

Jonah

Chapter 4

Jonah's Anger at the Lord's Compassion

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴ But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?” ⁵ Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶ Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.” ⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?” “I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.” ¹⁰ But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”

4:1 *displeased Jonah exceedingly*. Lit, “it became evil to Jonah as a great evil.” We are not told how Jonah came to realize that God was going to spare Nineveh from destruction. Perhaps 40 days had now elapsed since he had begun preaching that Nineveh would be overturned (3:4). (TLSB)

angry. Jonah was angry that God would have compassion on an enemy of Israel. He wanted God's goodness to be shown only to Israelites, not to Gentiles. (CSB)

Jonah's anger is mentioned several times (vv 4, 9) and contrasts with God, who is “slow to anger” (v 2). Luther: “We must note first of all how wondrous God is in His saints, lest we be tempted to judge and condemn them thoughtlessly because of any of their actions. This work here may be evil—as indeed it is. But for all of that, I must not despise and reject the person. For if we regard Jonah in this act, we must agree that his actions are surely wrong; for God Himself punishes him. And yet he is God's dear child. He chats so uninhibitedly with God as though he were not in the least afraid of Him—as indeed he is not; he confides in Him as in a father” (AE 19:92). (TLSB)

This is a result clause: “So it inflamed him.” Because the salvation of Nineveh was perceived by Jonah as “a great evil” (4:1a), it infuriated him. This sets the tone for the entire chapter since Jonah's anger is the problem Yahweh seeks to remedy through his words and actions in 4:4–11.

Moreover, the entire book of Jonah is designed to cure in us readers any Jonah-like anger at the salvation of those unlike ourselves. (CC)

A literal translation of verse 1 reads, “But it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and his anger burned.” “It” refers to God’s sparing Nineveh. Jonah considered God’s act of mercy a great evil. And now, like an angry judge, Jonah condemned God. (PBC)

Jonah was here displaying one of the characteristics of a self-righteous spirit, namely selfish exclusiveness. The older brother in the story of the prodigal son had the same attitude. Luke 15:28-30) Remember Christ’s parable of the laborers in the vineyard. (Matthew 20:1-16) (PBC)

There is a second and perhaps more compelling reason. Jonah did not want to be used by God to spare Nineveh so it could become that scourge that would later come down upon Israel. Jonah must have known some of the prophecies about Assyria one day destroying his nation Israel. For example, the Prophet Hosea had predicted that because of Israel’s idolatry, the nation’s idol (along with the nation itself) “will be carried to Assyria as tribute for the great king” (Hosea 10:6; see also Is 7:17, 20; Hosea 9:3). Jonah must also have heard reports of the horrible cruelties the Assyrians afflicted on their captives. And he should go and preach to that cruel and wicked nation so that it might escape God’s judgment and in turn bring God’s judgment upon Israel! In effect Jonah had said, “That’s asking too much of me, Lord. I simply can’t do it. I’d be a traitor to my own people. (PBC)

4:2 HE PRAYED – Yet, even in his confused state of mind, Jonah still knew enough to pray to the Lord. Sad to say, it was not a prayer of gratitude but of bitter resentment. Strangely enough, he admits his present anger and resentment was not the rash action of a moment but had been thought out long before when he was still at home. (PBC)

gracious ... love. See Ex 34:6–7 and note. Jonah again uses a fixed, confessional formula (see note on 1:9). (CSB)

slow to anger. In contrast, Jonah became angry quickly (vv. 1, 9). (CSB)

Cf Ex 34:6. (TLSB)

4:3 take away my life. Cf. 1Ki 19:4 (Elijah). To Jonah, God’s mercy to the Ninevites meant an end to Israel’s favored standing with him. Jonah shortly before had rejoiced in his deliverance from death, but now that Nineveh lives, he prefers to die. (CSB)

Reflection of Jonah’s selfish anger. He would rather die than endure the reality of God’s pity for Nineveh. (TLSB)

When the prophet Elijah had crawled under a bush in the desert, he asked the Lord to let him die. He felt he had failed in his mission for the Lord (1 Kings 19). Jonah sought death because his mission had succeeded! Apparently the devil did not allow Jonah’s

initial selfishness and prejudice to die out, but fanned their smoldering embers into full flame when the people of Nineveh repented and were spared. Unless corrected again, Joan was in danger of dying spiritually. That his gracious and compassionate Lord would not allow. (PBC)

4:4 LORD REPLIED – Here Jonah experienced first hand that the Lord was “slow to anger.” He did not take Jonah at his word. He did not kill him or let him die. Jonah was still God’s child and prophet, wayward and misguided though he was, and he had to be corrected. (PBC)

HAVE YOU RIGHT...BE ANGRY – Here is the gentle voice of a loving and concerned father, “My son, stop and think of what you are saying. You say I’m unfair in showing grace and compassion to the Ninevites. Didn’t I do the same to you when I delivered you from certain death? Now are you being fair? Is your anger at justified?” (PBC)

With this rhetorical question, God gently endeavored to get Jonah to reconsider his attitude. (TLSB)

Summary of Scene 6 (CC)

