

# Jonah and His Anger

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[ 0 : 00 ] Jonah chapter 4. But to Jonah this seemed very wrong and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord. Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home?

This is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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.

Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live. But the Lord replied, Is it right for you to be angry?

Jonah had gone 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.

Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort. And Jonah was very happy about the plant.

[ 1 : 00 ] But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. 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. But God said to Jonah, Is it right for you to be angry about the plant? It is, he said, And I am so angry I wish I were dead.

But the Lord said, You have been concerned about this plant. Though you did not tend it or make it grow, it sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals.

This is the word of the Lord. Good. Please keep your Bible open at that passage, and you'll find a handout you should have been given when you came in.

If you want to make some notes as we go along, then please do. Let's pray together as we come to God's word. Thank you, gracious God, that you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love.

[ 2 : 27 ] Please help us to learn more about your gracious, merciful character this evening, and to respond rightly to what we learn.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we come to the end of the story, to chapter 4. And in many popular renditions of this story, all the good stuff is done.

We've had the storm. We've had Jonah being thrown into the sea. We've had the fish. We've had him being vomited out by the fish. We've had the journey to Nineveh. We've had the preaching in Nineveh, and the response.

And all the exciting stuff appears to be over. What we're left with is an angry man sitting in the hot sun, waiting.

Seems rather an anti-climax, doesn't it, to what's gone before? But this is the sharp end of the book. This is the climax. This is the conclusion.

[ 3 : 29 ] This is where the action really happens in this book. This is where the big issues are dealt with. Forty more days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown, preached Jonah to Nineveh.

And amazingly, the people of Nineveh, from the greatest to the least, believed that message, and called out to God for mercy. And chapter 4, verse 1, Jonah is exceedingly unhappy about that.

He prays to die, verse 3. Lord, take away my life. It's better for me to die than live. Verse 5, he goes outside the city to wait and see what will happen.

Presumably, what will happen when the 40 days are up? This chapter is all about waiting. Jonah waiting to see what will happen. Will God respond to Nineveh's change of heart?

He waits to see. The sun rises and sets and rises and sets and rises and sets, and the clock ticks, tick, tick, and Jonah waits.

[ 4 : 46 ] Now, of course, we the readers know what's going to happen. Chapter 3, verse 10, we've been told how God has responded. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, God relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

But Jonah has not had that kind of preview. He has to wait and see, verse 5. He made himself a shelter. He sat in its shade. He waited to see what would happen to the city.

Oh, he has his suspicions all right, which is why he's so angry. But it's only in verse 11, right in the very last verse of the book, that Jonah is told for definite of God's pity for Nineveh.

Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, says God to Jonah, only right at the end, as he told the verdict. Meanwhile, the sun rises and sets and the clock ticks, tick, tick, and Jonah waits suspiciously.

And out of his suspicion flows his rage. And the question of this chapter is this, is it right for you to be angry? It's there in verse 4.

[ 6 : 09 ] Is it right for you to be angry, says God? And it's repeated in verse 9. Is it right for you to be angry? That's a great question of this chapter.

And indeed, I think probably of the book as a whole. Is it right to be angry? Here is a very angry man, furious about what he suspects God is going to do, or rather not do.

And his anger is not a new development. Look at chapter 4, verse 2. Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish.

This takes us right back to the beginning of the book, to chapter 1, verse 3. In chapter 1, Jonah fled for Tarshish, rather than obeying the word of the Lord. He's been angry from the moment he heard that word right back at the beginning.

I was so angry, I wanted out right then. At junior school, about the only thing, the only thing I was any good at was playing marbles.

[ 7 : 14 ] I started with a little bag of small marbles. We called them smallies in our school. And I won heaps of marbles. Heaps! A huge green shoe bag full of them.

Smallies, biggies, fancies, fancy biggies, steely, steely biggies. I don't know if any of you others know those terminology, but they were very familiar to me. One afternoon, I went round to Ian Campbell's house.

We played marbles, and he took all my biggies off me. Every one. He beat me fair and square. It was absolutely fair. It was a dreadful afternoon.

Dismay, despair, anger, outrage, bitterness, remorse. Why did I go? I still had plenty of marbles left, but for me, marbles was basically over as a game.

