

Jonah 4

3:10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. (Jon 3:10)

Jonah 4:1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. 2 So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. 3 "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!" 4 Then the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

5 So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city. 6 And the LORD God prepared a plant¹ and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

7 But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered.

8 And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

9 Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!"

10 But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night.

11 "And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left-- and much livestock?" (Jon 4:1-11)

Growing up, I enjoyed watching some of those murder mysteries with the super lawyer, such as Perry Mason or Matlock. The way it usually unfolded was that the lawyer would have the murderer on the stand, and would question him, until the man incriminated himself. He'd either show how the man's lies contradicted themselves, or get the man so angry that he'd blurt out something that would reveal his guilt.

Something like that often happens in the Bible. It's fascinating to study Scripture and see how often God asks His people questions. At the very beginning, God asks Adam, "Where are you?" and later, "Who told you you were naked?" He asks Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" We know God's famous interview with Job, where He asks Job no less than seventy questions about creation. He asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?" And we remember how often the Lord Jesus would ask the Pharisees, or His disciples, or the person He was about to heal, questions.

Why does God ask questions? God does not ask questions to learn, to discover, to gain information that He lacks. No, when God asks questions of us, it is to teach. It is to reveal things about us to ourselves. It is to draw out of us what our deceitful hearts are suppressing, hiding from, refusing to see. It is to show us what we need to know or do.

That's what happens in chapter 4, the climax of the book of Jonah. It's rather like the courtroom scene. In chapter one, Jonah refused to do God's will. In chapter 2, Jonah half-heartedly repented. In chapter 3, God showed mercy on Nineveh and brought great revival. But chapter 4 is where it all comes together. God is going to put Jonah on trial, as it were. The trial is simple: does Jonah, who claims to be God's prophet, really love what God loves? Does Jonah have God's heart, or something very different? God is going to ask questions, and use a surprising piece of evidence – a plant.

As we watch, we'll see God draw out what's really in Jonah's heart. But the idea is not merely to smile at Jonah, but to ask what's in our hearts. Do we love what God loves and hate what he hates – that's the big theme of this book. Do we recognise when God is doing something very similar in our

lives to draw out where we are very different to our Lord Jesus?

The passage can be outlined as Jonah's response, Jonah's relief, and Jonah's rebuke. Let's track the story from 3:10.

I. Jonah's Response

3:10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. (Jon 3:10)

Jonah 4:1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.2 So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. 3 "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!" 4 Then the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

After this massive downpour of God's mercy, drenching the Ninevites in the goodness and grace of God, there is one man here, who looks just like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Jonah is not happy. Jonah was deeply displeased that the Ninevites had been spared. He goes so far as to say, "I knew you would be like this." As if to say, "You big softie." He explains why he fled: "I ran away because I did not want to be an instrument of mercy on these Ninevites. And here we are, exactly as I thought would happen. I feared the worst, that these people would repent and instead of destroying Israel's enemies, You would spare them. Now my worst nightmare has come upon me. I have become the man who spared the Assyrians from Your judgement. I will forever be known as the Israelite who saved Israel's enemies."

"I can't think of a worse fate. Please kill me. I don't want to go on living, if living means I am known as rescuer of the Gentiles. I tried to kill myself before, but you stopped me, so now, please do me one last favour and kill me."

God asks Jonah one question, a simple question with an obvious answer, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah doesn't answer. God is going to ask this question again later. What makes you angry reveals what you love, and what you hate.

Jonah rebukes God for not being angry at the Ninevites, while God is rebuking Jonah for being angry at Him!

God has finished saving Nineveh, but there is one more person that needs saving, and it's Jonah himself. And God is going to do it through an object lesson. God is going to use this object lesson not to calm Jonah down, but to get him so angry that he starts blowing gaskets.

II. Jonah's Relief

5 So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city.

Jonah goes out of the city, and sits on the east side. Notice, he is not going home. He makes himself a temporary little shelter from which to watch the city in the shade. What is Jonah doing? Jonah still has hope. What does he hope for? He hopes that God will relent of His mercy! He hopes that God will go back to being angry with the city and destroy it. He is hoping that this terrible nightmare of the Assyrians being saved is just a temporary thing, and soon they will go back to their evil, and God will go back to judging them.

