiveable. The most common offenses can infect your heart with the poison of bitterness.

A broken promise. Do you still remember a broken promise? Have you forgiven the person who broke it?

A broken confidence. If someone has betrayed your confidence, how have you responded?

Personal rejection. This includes not only verbal and emotional rejection but slander and gossip as well. Someone may mean well, but it feels like a criticism. This will make you bitter if you don't deal with it.

False accusation. Being charged falsely with wrongdoing can hurt your reputation and damage relationships. It is difficult to forgive the accuser and restore trust.

Abuse. Physical violence can hurt long after the bruises heal. Sexual abuse can torment much longer than the event that harmed you. Verbal abuse often leaves enduring emotional scars. God, however, can bring healing and give you the supernatural ability to forgive the abuser.⁴

If you find yourself upset and playing the thoughts of your hurt toward someone over and over again, you are already **trapped and tied up by bitterness.**

This is why we as believers must at all times “walk in the Spirit” for it is then we will not gratify the desires, the urges, the compulsions of the flesh (Gal 5:16). Walk in the fruit of the Spirit. You can't be filled with *love, joy, peace, patience*, etc., and be **filled with anger and vitriol.** Jonah was **gratifying his selfish desire** that those who hurt him would hurt. He was good and angry, but that was not good. In fact, when we look at it, it's confusing at first.

Anybody who is following this story along would expect there to have just been a Jonah 3:10, and that should've said, “**And Jonah returned to his own land rejoicing.**” But instead, we have a Jonah 4:1 that says, “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.” And we learn that he's angry enough to die. Come on!

What is it that is paralyzing you? Is your heart freed from anger and bitterness? Look at what it did to Jonah. But anger doesn't just keep you *paralyzed*. It keeps you *pouting*.

ANGER KEEPS US POUTING

Look at Jonah's prayer. It's actually not much of a prayer. It's a pout! Anger turns your praying into pouting.

Jonah 4:2 | 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.

Jonah is beside himself in bitterness. He prays, but he prays wrongly, thinking God is wrong. Anger has blinded Jonah. That's what sin does to any individual. Whenever we allow any sin, especially anger, to enter in, we are giving Satan control over us. We become his marionette. Paul tells us never to be sinfully angry because it is then that we give **a place at the table of our heart and mind for the devil to counsel** us (Eph 4:26-27). Anger says, “I am a god. I will control this situation. I call the shots.” Anger lives and grows in the soil of pride and rebellion. In Hebrews we read something important about bitterness.

Hebrews 12:15, NIV | See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

This verse teaches us two things about bitterness: First, it has a **root-some source of human pride that causes you not to believe the promises of God**; and second, as the **root spreads**, it defiles many. It blows up into pouting. It starts with pouting to God, but then to others. Satan squeezes us with bitterness and despair, and **we pop with complaints and gossiping that defile many. Instead of covering with love complain with loathing.**

Pouting is Self-Righteous

Jonah thought he was right, and he wanted to inform God.

⁴ Erwin W. Lutzer, *When You've Been Wronged: Moving from Bitterness to Forgiveness* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007).

Jonah 4:2a | 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."

We don't specifically know the root of Jonah's anger toward the Ninevites, but it is not hard to imagine. The stories he's heard about these terrorists make him boil. As a prophet of Israel, ministering to God's people, surely **he has wept with numbers** of broken hearted parents and **counseled countless orphaned children**. The viciousness and violence of the soldiers. The arrogance of their paganism. I mean Israel is astray, but **the Assyrians are on another level!** They're monsters. You know that a depth of crippling pride had entered our hearts when we believe we are more righteous than God himself. That was Jonah. He thought he saw things more clearly than God. At the root of all bitterness is unbelief and pride. Jonah thought he knew more about righteousness than God.

Pouting is Self-Serving

Jonah reveals something far more sinister about bitterness. At the heart of bitterness is a satanic thirst to take the throne of God. **"God's just too soft! I'd be a better cosmic ruler than him!"** Jonah wanted a God who was more like himself, made in Jonah's image.

Jonah 4:2b | "For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."

