

## ***Jonah 4: Challenging a Mis-Aligned Heart***

*What's the greatest miracle found in Jonah's account?*

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. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

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. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.

Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.

But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint.

And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."

And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

If you've been listening in at all over the past 5 weeks, you know we're taking a mid-summer look at a small prophetic story tucked away in the Old Testament section of the Bible's library. The book of *Jonah*.

You may also be aware that many people think Jonah's account is nothing but a fairy tale. They don't buy as credible the claim that Jonah was actually swallowed by a great fish, survived, and then lived to tell about it. At best (they contend), it's a fictional allegory to make some point important to Jewish religion.

But don't be knocked off stride by the critics. As the *ESV Study Bible* notes, Jonah is a *literary masterpiece. While the story line is so simple children follow it readily, the story is marked by a high degree of literary sophistication as any book in the Hebrew Bible...[furthermore] Jesus [himself] treated the story as historical, using elements of the story as analogies for other historical events (see Matthew 12:40-41)...<sup>i</sup>*

as well as the amount of time He would spend in the grave (Matt.12:40).

And, quite frankly, what happened in 760 BC in Nineveh wasn't based on 1 whale-of-a miracle;

by my count there are at least 20 miracles recorded in these 4 chapters, in Jonah's life. Oxford mathematics professor and Christian apologist John Lennox reminds us (from the Oxford English Dictionary) that

***a miracle** is a marvelous event occurring within human experience which could not have been brought about by human power or by the operation of any natural agency, and must therefore be ascribed to the special intervention of the deity or some supernatural being.<sup>ii</sup>*

Does God do miracles? I find at least 20 supernatural interventions in *Jonah*:

1. God speaks with crystal clear clarity to Jonah 1:1-2
2. God custom-creates an unprecedented, violent storm on the sea 1:4
3. God causes the sea captain to re-vocalize God's call to Jonah 1:6
4. God causes the lot to fall on Jonah 1:7
5. God intensifies the storm when the sailors hesitate to throw Jonah overboard 1:13
6. God calms quells the storm when Jonah hits the water 1:15
7. God converts the sailors who fear and sacrifice to Him 1:16
8. God sustains Jonah's life as he sinks to the bottom 2:5-6
9. God appoints a fish to swallow up Jonah 1:17
10. God sustains Jonah's life within the fish 1:17b
11. God speaks to fish to eject Jonah alive 2:10
12. God speaks a 2<sup>nd</sup> time to Jonah with crystal clarity 3:1-2
13. God causes Jonah's short sermon to spark a city-wide repentance 3:4-5
14. God causes Nineveh's king to articulate what God wants to do 3:8-9
15. God relents from His purposed disaster 3:10
16. God addresses with clarity Jonah's angry prayer 4:4
17. God appoints a plant to rapidly grow over Jonah 4:6
18. God appoints a worm to wither the plant 4:7
19. God appoints a scorching east wind to buffet Jonah 4:8
20. God clearly exposes His compassionate rationale to Jonah 4:10-11

Why? Why does God hem Jonah's life front-and-back, side-to-side with *supernatural* intervention after *supernatural* intervention? I draw this conclusion: It's to demonstrate that

***The greatest miracle of all is a God who zealously cares whether people perish or live and urges us who belong to Him to repent and participate in His passion.***

Today, let's answer two questions about this truth, using the final chapter of Jonah. The 1<sup>st</sup> question comes from the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of this truth.

**#1 What keeps Jonah from participating in God's grace for the sinful and lost Ninevites?**

Reading this chapter carefully reveals something all-too-obvious about Jonah. He is an emotionally

wired guy, and his emotions were “in control” and “all over the map.”

- But it **displeased** Jonah **exceedingly**, and he was **angry** vs.1
- The Lord said, “Do you do well to be **angry**?” vs.4
- Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade... So Jonah was **exceedingly glad** because of the plant. Vs.6
- But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be **angry** for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be **angry, angry** enough to die.” Vss.7-9

Ever been a Jonah in your living? Before God? You don't like what is happening in your life. You feel powerless to control what's happening or to change what's happening. You're frustrated. You even stew in the frustration. Perhaps a bit of relief comes into your life for a spell, but then it doesn't last, it goes away, and your reactive emotions drive you back into anger and sadness and lashing out.

All the while you may even be praying to God, but that conversation isn't going very well either?

On their helpful [sciencemuseum.org](http://sciencemuseum.org) website, we find this:

#### **What are emotions?**

*Most people feel happiness, surprise, fear, sadness, disgust and anger at some time – these are the six basic emotions. There are over 600 words in English to describe them and we use 42 muscles in our faces to express them*

#### **Why do you have emotions?**

*If you feel afraid, you try and escape from the danger. If you're happy, you relax. If you are disgusted, you may feel sick. Your emotions influence your behaviour. Our ancestors relied on their emotions to survive. But these days, we use our emotions more for making lifestyle decisions than simply staying alive.*

#### **What's the problem with extreme emotions?**

*You need to be able to feel and recognise a range of emotions, but extremes of emotion can cause problems. Sadness can become depression, anger can become unprovoked aggression, and pleasure can lead to addiction. Feeling afraid in a dangerous situation is natural and useful. But being too fearful can cause unhelpful anxiety, phobias and panic attacks.<sup>iii</sup>*

OK...we know all of that. But we also know that “growing up” (i.e., what we call “maturity”) involves not allowing one's emotions behind our steering wheel. Emotions can be, and should be the product of what we choose to think rather than the producer of what we think.