So there he sits in his shabby shelter, miserably waiting out the forty days. I wonder if during this time, some Ninevites came by his little bunker and thanked him for bringing them the message of life. I wonder if he saw the faces of changed people, their consciences now clean, living in the freedom of renewed hearts. If he did, it probably only made the rage inside him burn even hotter.

So now the merciful Creator of Jonah goes after Jonah's heart. How does He do it? Through an object lesson that is going to show Jonah a mirror. Jonah is going to see himself.

6 And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

Don't miss the fact that it was the LORD God who prepared the plant. God seems to supernaturally cause a plant with large shady leaves to grow up quickly, and it provides a kind of shade that his shabby shelter could not. In the desert heat of Nineveh, with temperatures in the high 40s, any kind of shade would be delicious relief.

Notice God is doing this on the one hand, to teach, but on the other hand – to deliver him from his misery. God is always doing more than one thing.

But notice Jonah's response “So Jonah was very grateful for the plant.”

This is the first time in the book of Jonah that we have met a happy Jonah. What makes you angry reveals what you love, and what you hate, but what makes you happy and grateful reveals what you love and what you hate.

Now the same God who prepared the plant, is going to prepare two other things.

7 But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered.
8 And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

What is God doing? God gets Jonah happy by preparing a plant, and then He prepares a worm to damage and wither the plant, and a hot tormenting east wind to afflict Jonah. Jonah is suffering under this weather, and he grows faint, and once again, he wants to die. He is filled with loathing for life itself. God is going to make Jonah happy, and He is going to make Jonah very angry.

Jonathan Edwards made it one of his resolutions to never suffer the least anger at animals or inanimate objects. Why? Because he realised getting angry at things and dumb animals is really getting angry at the God who is in control of these things and using them.

And now, God is going to ask the bullseye questions. Sometimes companies will do exit interviews with people leaving the company. Here's Jonah's exit interview. He has completed the assignment of preaching to Nineveh, and now he is suicidally angry about a dead plant. Here God is going to

III. Jonah's Rebuke

9 Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!"

Now there is one way to get an angry person even angrier, and that is to ask, “Do you think it's

okay to be angry?" If there is one thing an angry person feels, it's justified about being angry. So to challenge an angry person about his anger, will usually make the man go nuclear. And that's just what happens here. You can just about hear Jonah's blood vessels in his eyes popping as he defiantly answers God, "It is right for me to be angry. In fact, I'm angry enough to die, and I wish I was dead."

Now this is the second time God asks Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Why is He doing this? God is making Jonah focus not on Nineveh, not on his circumstances, but on his own anger. He's been angry twice, and each time, God draws his attention to it.

Why? Because what you get angry about reveals what you love. When you get angry, it is usually because something you love has been threatened, or harmed, or removed. When you get angry, it is often because something you love or desire has been frustrated, thwarted, denied to you. And arising from that love is displeasure that demands change.

Jesus got angry in the Temple when He saw people using the things of God for personal financial gain, and turning a place of prayer into a market. His anger demanded change, and He drove out those sellers. But what did He love that drove His anger? He loved His Father's glory. He loved pure worship. He loved prayer. And the flip side was that He hated perversions of worship. He hated greed in the place of devotion. He hated religious commercialism.

Your anger reveals a lot about you. It's good to ask, what is it that is getting me so angry? What is it that I love so much that is driving my deep displeasure?

Jonah gets angry twice in this book. He is angry when the Ninevites repent, and are spared, and he is angry when his pet plant dies. So what does Jonah love? What does Jonah hate?

God's about to ask him that through the lesson of the plant.

10 But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night.

11 "And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left-- and much livestock?" (Jon 4:1-11)

God effectively says, "Why Jonah, it is clear that you loved that plant. It made you happy. You smiled for the first time in days. When you sat under that plant's shade, you were grateful, and the plant clearly pleased you. You loved it, and when the plant died, you were grieved. You felt sorrow and unhappiness because the plant perished, because the plant was destroyed. So much so, that you were angry when it died. You hated the fact that it died. But in fact, you had no real personal investment in the plant. You didn't make it. You didn't plant it, cultivate it, protect it, or spend any serious time cultivating it. It came up in one day, and died in one day. And yet you have more grief over its death than... than who Jonah?