It's clear that Jonah's not preaching the glories of our merciful God. Instead, he's complaining that God is not more like man. **Jonah would like a God who is as petulant as he is.**

Jonah knows the **attributes of God**. God is sovereign. Gracious. Merciful. Slow to anger. Abounding in covenantal love (*hesed*). God is loyal to unworthy sinners. His attitude is self-serving. **Jonah knows God but doesn't like him. God's too soft!** Jonah is mad that God is such a God of grace.

When you are pouting, you can't stop it without surrendering to God. Pouting indicates that self is at the center of your life, to the point you feel **constrained by your sociopathic flesh to question the living God. It's satanic.**

Pouting is Self-Exalting

Jonah 4:2c | "And abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."

It's important to realize that sinful anger leads to a pouting that is self-exalting. Your flesh is "in it to win it" at all costs. The motive of this **angry pouting is not a steadfast love for others, like God demonstrates**, but a **steadfast commitment to self at all costs, like the devil himself demonstrates**.

Jonah is glad that God is gracious, "abounding in hesed" toward Israel. But **why is God loyal in his love toward the evil Assyrians?!** Jonah is not only self-righteous and self-serving, but he's **racist** and self-exalting as well.

We all know that Jonah in his complaining is quoting **God's description of himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6**. Why would a preacher get exceedingly angry when, as a response to his preaching, he actually turns a culture away from violence, oppression, and wickedness to the living God?⁵ I'll tell you why. **He's blinded by thinking his dung doesn't stink**. We all know we are sinners but come on. There's sin, and then there's really bad sin. Jonah basically says in verse 2, "God, I do not understand how your love operates. I don't get it. It doesn't make sense to me." God sets out in this chapter to teach Jonah how his love operates, so the whole chapter is about love, and the incredible collapse of Jonah is because of a misunderstanding of God's love.⁶

⁵ Timothy J. Keller, "Abounding in Love, Jonah 4:1-11" from *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

⁶ Ibid.

When self is on the throne of your life, the bitterness, complaining, unrelenting thoughts, and the fighting, bickering, and ugliness will never end. As long as your pride is ruling you, **your pouting will continue and keep going. It cannot be reasoned with.** It must be crucified (Gal 2:20).

God's Patience in Our Pouting

Jonah 4:2c | "And abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."

The only thing keeping Jonah from oblivion at this point is the patience of God. It's ironic because this patient love of God is seen in four situations: Jonah running in chapter 1, the sailors in chapter 1, the Ninevites in chapter 3, and Jonah's pouting in chapter 4.

The key teaching in this passage is that fruitful, **prominent Christians can fall back into old patterns of sin** and self-deception so that only the patient love of God stands between us and oblivion. **God's patient love is such that he will always bring us back.** We are directly taught in the New Testament that Christians are predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). Do Christians stumble and fall yes—but not permanently. We're taught about the patient love of God here because Jonah is a perfect example. We should not point our finger at Jonah and be surprised. We should look in the mirror and see that we are Jonah.

Do you think that those old patterns of anger, and of fear, and of dishonesty, and denial are all gone away? Have all those bad habit patterns vanished? No. **They're under a death sentence**, but they're still there. You have to crucify them every day. The condemning power of sin is gone forever, but the actual power of sin, though under a death sentence, is still present. Therefore, it can erupt.⁷

The moment you stop walking in the Spirit and give into your flesh, you can become as blinded to the love of God as Jonah was. The fact that we are shocked by this passage shows how used to our own blindness we have become. Indeed, God "is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9).

ANGER KEEPS US IN PAIN

Jonah 4:3 | Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.

Anger can be so petulant that it renders the one who drinks it in hopeless. You become so **blinded by anger you experience despair**. You just want to die. That was Jonah. A prophet no less. He knows God's word. He's just quoted Moses in Exodus 34:6. That's the Old Testament version of our Ephesians 2:8-9. **Salvation is by grace through faith.** The Ninevites came by grace. They believed God (3:1). Miracle of miracles. But Jonah can't see it and certainly cannot appreciate it. That's what anger will do to a person. **Anger can ultimately lead a person to want to die** and to even take their own life. Jonah of course was merely asking for God to take his life. "God, why didn't you just kill me, and leave me at the bottom of the Mediterranean? **Why do I have to see my mortal enemies brought into your kingdom?** I like my worship free from Assyrians. I don't want to worship with those monsters."

