



Speaker:
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Jonah's Great Confession

◀ Series: Jonah · 4 of 4

9/26/2021 (SUN) | Bible: **Jonah 4**

Here we are on the final message from the book of Jonah.

We're looking at the fourth chapter today. As usual, we'll start with some commentary on the chapter, then we'll home in on a particular idea.

We've seen Jonah run away, get caught up with, and eventually submit to the mission God had for him, which was preaching to the people of Nineveh. And there was this massive act of repentance, which of course was the focus of last week's message.

Chapter 4 looks at the aftermath. Jonah had left the city to sit on a hill and see what would happen. Maybe he would hear that great wail of repentance continue to lift up from the city, and he'd have to witness his God showing compassion towards the Ninevites. But just maybe the repentance would be a sham. Maybe God would change his mind! In Jonah's mind, there was still a slim possibility he'd get what he wanted: the annihilation of Nineveh.

While he's up there, he got some branches and vegetation and put together a makeshift shelter. It was to protect him from the sun. In the middle of the day, temperatures would go way over a hundred degrees.

God had determined to teach Jonah yet one more lesson. The prophet would learn not only that God was right to show mercy but that Jonah himself was at fault in opposing it.

It starts with God causing the rapid growth of a plant. Whatever species it was isn't important. The vegetation was dense enough there to improve Jonah's makeshift shelter and cool him off.

The next day, God killed off the plant. Added to this, he introduced a hot wind coming from the East which made Jonah's discomfort that much worse.

Jonah was depressed again. He wanted God to just kill him on the spot. Remember, he'd already been depressed when he started to see the Ninevites repent. In v.2, he even complained to God for being merciful, patient and turning away from the evils he threatened people with.

Don't forget, Jonah had only recently experienced the mercy of God for himself and was full of praises to God for it. Yet now, he wanted that mercy denied to all these people!

I'll reiterate a point I made a few weeks ago about Jonah's motives. Everyone's agreed Jonah regarded Nineveh as the enemy, and he would have been overjoyed to see God destroy them.

But I said to you there may be more to his desire than mere vengeance. It's possible he wanted God to kill two birds with one stone. By destroying Nineveh, Israel would have one enemy fewer; that's true. *But it's possible Jonah wanted them destroyed as a warning to his own people.* Perhaps he was thinking if Nineveh was spared, Israel wouldn't fear God, wouldn't repent, and God would destroy them.

The truth is Israel should have repented anyway, regardless of the fate of Nineveh. They didn't, which is why God would bring down wrath on their heads just a few decades later.

Why Jonah was so depressed now was, believe it or not, because of the dead plant! He was so happy at the relief from the heat this plant gave him, it appears he became immediately fond of it.

I plant stuff. Vegetables and flowers. I normally grow them from seed. I might start them off in the house, then replant them outside. I might have to bring them indoors at night if it gets too cold. But I supply them with water. I make sure they have nutrients. I dedicate months of work for the prize of a fully grown plant. You'll understand then how I reach a point where I gaze on a flower and feel some attachment to it. In a sense, I care for it. If someone came in the middle of the night and destroyed the flower, I'd be sad.

This wasn't the case with Jonah. God makes exactly that point in verse 10. Jonah didn't nurture this plant. It grew and withered away in 24 hours, and God did that. But Jonah was upset when it died. And God points out how morally screwed up Jonah was to have compassion on a plant but *not* want compassion to be shown to actual people!

It may have surprised you that God brings cows into the argument. You know, he's talking about the lives of hundreds of thousands of people made in the image of God. You might wonder how that argument can be improved on by talking about the loss of life of creatures worth far less to God. Imagine me telling you about how tragic it was that a city in Iraq got bombed, resulting in the loss of life of thousands of people—not to mention all the cats that died! It would be inappropriate and insensitive.

But God is simply working with the confused Jonah he has in front of him. If Jonah thinks more of the life of a plant than a multitude of people, perhaps the killing of innocent animals might cause him to stop and think. It's like God's saying, *Okay, if you don't care about the people, what about the poor animals?*

The chapter ends all of a sudden with this challenge of God's in v.11. We're left to wonder just what Jonah was thinking at that point. We're hoping there would be this sudden realisation of how mixed up he'd been—that it was right for God to show compassion if he saw fit to do so.

We should each take note of this lesson from God. Our lives may be very different from Jonah's, but there's not one of us who's immune from having a lack of compassion at times. Unless we daily remind ourselves of the mercy we've received, there's always the temptation to wish for nothing else but vengeance on the wicked. Dare I say it: believers have even hoped for the downfall of other Christians.