Just didn't want to do that anymore. It was sickening. According to 4-2, that was Jonah back in chapter one. I don't want to play in your game anymore. I've had enough.

[ 8 : 18 ] It's right way beyond what's acceptable. Of course, he found that there was no way out of the game, because as he said back in chapter one, his God is the God of everything.

He made the heavens and the earth, the sky and the dry land. And via storm and sea and fish, he found himself back in the game, reluctantly. But he still wants out, just as much as he did back then. Verse three, this is unendurable. I want nothing to do with it. Kill me now. I'd rather die. The same is repeated in verse nine, this time in connection with the plant.

Is it right for you to be angry about the plant? It is. I'm so angry. I wish I were dead. I'm that angry. Is it right for you to be angry? That's the big question of the book.

And I take it that's the big question the book raises for the person reading it as well. Now, I've been making certain assumptions in reading this book. I've assumed three things.

[ 9 : 16 ] One, that we have this story because Jonah told it. Two, that he told it against himself, having changed his mind about his attitude. And three, because he thought this story needed to be heard by the people back home.

What could have made him pass on this very embarrassing story about himself? The only adequate reason, I think, is that he knew that people back home needed to hear about how God challenged his attitude.

Who is back home? Who are the first here as well? The people of Israel. A bit further on in the story. The events of this book probably happened somewhere in the middle of the 8th century BC.

Things were going well in Israel back then, if you remember. By the last quarter of that century, a couple of decades further on, all that had changed. In 722 BC, Israel experienced grim judgment from God at the hands of the Assyrians, the nation to whom the city of Nineveh belongs. And my guess is that the first people who read this story knew just what it was like to be angry with God at what God did with Nineveh.

[10:40] And that they also needed to face the question, is it right for you to be angry? Why exactly is Jonah angry? So fuming mad in chapter 4.

Well, clearly it's something to do with God being merciful to Nineveh. But why exactly? Is it because he hates the Assyrians, the people of Nineveh? Is it because he'd rather back home with his successful ministry than waiting in the desert in the hot sun?

Is it because he's lost his comfort or his status? Is that why he's angry? Is it because he's seen in God's call to Nineveh a sign that the days of mercy for Israel back home are coming to an end?

Maybe because his work in Israel will ultimately prove fruitless or a combination of all of those. It could be part of all of those, couldn't it? This passage gives us no specifics to work on.

It's intriguing. So instead of speculating about what this passage does not say about Jonah's anger, for the remainder of our time, let me try and focus on what this passage does say.

[11:45] Three important things Jonah 4 tells us. One, they're really obvious things. One, God is very patient with Jonah in this chapter.

Very patient. Remember who God is? He's the owner and ruler of everything. The sea, the dry land, the sailors, the fish, the whole of Nineveh from the greatest to the least, the plant, the worm.

He rules over everything. Remember who Jonah is? He's just a little person, a prophet, a creature, a person God has made for a job, but just one little human being.

And the little human being is furiously shaking his fist at God's kindness on a grand scale. You, God, you ought not to be doing this in your world.

I know what's right here. I know what's just even if you don't. I know what ought to be done even if you won't do it. They ought to be destroyed.

[12:54] I think that what you are doing is so bad that I don't want anything to do with it. It's beneath me. Kill me now. Get me out of it. I don't want to play. I'd rather die than have anything more to do with what you're doing.

And in response to this furious, fist-shaking little creature, God is exceptionally kind and patient. In fact, he shows to Jonah the same sort of kindness Jonah is so angry about and I'm showing to Nineveh. Look at God's patience in this chapter. It oozes with it.

Verse 4, patient question. Is it right for you to be angry? Such a patient question. It's not what he deserves.

It's there in verse 6. The Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head and ease his discomfort.

[13:52] Isn't that a kind and gentle thing to do? I think if I'd been God, I'd have let him fry in the sun for a bit. But he doesn't do that. He's very kind. It's there in verse 9.

Is it right for you to be angry about the plant? Again, a patient question, inviting Jonah to think. It's as big as it gets in verses 10 and 11.

You've been concerned about the little plant. Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh? Patient question, explanation, question, explanation, all the way through.

He's very patient with Jonah. Now, why does this chapter make such a big deal of that patience?