This reminds me of a story from **Corrie Ten Boom**. During World War II, she and her sister Betsie had been sent to a German prison camp for the crime of helping Jews in Holland. Her precious Betsie died in the camp. Corrie lived, and after the war began to teach and speak everywhere of God's forgiveness for everyone. Shortly after the war God called Corrie to testify in Germany. Corrie told the people of the love, forgiveness and healing that God wanted to bring to Germany.

During one meeting a former Nazi prison officer approached Corrie. He had been one of the very guards who had abused and neglected her and her sister in prison. He did not recognize her, but she recognized him. He had become a Christian, and now asked Corrie if she could forgive him. Corrie was shocked! She now recognized him! Could she forgive him?

⁷ Ibid.

At first Corrie resisted, but then with the strength God gave her, she was able to hold her hand out to the man, and tell him: **"For Christ's sake, I forgive you!"** After being obedient she sensed the filling of the Holy Spirit and felt only great love for her former enemy.⁸

2. THE POWER OF KINDNESS (4:4-6)

We see God's kindness to Jonah is rooted in his kindness to Israel and to all mankind. His kindness is all of grace. There is no merit involved.

GOD'S KINDNESS TO ISRAEL

Jonah 4:2b | I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

The irony here is that Israel had far more light than Nineveh (the capital of the Assyrian empire) but **repented with so little of a message** and no promise of redemption, even though God spared them. Yet Israel had so much light and revelation from God and were hardened. **Why did God choose Israel?** God tells us in Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 7:7-8 | It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples,⁸ but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

God's election of any sinner is unconditional. It's "not by works" or merit. Otherwise, we would have reason to boast (Eph 2:9). God loves us not because we are so great, but despite our rebellion which is hell deserving. The ground is level at the cross. Jonah doesn't deserve salvation any more than the Ninevites. We are all just as deserving of hell as unworthy of heaven as the most wicked and cruel Assyrian soldier. **The ground is level at the cross.** Jonah didn't get how undeserving he was of the steadfast love of God. He wanted it all to himself. **"Keep those nasty Ninevites out of the kingdom,"** he must have thought!

GOD'S KIND NATURE

Jonah is stewing over this heaven-sent revival. We scratch out heads. Really? God asks Jonah about his anger, but we hear of no answer.

Jonah 4:4 | And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

We don't see a response from Jonah about the people, but Jonah answers God later when his little plant withers, and God asks him the same question.

Jonah 4:9b | "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."

At this point of the story, we rightly ask ourselves, **"What is wrong with Jonah?"** He should have been happy for the repentance of the Ninevites, but instead he is unhappy. He had been instrumental in the gift of spiritual life to thousands, but now he prefers death. He claimed to be cognizant of God's grace and mercy, which he himself had experienced. He **resents God for it** and says that **he would have preferred wrath for Nineveh.** One thing wrong with Jonah is that he is **not understanding of the miracle of God's grace and love.**⁹

⁸ Carole C. Carlson. *Corrie Ten Boom: Her Life, Her Faith: A Biography.* (Old Tappan, NJ: F.H. Revell, 1983) 78.

⁹ Boice, *Minor Prophets*, 305.

Jonah 4:2b | I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

Here's what God tells Jonah through his question. **God is the one who has the true right to be angry! Grace is a miracle.** In other words, the regeneration of sinners is an act of almighty God (cf Eph 2; Eze 36, 37). God has to do the work. God has to raise the dead. **God has to give the increase** (1 Cor 3:6). Just as God makes a plant grow to give the weary Jonah rest, he gives the increase so that a wretched sinner can be born again. Everything you have is a gift. That's grace!

GOD'S KINDNESS TO JONAH

Jonah doesn't answer God as to why he is angry about the revival in Nineveh, but he instead goes out and gets some rest in a little room he builds, kind of like **the temporary shelters** they would have quickly constructed in Israel during the Feast of Tabernacles. God wants to help him with his rest, and **God in his kindness**, he grows a sheltered vine to give Jonah shade and rest.