I said Jonah had made this confession about the grace of God. Believers will already know there's not one God of the Old Testament who's permanently angry and another one of the New Testament who's nice as pie. *It's the same God.* Not only is he just as determined now to punish sin as he was then, but he was just as much a God of grace and mercy then as he is now. Here's one example taken from Exodus ch.34 and v.6:

And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth..."

Exodus 34:6

With the rest of our time today, I'd like us to pay some attention to this confession of Jonah's. He may have uttered it in a spirit of anger and frustration, but it is undoubtedly a powerful confession of some of the great characteristics of God.

A God of grace and mercy

We've witnessed a significant example of the mercy of God when he backed off from destroying Nineveh. It's just one example of many, and it shows he's *able* to show compassion.

I said last time the way these scenarios are described for us is not how they are really. God was never going to destroy the city. It was, most certainly, within his power to crush the place; but he'd already determined not to. They didn't repent because they were less evil than everyone else. Far from it. They repented because, following God's threat via Jonah, God *gave the people the gift of repentance*.

Elsewhere, we see people threatened by God and *not* repenting. They *do* get destroyed. And in our efforts to understand the character of God, we need to grasp this important truth: **God will show mercy to whoever he wants, and he will deny mercy to whoever he wants.**

This principle is mentioned in Romans in connection with the big event in Egypt just prior to the Exodus. The apostle needed to explain this because people then—and now—wonder why God isn't compassionate to everyone. After all, if God's able to have mercy on every person who's ever lived and whoever will live, why would he not do it? Paul explains in Romans 9 and v.22:

What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction...?

Romans 9:22

The truth, harsh as it may sound to some, is that **it was always God's intention to bring eternal ruin on some people so that his power and holiness could be displayed for the whole of creation.** If that truth makes you feel uncomfortable, you have a distorted view of who God is.

So Jehovah is a God of grace, but he exercises it according to the good pleasure of his will. As for us, our greatest delight is to see God move in compassion, but we still acknowledge that his purposes in vengeance are good and right.

Jonah was different. He would have watched maybe half a million people—including women and children—get killed and be able to smile about it. Strangely, when God asked him if it was right for him to be angry, Jonah was probably thinking to himself, *Is it right for you to be so gracious!*

Let's ensure we're not like that. When we think about all the wonderful things tied up with the grace of God shown towards us, let's desire the same compassion be extended to others. And let's make sure we're as forgiving towards the brethren as God is to us.

As we look back, we see more clearly than any patriarch or prophet the grace of God at work:

- We see his grace in electing a multitude of people to salvation, their deliverance being therefore certain.
- We see his grace in the coming of the son of God in the flesh, a condescension of God to man whereby the son placed himself in a lower status than even the angels.
- We see his grace at Golgotha, where an innocent man stood in the place of sinners to take the punishment for their sin.
- We see his grace at the tomb, where the abandoned burial clothes signified the rising of Jesus from the dead to vindicate us and secure *our* escape from death at the resurrection.
- And we see his grace in our own lives, when the blessed Holy Spirit seeks us out, changes us, convinces us of our redemption, and dispenses all the wonderful fruit of himself in our souls.

A God of patience

We all know what patience means. It describes when you have a desire to have something or do something but you hold back. And you keep holding back. I'll quickly give a few examples of some of the different types of patience:

- If we're in the queue at the post office, we might be there longer than we hoped, and we have places to go. The hold-up could be some awkward customer up ahead. Inwardly, we might be getting irritated. We might even be tempted to tell them to hurry up. To be patient is to rein in that desire and keep quiet. We realise that's the best choice because the trouble which could be caused from our outburst would potentially be greater than the small benefit of venting our anger and maybe getting served sixty seconds quicker!
- If we want something from God, we'll usually want it sooner rather than later. Now it's right we continually ask him for it. But we must accept the possibility God may have decided to make us wait. He may have planned to give us our desire—but in thirty years' time! Here, the temptation is to get annoyed at God. So we hold back instead. We exercise self-control. We submit to his infinitely greater wisdom.
- And then we have God himself showing patience. This time, we don't really mean God decides to exercise self-control. He's always in full control of himself. This isn't about God holding back from some sinful impatience. Instead, his patience describes how he puts judgement on hold, or delays intervention for some other reason.

Think about what God's patience means in the present context. **He was patient in that he held back from carrying out a judgement on the Ninevites which was completely just.** He did this to make room for the next stage in his plan, which was their repentance and his mercy.

We need to make a distinction here. Some people talk about God "giving people a chance" to repent. Is that true? Yes and no. In the pictures the Bible gives us, including the current one, God appears to give them a chance. They take advantage of this delayed judgement and claim the mercy of God for themselves.