Well, I suspect it's because this kind of anger is commoner than we would imagine amongst God's people.

It's easy to write Jonah off as a specially nasty, grumpy little man. But this story is here because others need to know of how God treated him when he was like this.

[14:55] And we need to consider the possibility that it's not all that uncommon for God's people to be angry with what God is doing.

So let's put ourselves in the shoes of the first readers of this story. Imagine you're some years on from Jonah's visit to Nineveh. Two things would be absolutely clear to you.

One, the Assyrians are coming. They are coming. A devastating military force. They might already have begun to arrive as this book has been written.

Quite clear by now, a bit later on, that Nineveh's response to God has been superficial and not long-lasting. The second thing that's clear is that God has brought them.

The Assyrians have come because of God's judgment on Israel's disobedience. His patience with Israel has run out. This once-privileged nation has been overrun by a fierce enemy.

[16:01] Now put those two things together. We've lost our privileges, and we've lost our privileges at their hands, and God has done it.

Do you imagine the anger? How can it be right for him to have had mercy on people like these? It's easy to understand how a couple of generations later, people could be very angry at God's undeserved mercy to these people.

It's not just that they're undeserving. It's what they're going to do to us and what we'll lose as a result. And so Jonah talks about God's patient kindness to him, a thoroughly undeserving creature, as he's portrayed in this book.

If God's patience to Nineveh is a problem, remember that God has been very patient with Jonah.

Here's the second thing. God has been very, very patient with the nation of Israel.

It's quite clear from the start, isn't it, that Jonah knew what God was going to do. He did. How do we know that? Well, we find it. How did he know that, rather? Well, verse 2 tells us.

[17:19] How did Jonah know that God was going to be patient? Verse 2. Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

How does he know that God's going to be patient with Nineveh? Because he knows his Bible. And in verse 2, he quotes from the Bible.

Well, it's from the Scriptures, this. Very famous words spoken a long time before. Spoken by God to Moses in the book of Exodus.

Jonah knows what God is like from the Scriptures. That's how we know what God is like, from the Scriptures. And so he knows what God is likely to do to Nineveh. However, there is something he has forgotten.

Now, folks, that wonderful statement from Exodus chapter 34 comes in a particular setting. I wonder if you remember the story of Exodus up to that point. The people of Israel rescued from slavery in Egypt, brought to God at Mount Sinai, given God's commands, put in relationship with God, urged to be faithful to the God who's rescued them, and what do they do?

[18:42] 30 seconds with your next-door neighbor. What do they do next? Talk about that, please. 30 seconds with your next-door neighbor. What's the next thing they do? Well, I think I heard whispers about it out there.

The next thing they do, the next thing that happens in the book of Exodus is the golden calf episode. Remember that? Immediately, Israel makes an image of a golden calf to aid her in her worship of God, something that God has commanded she should not do.

Immediately, this happens. The whole relationship is nearly blown out of the water the moment it started. And into that situation, God speaks these words about his mercy.

The Lord, the Lord, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. It was only ever because of God's undeserved mercy that the relationship between God and Israel kept going at all.

And it's been like that right from the beginning. Jonah had been a faithful prophet in Israel, but it is not true that Israel had been a faithful people.

[19:56] And the privileges that Israel had had at God's hand were never deserved. They were always undeserved. And for Jonah to burn with anger at God showing mercy to Nineveh is simply to have lost perspective.

For right from the beginning, God has shown mercy to his own nation. It's the only reason she exists. Are you right to be angry, Jonah?

Yes, I am. Yes, I am, he says. And that's to show that he's lost perspective on God's mercy. What's Israel doing right now back home?

Well, if you were here for our first session in 2 Kings chapter 14, Israel right now back home is rerunning the golden calf sin because Jeroboam II has not turned away from the sins of his predecessors, Jeroboam I, who installed golden calves at the northern and southern ends of his kingdom.

Right back at the beginning, the nation of Israel was nearly blown out of the water by her idolatry. And now, she is doing exactly the same thing that threatened her relationship with God so catastrophically right back at the beginning.

[ 21 : 23 ] Has she turned away from those sins? She has not turned away from them. Israel is entirely unrepentant. And Jonah is angry that others are being shown mercy.