Jonah 4:5-6 | 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. ⁶Now 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 **contrast here between God's heart and Jonah's is striking.** God cares about Jonah's **temporal comfort**, but Jonah doesn't care about the **Ninevites eternal comfort**. Some have wondered what kind of plant it was that grew up over Jonah. Horticulturists have determined that it was a **castor oil shrub** which would have been "a lush, fast-growing provider of shade."¹⁰ It can quickly reach **the size of a small tree, up to thirty-nine feet**. Its long leaves (up to 20 inches long) would have provided ample shade for Jonah.

Here we see the long-suffering heart of God. God loves the wicked Assyrians. But **God also loves the hard-hearted, smug, self-righteous**, and at times racist prophet, Jonah.

3. THE PROBLEM OF IDOLATRY (4:5-11)

Why is Jonah such a bad missionary? He's likely the worst ever. His problem is that he's going to reach idol worshippers, but we find out **he's in need of rescue just as much as the Ninevites.**

What's at the root of this? It's **idolatry**. Jonah goes to Nineveh to condemn idolatry, but who is the real idol worshipper in our story? An idol is anything that takes the place of God. **Jonah loves his castor oil tree** more than the people of Nineveh. Jonah loves himself. The **central motive for all idolatry** is the flesh: the self-life.

Jonah 4:5-11 | 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. ⁶Now 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. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun

¹⁰ Jules Janick and Harry S. Paris, "Jonah and the Gourd at Nineveh: Consequences of a Classic Mistranslation" *Cucurbitaceae Conference 2006* (Lafayette, IN: Purdue University, 2006), 349-357. <https://hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/jonah.pdf>

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." ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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?"

These are some of the strangest verses in the Bible upon first read. But as you think about them, they become incredibly convicting. You've got to **remember where Jonah has come** from great prosperity to really appreciate these verses. Jonah comes from **green Galilee in Israel** during the prosperous and enriched reign of Jeroboam II. His entitlement attitude when it comes to earthly comfort is frighteningly blinding. The idol of earthly comfort put blinders on the eyes of the prophet Jonah.

THE WAIT: THE APATHY OF EARTHLY COMFORT

Earthly comfort and materialism can lull us to sleep. It makes Jonah think he's better than the Ninevites. **He makes a booth and just passively waits for God to judge Nineveh.**

Jonah 4:5 | 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.

There is Jonah waiting, like a person who has staked out a good view of the fireworks show. It seems **Jonah is convinced he's going to see a real pyrotechnics display, a new Sodom and Gomorrah.** God is holy right? He must destroy them! What apathy he has. We read of no praying, no pleading for God to have mercy. Jonah had heard the wailing in the streets. He had seen the great and mighty King Assur II pitiful state as he sat in ashes with tears streaming down his face. The site of thousands sitting in sackcloth and ashes was imprinted on Jonah's mind. **Could it have been real humility,** real repentance? **No! How could it be? These were dogs! They have to burn!** They must have **previously heard of Yahweh's covenant love** for Israel, delivering from the greatest army in the ancient world. They heard of this great God who split the Red Sea. But had these people truly trusted in the one true Almighty God? Sadly, and shockingly, he's hoping not. He wants them to burn.

Jonah's there in his nice booth, with his shade tree. **He could care less** about these precious souls. He's **waiting**, completely **apathetic** about the Ninevites eternity. He doesn't care if they perish.

THE WEED: THE APPEARANCE OF EARTHLY COMFORT

Jonah was a man accustomed to earthly comfort. Where we live, earthly comfort is everywhere. God relieves Jonah's temporal discomfort by growing him a plant, a castor oil plant to be precise. It's like a big leafy plant that can grow overnight, and at times is the size of a small tree.

Jonah 4:6 | 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.

God loves Jonah and takes care of him, even in his sinful bitterness. It is hot where Jonah sits—hot enough that the makeshift booth cannot provide enough shade. So **the Lord appoints a plant** with large leaves to grow up over Jonah to give him more shade—in one day's time no less (which itself is mercy). The story reveals that the Lord gives this provision to save him from his discomfort, or literally, to "rescue" him

from his “evil” or “trouble.”¹¹ Jonah, the text says, “was exceedingly glad because of the plant.” Maybe he’s a little too glad.