But theologically speaking—in reality—it's wrong to think God gives people a chance. We're meant to understand these as creative presentations of higher truths. We're meant to understand chance doesn't come into it. **Every act of repentance, even though carried out by an individual, is ultimately a divine act of grace.**

Every person who's not part of that body of God's elect (let's call them a "reprobate") realistically *has* no chance. Now when they come into this world, sin comes naturally to them. But they're not forced to sin. They sin because they *want* to. And God holds them accountable for their sin.

The Bible says these people who refuse to trust in Christ are an abomination to him. I imagine he can barely stand to even look at them. But hang on: they're still walking around, going to work, spending time with their families, going on holidays, and so on. Why are they still here? Why hasn't he struck them all down dead?

This brings us to another angle in the patience of God. Let's have another look at the verse we read a few moments ago:

What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, ENDURED WITH MUCH LONG-SUFFERING the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction...?

Romans 9:22

God keeps reprobate sinners alive for a reason. He might let them live a long and prosperous life. But every day they exist without God, chasing their own pleasures, they're storing up judgement for themselves.

The dreadful paradox here is the longer they live, the worse it'll be for them. Because whether they're rich or poor, they receive things from God's hand every day of their lives. Even the poorest people on earth are only alive because God provides enough food, water and shelter for them. And every person who exists receives every heartbeat and every breath from God.

No matter how long a person lives, they receive an abundance of gifts from God, and this makes their guilt for living independently of him all the worse.

If you're listening to this and you're not sure if you belong to God or not, there's a good chance you don't. And every day you carry on in this way is likened in the Bible to "drinking" sin. It's as if, each day, you fill the cup of the wine of your sin till it's almost overflowing, and you take it in ravenously.

But this imagery in the Bible has another side to it. All your sins are increasing the punishment you'll face at the judgement. And God's anger is itself described as the filling up of a cup. Imagine this judgement goblet of God's being filled up day by day, as his anger towards you grows. And when the time comes, you'll drink the wine of that fury to the very last drop.

But the truth is you don't know which type of patience is being exercised in your case. You should never think your doom is inevitable. You can no more tell if you're one of God's elect than I can. If what I said frightens you, I'm very happy. It means I have your attention, and I can tell you that the gospel message is for people like you.

I don't mean people who simply want to escape that judgement, but people who genuinely want to get right with God. To get forgiveness for their sins. To be adopted into God's family. To enjoy a resurrection to eternal life.

You don't need to copy the Ninevites by sitting on a pile of ashes. But you do need to go to God in prayer and ask him to be merciful. Own up to your sins. Reel some of them off. Tell God how ashamed you are you've loved sin so much. Ask him to help you not to sin from now on. Tell him you believe Jesus suffered in your place. Tell him you dare to approach him because the Bible *says* you should. Remember that the Bible tells you about God's promise that he won't turn away *anyone* who comes to him in this fashion.

Many people think this is too easy. They wouldn't believe me if I told them they could go from being on God's death row to being issued with a royal pardon within the space of five minutes. Sadly, some will never approach God in this way as a result. But don't copy them; COPY US! Follow us into God's holy city and experience the wonderful things we have.

What about us who are believers? God was patient with us. He could have quite rightly killed us as soon we were born. We came into this world sinning like everyone else.

But God was patient with us. He wasn't giving us more time in the hope we'd repent! His patience meant he'd predestined us to salvation and would therefore convert us at some stage in our lives and he lovingly put up with us until that appointed time.

This well-known verse from the second letter of Peter (v.9) describes how God as it were "bides his time" before he converts us:

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:9

This verse has a specific application for the first century church, but I think it's rightly used by present-day believers to comfort them. I say "believers" because that's who the verse is aimed at. I know it's used by some evangelicals to show God's desire or intention to save everyone. But in this verse, God's patience is for the purpose of bringing about repentance. He is long-suffering towards *us*, his people. He intends to save every one *of us* from perishing, and he instils in every one *of us* the spirit of repentance.

A God of love

God loved Jonah. And that love included doing both good things and bad things to him. I know it's hard for some Christians to reconcile God's love for them with the bad things which happen to them.

A common belief would be God loves us and does good things for us. But circumstances, our own mistakes, and the opposition of Satan, bring bad things. Then God comes along and puts it right.

I truly believe these brothers and sisters would find far greater comfort if they learnt this one important truth: **God sends suffering into the lives of his own children.**

Whether the immediate cause is Satan, sinners or self, you can trace back the chain of causation to God himself. As the Psalmist says, God is the author of both good and evil. We find another example right at the end of the Bible, in the third chapter of Revelation and v.19:

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Be zealous therefore, and repent.