In Jonah's case, he had long chosen to think that the Assyrians deserve nothing but catastrophic judgment. He longed for that. Before God, he dared to insist on it. “God—for decades they've done nothing but destroy others. It's payback time!” Nothing would satisfy his chosen outlook that these evil people should get nothing but God's unleashed judgment on their evil. When that

didn't happen—when God didn't do what he believed He should do—Jonah, clinging to his own way of thinking, seemed cemented anger and frustrated.

If I may, Jonah had idolized his way of thinking, forgetting in his emotion that God was God and he was not. It's a dangerous place to be, and yet God presses with probing, convicting questions:

“Do you do well to be angry?”

“Do you do well to be angry for the plant?”

“How can you pity a plant...and expect Me not to pity thousands of people who are lost (very lost) in spiritual ignorance?”

Last week, I mentioned the ministry of Jonathan Edwards.

*During the Great Awakening (American colonies, 1730's and 1740's), when the Spirit of God revived much of our nation's early faith, Edwards was presiding over a massive prayer meeting. Eight hundred men prayed with him.*

*Into that meeting a woman sent a message asking the men to pray for her husband. The note described a man who had become unloving, prideful, angry, and difficult.*

*Edwards read the message in private and then, thinking perhaps the man described was present, made a bold request. Edwards read the note to the 800 men. Then, he asked if the man who had been described would raise his hand, so that the whole assembly could pray for him. Three hundred men raised their hands.<sup>iv</sup>*

I find it fascinating that if Jonah wrote this book that bears his name, that he is moved by the Spirit of God to raise his hand in this chapter as if to say, “I need prayer. My agenda, my pride, my (perceived) rights, my anger had taken over in my life. All that prevented me from being on the same page as my God. Ugly, isn't it.”

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Here's the question for the first part of this truth

## **#2 What *kind of God* do we who are in God's family belong to?**

For God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16-17).

For the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)  
For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10)

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

You're a disciple of Jesus Christ this morning? You and I belong to a God who loves very sinful and very lost people much more than we do. We make sure that all of our friends are Christians; Jesus ate so often with tax gatherers and sinners that he was called a drunkard and a glutton. Jesus protected and forgave a repentant woman caught in the very act of adultery. Jesus gave an entire day to a man who had cheated many of his clients 4 times what they should have paid. Jesus washed the feet of the man who would betray and have him cornered for a few measly bucks.

How quickly we readily want to condemn and judge. Only to discover we belong to a God who asks us to pray, to love and to reach, to extend unmerited grace...the same grace that each of us have received. We may want God to serve our critical agenda; He asks us probing questions that we might bend the knee to his.

Tim Keller (*The Prodigal Prophet*, pp.221-223) identifies how God needed to deal with Jonah:

*God did not try to liberate Jonah from his self-righteous identity with only a speech. We must not forget he also sent Jonah difficulties and disappointments.*

*The first time he sent a life-threatening storm. The second time he took away the plant that had been such a comfort to him. Something Jonah loved withered and died. Why did God do it? Because he was being merciful and therefore was doing spiritual surgery on the idols of Jonah's heart.*

*John Newton [wrote] an entire hymn about Jonah 4 where God blasts this vine, here called a "gourd."*

I asked the Lord that I might grow  
In faith, and love, and every grace;  
More of his salvation know;  
And see more earnestly his face...

I hoped that in some favored hour,  
At once he'd answer my request;  
And by his love's constraining power  
Subdue my sins—and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel  
The hidden evils of my heart;  
And let the angry powers of hell  
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with his own hand he seemed  
Intent to aggravate my woe;

Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,  
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

“Lord, why is this,” I trembling cried,  
“Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?”  
“Tis in this way,” the Lord replied,  
“I answer prayer for grace and faith.”

These inward trials I employ,  
From self, and pride, to set thee free;  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,  
That thou may'st find thy all in Me.”<sup>v</sup>

Keller adds:

The call of Jonah is a call to us. It is a painful process to find our all in Him, but it is the only real path to joy. The final verses of Jonah tell us that the mark of those who have been immersed in the grace of God is compassion and love, not contempt, for people who aren't like them. God challenges Jonah for confronting profane, ungodly people without weeping and compassion. Certainly error and evil must be denounced. However, God is both just and loving, and he rebukes Jonah for preaching to the city without loving the city.<sup>vi</sup>

#### FINISHING UP

***The greatest miracle of all is a God who  
zealously cares whether people perish or live  
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Do we love the city to which God has called us? How about the people around us...who may be very different for us...believe and worship very different things than we do. How much of God's passion for them do we share with Him?

We'll find these questions this week in the Connect Group study that goes with today:

- How many spiritually lost (not believing or following Christ) people do you “rub shoulders with” regularly, and know fairly well?
- What do you know about why they are not believing or following Christ?
- Have you any chance recently with them to invite them “across the welcome mat” to Jesus? Yes, or no? Why, or why not?
- What would you say your passion is for seeing them “not perish”?

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<sup>i</sup> ESV Study Bible (Crossway, 2008), p.1684. Cf. Luke 11:29 When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, “This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. <sup>30</sup>For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.

<sup>ii</sup> From his 2010 Harvard lecture at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Kz4OgXsN1w>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://whoami.sciencemuseum.org.uk/whoami/findoutmore/yourbrain/whatareemotions/whatstheproblemwithextremeemotions>

<sup>iv</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Holiness By Grace* (Crossway 2001), p. 80. Cited in *More Perfect Illustrations*, p.217.

<sup>v</sup> Found in Miroslav Vol, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 78.

<sup>vi</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God's Mercy* (New York: Viking, 2018), 223-224.