Remember, the time of Jonah in northern Israel was one of unprecedented prosperity. Jeroboam II had continued the ultimate prosperity religion: Baal worship. **Jonah surely preached against Baal worship**, but certainly enjoyed the prosperity a little too much.

Jonah would have preferred that the city be overthrown, but through his prophecy **the city repented and was spared by the Lord**, much to Jonah's dismay. Jonah is infected with chronic comfort-zone-itis. He's got it bad. He loves the comfort of his little booth and his castor oil plant. He just loves it. How much does he love his earthly comfort and security? When it's taken away, he wants to die!

How about you? Do you realize the suffocating nature of materialism? God's good gifts are precious and wonderful, but they are never to be put in the place of God. Our wealth, our comfort, our family, our home, our children—should never take the place of God. God must be at the center. Everything, even the best of our relationships, is rubbish compared to knowing Christ.

THE WORM: THE ATROPHY OF EARTHLY COMFORT

The problem with anything on earth is that it is temporal. It cannot be trusted in. It atrophies and withers and dies.

Jonah 4:7 | But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered.

Oh, that dreaded worm! A little worm can take away Jonah's happiness. This demonstrates that foothold of idolatry in the heart of Jonah. He had put his happiness in something that can be taken away. **What's your castor oil plant that can be taken away so easily?** Remember the convicting words of Jesus.

Matthew 6:19-21 | Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

We see that once Jonah was rested and cared for by God, the Lord allowed the castor oil plant to die. **Jonah turned God's mercy to him into an idol.** You can turn the good gifts of God into idols.

We can all turn our comfort zone into a false savior, like Jonah did. God killing the castor oil plant was unveiling the lingering idols of comfort in the heart of Jonah. The Lord sent a scorching wind to prepare Jonah and us for this convicting lesson. Jonah was so singed by the sun that the Bible says he was ready to faint. Jonah pitied the plant more than the people of Nineveh. He had his booth and shade. When that was taken away from him, he told the God he was supposed to be serving, basically: “Let the world go to hell as long as I have my little place of comfort.” He was out of northern Israel, but northern Israel and its prosperity religions still had hold of his heart. What an indictment! Consider the power of earthly comfort. Jonah was so embittered by the loss of his precious little plant, that he would rather die. He cared so much more about his plant than the 120,000 immortal souls of the Ninevite children and their parents.

So what's your plant? That castor oil plant grew up so quick and provided needed shade. Before we judge Jonah too harshly, let's remember he had been dowsed with the stomach contents of the great fish. He had walked a day's journey into the greater Nineveh area into the city. He had seen the greatest revival in a pagan land in the entire Old Testament. Exhaustion can bring us to a place of being irrational. Remember the great prophet Elijah's plea under a different place of shade. He collapsed under his broom tree and wanted to die.

¹¹ Eric Redmond, William Curtis, and Ken Fentress, *Exalting Jesus in Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 56.

1 Kings 19:4b | 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."

Elijah had his broom tree. Jonah had his castor oil plant. Both provided plenty of shade and a place of rest. But what if God, as he did with Jonah, chooses to take away your plant with a worm? What is it that causes you to lose sight of the precious souls God has given you and sulk with anger, wanting to die if it is taken away? What do you have more pity for than the precious souls around you?

THE WIND: THE AMPUTATION OF EARTHLY COMFORT

We may not appreciate God's amputation of our idols at first, but truly "**the Lord gives and the Lord takes away,**" and we can say "blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:20).

Jonah 4:8 | 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."

Realize, when God takes away your castor oil plant, he's not mad at you. He loves you. He just wants you to worship him, not the plant!

After all Jonah's chastening, he still has an idolatry problem. Even after his second chance, the idolatry of his heart comes right back to bite him. How we react to the loss of anything reveals who or what we are really trusting in. Take Job for example. His kids, his home and eventually his health are all taken away. But look at the most brutal moment when his kids are taken. What is Job's response? Worship. He thanks God for his good gifts and worships the Lord.