"Look over at that city Jonah. Living inside that city are real people and real animals. One hundred and twenty thousand of them are so young they cannot yet tell their right hand from their left. Unlike you and your plant, I am deeply invested in each one of them. I thought of them before the foundation of the world. I gave each one life and knitted them in the womb, gave each one unique fingerprints, personality, ability. I have sustained the life of each one of those people, without them knowing it, every day they have been alive. And their sin was dooming them to be separated from Me forever. I gave them life, like I gave you life. I want them to live and not die, like I want you and your people Israel to live and not die. Is it wrong for me, their Creator and sustainer to love

them, and pity them?

“You have love and pity for a plant that you never gave a day's work for. So Jonah, what is it that you really love? You know why you loved that plant? Because of what it gave Jonah. Jonah loves shade for Jonah. Jonah loves relief for Jonah. Jonah hates discomfort for Jonah. Jonah hates pain for Jonah.

Jonah loves announcing victory for Israel. Jonah hates seeing Ninevites spared. Jonah loves mercy for himself. Jonah hates mercy for Nineveh. Tell me Jonah, who is chief of Jonah's loves?

You claim to be My servant, Jonah, but why do we love such different things?”

Now the book ends in verse 11, with God asking Jonah the essence of these questions. It ends abruptly because there is no answer to God except repentance or rejection.

But if Jonah actually wrote the book, it was perhaps his humility and repentance that gave God the last word in the book. Here God is exonerated, and Jonah is shamed.

Now we'll miss the whole point of the book of Jonah, if we simply look at Jonah, and feel amused that he was like this. Jonah isn't in the Bible so that millions of people could scorn him. Jonah is in the Bible because each of us has a Jonah story. Each of us, like Jonah is at varying stages of loving what God loves, or not loving what God loves. So God brings various things in our lives to show us where we are different from Him.

He could do it like He did with Jonah, giving you a command you do not like. But He could do it in other ways. He can tell you that you should have a response you do not have, such as thankfulness, or contentment, or joy, or compassion. He can tell you that something in your life should be a priority, when it is not a priority to you. He can remove something in your life that had become an idol to you. He can thwart your pursuits and corner you and frustrate you till you see that what you are pursuing and what He is pursuing are different. He can give you what you were seeking and let you feast on it and let the emptiness in your heart gnaw at you. He can confront you with your fears.

That is your Nineveh. That is your shady plant that grows and dies. In all this, He is working with you as individually and as personally as He worked with Jonah. But the key to growth is to stop and ask, what is getting me so angry? Don't just get blindly happy and angry over the plant, like Jonah. Ask, why am I happy? Why am I angry?

What do I love and hate that is fueling this anger? Is this something God loves or hates? Is this His priority?

Ask, why am I so fearful over this? Why do I worry about it? What does it reveal about what I love or hate?

Ask, what am I grieving over? What causes me sorrow, and even depression? This thing that I lost, is it something God wanted me to have? Did I love it more than God does? Do I love it more than I should have?

Ask, why am I so happy and grateful right now? Am I enjoying God's gifts for God's sake? Or am I loving something that God does not?

This is how a loving, merciful God will work to conform your heart to His. He governs your life and your life circumstances, and if you have ears to hear, you will hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit whispering to you, “Is it right for you to be angry over this? “Is it right for you to be

happy only when you get your own way?”

But perhaps we can imagine a repentant follow-up response from Jonah like this, because it is the sort of conversation you and I might have with God. “God, I’m ashamed. I can’t believe how utterly self-centred I’ve become. I have sat on the throne of my life, and made everything revolve around me. That’s why I have not loved what you love at all. I’ve actually hated what You love, and loved what You hated. I hated mercy on those I don’t like, and loved their destruction. I loved my own mercy and comfort, and hated my own affliction.

Now I see how far from You I have drifted. I’ve actually been serving myself and pretending I was serving You. I was doing things in Your name, but I was really still god in my own life.

“You have used my anger, my refusals, my cruelty, my pettiness to show me how my loves are nothing like Yours. Forgive me. I want to love You by loving what You love. That means I need to repent of my pride. I need to break down, mortify loves that displease You. I need to unlearn some loves and learn new ones. I can’t just pretend to serve You on the outside if we are opposites on the inside. Renew my mind, re-shape me, till I love what You love, and hate what You hate.”

That’s what Jonah could possibly have prayed, once he got the point.

If you still think of your Christian life as avoiding certain unChristian actions, and beginning certain Christian actions, I want to invite you to go deeper. Go beyond the mere externals and start asking what does my God love? What delights His heart? What brings Him pleasure? What would I be like if I loved all the things God loves, and hated all the things God hates?