When the Israelites stand on the shore of the Red Sea and see Pharaoh’s chariots approaching, they complain to Moses: “Was not this the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone that we may serve Egypt’? For it was better for us to serve Egypt than that we should die in the wilderness” (Ex 14:12). Supporting the view that Jonah in 4:2 alludes to Ex 14:12 is the correspondence between Jonah 3:5 and Ex 14:31. Another connection between Jonah and Exodus 14 is the noun “dry land” (דְּבַר־אֲדָמָה) in Ex 14:16, 22, 29 and also Jonah 1:9, 13; 2:11 (ET2:10). (CC)

Connecting the question “Was not this my word while I was still upon my ground?” in Jonah 4:2 with the similar words used in Ex 14:12 yields the following insights. Both texts demonstrate the unwillingness of people to leave a previous place of security (Egypt or “my ground,” Jonah’s position in Israel) at Yahweh’s command to face a new locale. Both prefer negative past experiences over moving into the future planned by God. Israel preferred slavery in Egypt instead of what looked like coming death; Jonah prefers death rather than life under the grace of God that welcomes even converted Gentiles. The effect of these comparisons sets up Jonah as the disobedient Israel in his day. (CC)

Jonah is self-centered, self-righteous, and self-willed. He assumes that he can choose his own mission and message. Nevertheless, the sailors were changed and converted to saving faith (1:16) by Jonah’s confession of faith (1:9), and Nineveh has been converted to saving faith (3:5–9) through Jonah’s prophecy (3:4). Even Yahweh has changed his verdict from judgment to salvation (3:9–10). The only figure in the book who remains unchanged is Jonah. (CC)

4:5–11 Some consider this section a flashback to the time right after Jonah had finished preaching in Nineveh (3:4). He planned to wait out the 40 days in hopes of seeing Nineveh’s destruction. (TLSB)

Within 4:4–11, the purpose of 4:4–5 and 4:9–11 is to function as a framework around the nucleus of 4:6–8, which relates three divine acts. The theme of the surrounding framework is the unreasonableness of Jonah’s anger over the salvation of the city of Nineveh. The opening frame (4:4–5) is God’s first verbal attempt to dissuade Jonah from his anger. Then the three actions by Yahweh seek to move Jonah to repent (4:6–8). The closing frame (4:9–11) is Yahweh’s final verbal plea for Jonah to turn from his anger and share in God’s compassion toward all of his creatures. (CC)

4:5 “Jonah went out from the city” (4:5) of Nineveh, to which Yahweh had called him twice (1:2; 3:2). This can be seen as a minor act of rebellion, similar to his flight away from Yahweh and away from Nineveh in 1:3. He makes himself a small shelter to sit under for protection from the sun and waits to see what will happen in the city. (CC)

shelter. Apparently this shelter did not provide enough shade since the next verse indicates that God provided a vine to give more shade. (CSB)

Temporary shelter made of branches to protect from the sun and wind. (TLSB)

waited to see. Jonah still hoped that Nineveh would be destroyed. (CSB)

4:6 *the LORD God provided*. This characteristic phrase occurs also in vv. 7–8; 1:17. (CSB)

vine. Probably a castor oil plant, a shrub growing over 12 feet high with large, shady leaves. God graciously increased the comfort of his stubbornly defiant prophet. (CSB)

Might suggest the castor oil plant, which can quickly grow to a height of 15 ft. (TLSB)

discomfort. Lit, “evil.” Jonah’s booth by itself was probably not very good protection from the sun. (TLSB)

WAS VERY HAPPY – For once Jonah was happy. How quickly a small blessing from the hand of the Lord can ease our burdens and make us forget our troubles! (PBC)

Lit, “rejoiced with a great joy.” This is the one time we are told that Jonah was truly happy. (TLSB)

4:7 WORM...CHEWED THE VINE – Since Jonah had refused to change his mind about the Lord’s mercy, God resorted to sterner measures to teach him. At this point He proceeded to deal with Jonah as Jonah wanted Him to deal with the Gentiles. (PBC)

God used elements of His creation to try to change the hard heart of His stubborn prophet. (TLSB)

God does to Jonah what Jonah wishes God had done to Nineveh. By means of the destroying worm, God retracts his grace and leaves Jonah exposed to his own evil. Jonah was angry in 4:2–3 because God’s grace worked for repentant Nineveh, but in 4:7–9 he is angry because his own impenitence has removed him from God’s grace! (CC)

4:8 SCORCHING EAST WIND – When this hot, dusty wind called the sirocco begins to blow off the desert, it can raise the temperature by twenty degrees and drop the humidity in a matter of minutes. Its effect is exhausting. (PBC)

God made Jonah so miserable that, feeling faint, he wished to die. God was setting the stage to again challenge Jonah’s attitude toward Nineveh. (TLSB)

better for me to die. See note on v. 3. (CSB)

Repeat of Jonah’s words in v 3, but here his wish to die is caused by physical wretchedness. (TLSB)

4:9 God’s question is a repeat of the one in v 4, except for mention of the plant. (TLSB)