Jonah demonstrates that when we walk in the flesh, we are capable of incredible irrational thinking. Bitterness makes us stupid. Jonah thought he had a reason for anger. It's just not fair. God your grace is good enough to save good sinners. That was Jonah's narrow theology. Believe this false theology is alive and well. It is hurting the church of Jesus. The truth is, God's grace is not just good enough for good sinners, but for the worst of sinners. In other words, grace is not about what's fair. If we want fairness, then we all go to hell. Grace is outside the realm of God's justice. It's in the realm of mercy.

THE WHINING: THE ADDICTION TO EARTHLY COMFORT

Jonah 4:9 | 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."

The truth is the fountain of Jonah's anger is entitlement. It's not fair! He thinks he's better. **He thinks he's owed a bit of comfort after all he's been through!** Let's all realize we are all Jonah, living in North America in the twenty first century. We have **unprecedented prosperity**. The poor among us are richer than any king of the great kings of the ancient world. We have far more prosperity than Jonah or the greatest kings could have ever fathomed.

We are not too different than Jonah who loves a plant far more than the people of Israel. So it is with us: **we love our A/C sometimes more than the souls of those perishing around us**. We love comfort more than conversion. However you want to say it, we are all a lot more like Jonah than we'd like to admit. What's your plant? What is it that takes your heart away from loving the people God loves? Where do you go when you are hurting? That tells you everything you need to know about what you worship. Sadly, **Jonah at times worshipped his comfort more than he cared about God's plan and people**. All that time in the belly of the fish, and Jonah was still addicted to comfort. I hope he got help after chapter 4 ended! There is help for all of us. Start with Ephesians 4:22-24 and put off the old life and put on the new. Choose to walk in the Spirit at all times, and you will not fulfill the desires and compulsions of the flesh (Gal 5:16). Take advantage of fellowship and accountability in your local church (Eph 4:15b-16; Heb 10:24-25). True happiness and peace comes from living life the way God designed it, practicing the presence of God.

You are in the place where Jonah was. Be careful not to be lulled into spiritual lukewarmness through the opioid of materialistic comfort. A good test of whether or not you worship the idol of earthly comfort is to consider your love and effort to reach the lost for Christ. Jonah was shackled by his own glib self-righteousness. Are you more upset when you lose a parking space or there's a shortage on toilet paper or ice cream or cars than you are with eternal souls around you? Oh how very much like Jonah we may be. Let us repent and renew our efforts to let God's heart take hold of us for the outcasts.

THE WORD: THE ASSURANCE OF ULTIMATE COMFORT

Instead of the expected fireball from above, Jonah heard a gentle voice. God addresses the idolatry of his heart directly. It's actually the voice of ultimate comfort. We serve a God who saves the worst of sinners! Hallelujah.

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| Jonah 4:10-11 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. ¹¹ 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?" |
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God challenges Jonah to trust in the God of the castor oil tree. He's challenging Jonah to have **a heart of compassion like himself**. Jonah is angry that the Ninevites have not perished, but that the castor oil tree did perish. He's glad to sacrifice the eternal on the altar of his immediate comfort.

Where is real comfort and ultimate happiness found? We are left hanging, aren't we? But it's right there in front of us. The God who loved the pagan sailors and the cruel Ninevites also loves hardened, self-righteous, respectable sinners like us!

Sometimes we pity the loss of our electricity or internet more than we pity the perishing of souls. Something is wrong with us.

Conclusion

Jonah had far more spiritual light than the Assyrians. He thought he was too good to bring a message from God to the Assyrian Ninevites. What he didn't understand was that **God was showing his patience just as much with Jonah as the Ninevites**. Jonah is a filthy rotten sinner worthy of hell, just like the Assyrians.

You would think after being miraculously given a second chance after near death in the belly of a fish, **Jonah would be more humble and in line with God's will**. **Jonah was given just as much grace and mercy as the pagan Ninevites**. It reminds me of the story I read recently.