And that his ministry is being taken somewhere else. And look back at chapter 2. Look at chapter 2, verse 8. In chapter 2, verse 8 and 9, he criticizes those who cling to worthless idols.

And he numbers himself in verse 9 as those among those who do not cling to worthless idols.

But what is his nation back home doing? Clinging to worthless idols. There's a massive blind spot here in Jonah's mind. Cannot see the fact that things back home are just as idolatrous as any of the pagan nations ever have been.

Merciful, mercy for them? Jonah says, no. Mercy is for the faithful, for those who don't cling to worthless idols.

[ 22 : 41 ] God has been very patient with Jonah and he's been very patient with Israel. But there is a huge blind spot. He thinks in some way that he and his people are entitled to God's favor.

And in fact, in this book, the sailors in chapter 1 and the people in Nineveh in chapter 3 respond better to God than Jonah or Israel have ever done historically.

God has been very patient with Jonah and very patient with Israel. But the clock is ticking. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Tick. And God's patience is running out. Three. God has the right to be patient.

Read verse 5 and 6. Jonah has gone out and sat out at the place east of the city. He made himself a shelter and sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.

[ 23 : 54 ] Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort and Jonah was very happy about the plant.

Isn't that kind of God? It's just a small thing. It's just a plant. But it brings joy to the prophet. It is the only thing in the book that he is pleased about. The plant.

The only thing. Isn't it kind of God? He does something unnecessary to bring relief to this horrid, angry person. He has the right to do that.

Even for a horrid, angry little person like Jonah. He also, of course, has the right to take it away.

Which he does. Next day, he appoints a worm and the worm eats the plant and the plant withers.

But Jonah does not think that God has the right to take it away. Look at verse 8. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint.

[ 24 : 59 ] He wanted to die and said, it would be better for me to die than live. But God said to Jonah, is it right for you to be angry about the plant? It is, he said.

I'm so angry. I wish I were dead. But the Lord said, you've been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow.

It sprang up overnight and died overnight. Is it right for you to be angry about the plant? It jolly well is, he says.

Angry enough to be dead. I'm so angry that you took it away. And then the patient argument comes back. You pity the plant, though you didn't tend it or make it grow.

It was a small thing. You're angry about it, even though you didn't make it. You didn't have any call on the plant. It was always a gift. It wasn't yours.

[ 25 : 54 ] It wasn't your plant. You didn't make it grow. I made it grow. You weren't its creator. And yet you're concerned about its loss. How much more then should I, the creator, have pity on Nineveh, that great, clueless city, and all its inhabitants and all its creatures.

You see, one of the big points of this book is that God is the maker and creator of everything. He cares intimately for everything he's made. He has the right to be patient with it.

He had the right to be patient with Nineveh because he made it. It's his city. Despite the fact that her proud arrogance was real and deserved judgment, he had the right to be merciful.

He had the right to be merciful to Jonah despite the fact that his proud rebellion is absolutely unfitting for a prophet of God.

He's had the right to be patient with Israel despite the fact that her existence and all her privileges have only ever been because of his creative power and his love and mercy.

[ 27 : 09 ] He has the right to be merciful because he made them. They're his. We human beings are quite often angry at what God is doing or not doing.

Often what makes us angry is that he doesn't seem to be doing the right thing. Doesn't seem to be acting justly. Doesn't seem to be doing what we would do if we were him.

He's bringing mercy to Nineveh, not judgment. Where's his justice? Robert De Niro, if there's a God he's got a lot to answer for. So often we find ourselves angry at God because he's let this happen or that happen or the other happen or he's not done what we would have done if we were him. Often that's related to people getting away with things. I can't believe he allows that North Korean dictatorship to continue. How can there really be a God if he does that? I can't believe that he allows that corrupt government to remain in place or the conversation I had in the barbers on Saturday morning.

I can't believe that God, if he's there, allows those terrorists to do that kind of thing. And these things are sometimes especially difficult when I have been deprived of a position of privilege and especially when we suspect or know that those who are prospering care absolutely nothing about God.

[ 28 : 42 ] Sometimes those things raise huge angry questions about God and his justice. And sometimes that overflows into exactly the same sort of stubborn, angry attitude that we see in Jonah here.