Revelation 3:19

Now we know *everyone* in this world suffers in different ways. And we also know the saints suffer *in the same ways* as everyone else. The difference is God ensures when we suffer those things *good* will come of it.

The comfort of this doctrine comes firstly through knowing God is sovereign in every aspect of your life, not just what you see as the good stuff; and secondly, by seeing his reasons for allowing you to suffer are good. Being our father, you might say he "gives us treats" in love and he "smacks us" in love.

I know Jonah was having a difficult time with the sun beating on his head and the scorching wind dehydrating him; but he should've trusted God was still on his side. Instead of wanting to die, he should have thought, *What lesson is God trying to teach me here?*

I've no doubt every believer who's ever lived will have made the same mistake. And sometimes the worse the difficulty we're going through, the more likely we are to despair.

It's easy as a Christian to feel on top of the world, full of the joys of God, when things are going right. We might receive some extra special blessing, like the gourd which God covered Jonah with. But if it goes, we may find ourselves complaining or crying about our situation.

The comforts and privileges most of us enjoy now are very fragile:

- We have an abundance of food in the supermarkets, but with a significant enough disruption to the supply chain, we'd have rioting on our streets.

- We enjoy relative freedom, but recent events have shown how easily they can be taken off us.
- We have a mostly friendly police service, but it can turn into a force of oppression with just a change in the law.
- We enjoy peace with other nations, but on the whim of our leaders they could declare war on someone and conscript our sons to go and die in foreign fields.
- As believers, we have a great deal of freedom to thank God for in this country. We can worship together, read and distribute Christian literature, take the gospel into prisons, and even stand in the street preaching the word of God to the people. Yet with a change of government we could see all these stripped from us in a very short space of time.

Whatever we lose, it's essential we remember God hasn't abandoned us. I found this gem in one of the commentaries: "Our *gourd* may be gone, but our *God* isn't!"

In any case, this world is not our home. Our home is the world that is yet to come, so we ought to hold onto the things of this world very lightly.

You who are God's children should feel your soul warmed by the knowledge of God's everlasting love for you. He loved you in *electing to save you* before he even made the world, he *set* his love upon you *in time*, and this love will continue *into eternity*.

I'd encourage you to spend some time today thinking through some of the themes we've covered in our exploration of this book.

1. **We talked about Jonah himself.**
 - a. His rebellion against God
 - b. His childishness in running away
 - c. The danger God placed him in
 - d. His repentance
 - e. The massive response to his preaching
 - f. And the depression he felt which was so bad he wanted to die.
2. **We tried to learn from his story.**
 - a. *We* should take care in *our* obedience to God.
 - b. *We* should never try to avoid him but, in all *our* difficulties, run to him in prayer immediately for help and forgiveness.
 - c. *We're* to remember how God's able to deliver *us* from the very worst of situations.
 - d. *We* should have faith God will ensure the gospel *we* share has the exact effect on the people he desires.
 - e. And *we* daily remind *ourselves* of the grace of God shown towards *us* so that *we* never fail to be forgiving and compassionate to *our* fellow man and especially those who belong to the household of faith.
3. **And finally, we learned more about God**, or at the very least were reminded about his character.
 - a. We looked at his great power in being able to either destroy the city or bring about widespread repentance.
 - b. We listened to Jonah's testimony about God being the Lord of salvation, saving whoever he will whenever he will.
 - c. We worked out what was meant by God "repenting of evil", concluding it's an act of love for him to condescend to describe himself and his actions in ways understandable by the common man.
 - d. And we were able to look past Jonah's complaints and hear only a glorious confession of the character of God. HE IS MERCIFUL AND GRACIOUS. HE IS LONG-SUFFERING TOWARDS US. HE IS ABUNDANT IN GOODNESS AND TRUTH. AND HE LOVES US, HIS PEOPLE, WITH AN IMMEASURABLE LOVE THAT WILL NEVER END.

How full of usefulness and teaching this book is! And this is just one tiny section of this larger collection of books we call the Bible. We should treasure it. This word of God is worth more than all the wealth in the world. So read it. Spend time in it. Make notes from it. And when it's ministered to you each week, try to spend time considering what's been raised.

As we say farewell to Jonah, we thank God for blessing us as we learn more about how to conduct ourselves in this world, but especially for allowing us yet another glimpse into his glorious, beautiful and loving nature and purposes through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Lord bless you in the saviour's name.

Amen.