Timothy Jones and his wife and kids **had just adopted a troubled daughter**. We'll call her **Abigail**. They gladly welcomed this new daughter, with all her scars and hurts, into their family. This precious eight-year-old girl had previously been adopted by another family. Her former family had **never quite integrated the adopted child into their family** of biological children. After a couple of rough years, they **dissolved the adoption**, and the Jones family ended up welcoming an eight-year-old girl into their home.

One detail that came out was that for one reason or another, whenever Abigail's previous family vacationed at Disney World, they took their biological children with them, but **they left Abigail with a family friend**. Usually — at least in the child's mind — this happened because she did something wrong that precluded her presence on the trip.

Once Abigail's new family found out about this history, they made plans to take Abigail to Disney World to bond together as a family.

Mr. Jones carefully prepared for the trip to **make it the best for Abigail** and their whole family. What he *didn't* expect was the **stream of downright rebellious behavior** in their newest daughter before the trip happened. In the month leading up to the anticipated trip to the Magic Kingdom, **Abigail stole food** when she had so much already. **She also lied** when it would have been easier to tell the truth.

She whispered insults to try and hurt her older sister as deeply as possible. Each day closer to the trip, **Abigail's mutinies multiplied.**

A couple of days before our family headed to Florida, the pulled his newly adopted daughter into my lap to talk through her latest escapade. **"I know what you're going to do,"** she stated flatly. **"You're not going to take me to Disney World, are you?"** The thought hadn't actually crossed her adopted father's mind, but her downward spiral suddenly started to make some sense. She knew she couldn't earn her way into the Magic Kingdom — she had tried and failed that test several times before — so she was living in a way that placed her as far as possible from the most magical place on earth.

The father asked her, "Is this trip something we're doing as a family?"

She nodded, brown eyes wide, rimming with tears.

"Are you part of this family?"

She nodded again.

"Then you're going with us —you're part of our family, and we're not leaving you behind."

I'd like to say that her behaviors grew better after that moment. They didn't. Her choices pretty much spiraled out of control at every hotel and rest stop all the way to Lake Buena Vista. Still, we headed to Disney World on the day we had promised, and it was a typical Disney day. Overpriced tickets, overpriced meals, and lots of lines, mingled with just enough manufactured magic to consider maybe going again someday.

In our hotel room that evening, a very different child emerged. She was exhausted, pensive, and a little weepy at times, but her month-long facade of rebellion had faded. When bedtime rolled around, I prayed with her, held her, and asked, "So how was your first day at Disney World?"

She closed her eyes and snuggled down into her stuffed unicorn. After a few moments, she opened her eyes ever so slightly. "Daddy," she said, "I finally got to go to Disney World. **But it wasn't because I was good; it's because I'm yours.**"

It wasn't because I was good; it's because I'm yours. Why do we get to belong to the Lord? Why did Jonah belong to the Lord? Because he was good? No! Because God is good!

That's the message of outrageous grace.¹² That's the message of Jonah. **Jonah did nothing to earn God's favor.** Neither did the Ninevites. It's all of grace, such deep, deep grace. We don't get what we deserve. Christ bore that penalty for our sins. We are not good. Christ is good. He gets all the glory. We are saved not because we are good, but because in love he chose us and loved us. If you think of it that way, there's really no difference between Jonah and the Ninevites. And there's no difference between you and the people with hardest hearts.

God could have chosen to save anyone, everyone, or no one from Adam's fallen race. But what God did was to choose a multi-hued multitude of "someones," and — if you are a believer in Jesus Christ — one of those "someones" was you. Let the whole world know then, that God's love is set upon them through Christ. **He invites us to come to him, not because we are good but because he is good!** That's the conclusion of Jonah that points us the Someone greater than Jonah, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Think of it! The apostle Paul entered heaven to the cheers of those he had martyred. That's grace.

Jonah enters heaven, hopefully more humble and wiser, hands raised in praise to God, together with the Ninevites and the pagan sailors.

Jonah may have been the worst missionary in history, but he still had an amazing harvest. Some plant. Some water. But God always, always, always gives the increase!

¹² Daniel Montgomery, *Proof: Finding Freedom through the Intoxicating Joy of Irresistible Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 81-84.