ANGRY ENOUGH TO DIE – This indicates the depth of his despair. Now the Lord had brought Jonah to the point where He could complete His object lesson. (PBC)

Jonah’s extreme anger was the result of an inconsequential event, the death of a plant for which he could take no credit and which had only temporary value (v 10). Jonah wanted things his way, even if it was not part of God’s plan or if it interfered with God’s grace. (TLSB)

4:10 sprang up overnight and died overnight. Indicative of fleeting value. (CSB)

Jonah’s concern compared poorly with God’s concern for Nineveh. Jonah was preoccupied with his own condition and the fate of a plant, while God was concerned with the condition and fate of human beings. (TLSB)

4:11 *should not I pity Nineveh.* Hbr is emphatic, yet God’s final question is left unanswered. We do not know if Jonah’s attitude toward Nineveh changed. This makes the story a challenge for us. It is a reminder that God has every right to show mercy to whom He wishes. We dare not demand that God should favor us and not others. *pity.* Commonly used negatively (e.g., in Dt, the Lord tells Israel repeatedly not to show pity on the Canaanites). (TLSB)

God had the first word (1:1), and he also has the last. The commission He gave Jonah displayed his mercy and compassion to the Ninevites, and his last word to Jonah emphatically proclaimed that concern for every creature, both man and animal. Not only does the “LORD... preserve both man and beast” (Ps 36:6; see Ne 9:6; Ps 145:16), but he takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but (desires) rather that they turn from their ways and live” (Eze 33:11; see Eze 18:21–23). Jonah and his countrymen traditionally rejoiced in God’s special mercies to Israel but wished only his wrath on their

enemies. God here rebukes such hardness and proclaims his own gracious benevolence. (CSB)

There is an interesting parallel in the NT. At one time the Apostle Peter had felt it wrong to share the gospel with the Gentiles or even associate with them. In a vision God let Peter see a sheet coming down from heaven filled with food unclean for Jews. (Acts 10:34-36) (PBC)

The Ninevites “do not know [the difference] between their right and their left,” indicating their relative ignorance of God and his self-revelation in the Scriptures. They would have had no knowledge of the one true God if it were not for Jonah’s preaching (3:4), which was the means of their conversion, just as Jonah’s confession of Yahweh in 1:9 led to the conversion of the sailors. This highlights the importance of the proclaimed Word of God (Rom 10:14–15). (CC)

cannot tell their right hand from their left. Like small children (cf. Dt 1:39; Isa 7:15–16), the Ninevites needed God’s fatherly compassion. (CSB)

Expression for extreme degree of spiritual ignorance and vulnerability of Nineveh’s population (cf Dt 5:32; 17:20; Jsh 1:7; 23:6; Pr 4:27). (TLSB)

and many cattle as well. God’s concern extended even to domestic animals. (CSB)

God probably mentioned livestock to remind Jonah that sparing cattle was more valuable than sparing one little plant. (TLSB)

God’s concern and compassion extends to all His creatures, even to the animal world. Sparrows do not fall to the ground without His permission (Matthew 10:29). He provides for needs of animals, birds and other creatures (Psalm 136:25; 147:9; Matthew 6:26, 28) and He preserves them (Psalm 36:6). (PBC)

Summary of Scene 7 (CC)

Jonah experiences a resurrection from a watery grave and a miraculous ride home in a fish (2:1, 11 [ET1:17; 2:10]). These gifts are unexpected and undeserved. For his own salvation Jonah gave thanks (2:10 [ET2:9]). Then he receives Yahweh’s sheltering gift of the qiqayon plant, over which he rejoiced (4:6). How much more should he have rejoiced when the myriads of Ninevites believed in God (3:5), were spared from divine judgment (3:9–10), and received everlasting salvation through faith! On the Last Day they shall be raised together with all who believe in Christ and shall stand as witnesses against all who reject the only Savior: “The men of Nineveh will arise in the judgment with this generation and condemn it” (Mt 12:41). (CC)

Shall God have compassion upon all people? Whatever Jonah’s answer may have been, in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4), “one greater than Jonah” appeared (Mt 12:41 || Lk 11:32): Jesus the Nazarene. He has spoken the definitive answer with his whole heart, written in his own blood. The life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised second coming of Jesus are the Father’s

yes—yes, yes, a thousand times and forever yes! St. Paul says as much. All of God’s promises are “yes in [Christ]; so through him the amen [is spoken] by us to the glory of God” (2 Cor 1:20). (CC)

Ch 4 Jonah has a precious opportunity to preach God’s Word to Nineveh, but his heart is not in it. He does not seem to understand the extent of God’s concern for people who are enemies of Israel, and he hopes that misfortune will come to them. We have the immense privilege of sharing God’s Law and Gospel with the world around us. We have opportunities to be part of His plans. May we never be found guilty of neglecting our mission to make disciples of all nations. Praise God, He did not neglect us but appointed His only-begotten Son as our Savior. • O Lord, reveal to me every opportunity I have to share the good news of salvation with others, no matter who they are. Amen. (TLSB)