God has been merciful to Jonah and very merciful to Israel. And he has the right because he's the maker and owner. You see, Jonah is like a little Israel in this book.

Like Israel, very privileged but refusing to be what God wants him to be in the world. Like Israel, counting himself among one of the faithful, blind to his gross disobedience.

Like Israel, furious about the fact that his privileges might be about to be removed. Jonah has experienced temporary relief as the plant grew up and shaded him from the sun.

back home. Israel has experienced temporary relief in the reign of Jeroboam II. God blessed the people back home.

[ 30 : 02 ] But Jonah seems to think this is something he's entitled to. Furious when it's taken away. Furious when God's mercy goes elsewhere.

And no doubt Israel back home felt exactly the same. Furious when God threatened her nation with judgment and her nation was overrun by enemies.

How dare God take that away? That was our land. We are his people. No, says God, right from the beginning it was always undeserved.

The whole world is mine. I made it. If I want to have mercy I can. I'm allowed. It's mine. But if the prophet I've chosen to make myself known to gets fuming angry I will challenge him about his anger because he ought not to do that.

And if the people I've made to reflect my character in the world become just as idolatrous as the world around about I'll threaten them with judgment because that's not what they were made for.

[ 31 : 14 ] They need to realize my patience can run out. Sometimes when God does things we don't like we think that he does that because of lack of concern. This book flips that idea entirely on its head.

Jonah's fuming anger is a product of his small concern not his big concern. his nation losing their position in the world his ministry back home maybe it's in vain his status as a successful prophet disappearing those horrid people over there being let off I want out of that I'd rather die that's a sign of his lack of concern not his big concern.

Brothers and sisters God's patience is a big big thing. It comes from his being the creator of everything. It becomes from being deeply concerned for all that he's made.

It comes from relating to sinful humanity on the basis of undeserved mercy not just desserts. He has the right to do that.

we finish the book waiting the clock ticks tick tick what will God do?

[ 32 : 43 ] How will Jonah respond? Well in the end Israel was judged her time ran out and Assyria was too later on but it seems that in the end Jonah turned round from his anger.

Why was this book written? Well so that Israel might stop looking on her position with God as an entitlement and remember that the only reason she had a position with God was that God had made her to be his and acted mercifully towards her and so that she would repent and turn back to God from her idolatry on the basis of his mercy not her rights.

That I think is why this book is in the Bible. God's mercy brings us into relationship with the creator of the world to be the people he wants us to be.

It's a marvelous position of privilege but it's not an entitlement it's not a right it's always a gift.

Two things to close God is amazingly generous and kind and merciful this book oozes with his kindness and patience and mercy a great encouragement to us here this evening a great encouragement that God relates to us on the basis of his mercy not our performance.

[ 34 : 32 ] So if we're tempted to doubt his mercy this is a great night to turn around from that and stop doubting his mercy. He's always related to humanity on the basis of his mercy not our rights.

The flip side of that of course is that his people can never say it's my right to belong to God no matter how I behave.

For what the creator's mercy is meant to do is to lead us into a relationship where we behave as the creatures he's made us to be not as the rebellious creatures that we so often tend to be.

well our time is over why don't we pray and ask for God's help to grasp his character just a minute to reflect in the quiet on what we've thought about and to respond to God ourselves and then I'll lead us in prayer.

Striking isn't it that Jonah could be so angry at a God who is slow to anger. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God slow to anger and abounding in love.

[ 36 : 19 ] we thank you Lord that despite being spoken in anger these words are true that you the creator of the world the maker of everything big and small sky and sea heavens and earth we thank you that you are gracious and compassionate slow to anger abounding in love we pray please that you would deliver us from thinking that we can relate to you on the basis of our performance our faithfulness our rights or any sense of entitlement help us to be daily dependent on your mercy and deliver us please from thinking that because of the privileges you've showered upon us we can just behave any way we like and be any sort of people that we like we thank you for your mercy to Jonah your patience with him that you were patient in seeking his change of mind we thank you for your great patience to the nation of Israel historically that you patiently warned her that she needed to change please help us to respond rightly to your patience we ask this in

Jesus name Amen Amen