

GOING AGAINST GOD: JONAH'S RESENTMENT
Jonah 4:1-11
February 18, 2007 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

The book of Jonah is written in a chiasmic structure as we have demonstrated in our sermon titles along the way. It is presented in an ABBA structure (no, not the Swedish pop band).

- A – Running from God: Jonah's Resistance (Chapter 1)
- B – Running to God: Jonah's Deliverance (Chapter 2)
- B – Going with God: Jonah's Recommission (Chapter 3)
- A – Going against God: Jonah's Resentment (Chapter 4)

The B's in the structure display Jonah's obedience to God. As I mentioned last week, we would consider these to be the favorable chapters concerning Jonah and His walk with the Lord. It took a lot to get him to obey, but he finally cries out to God in chapter 2 in a prayer of thanksgiving. The pinnacle of his repentance is shown in his confession, "Salvation is from the LORD" (2:9). He then demonstrates that his repentance is real in his obedience to God's second commission of him in Chapter 3. He goes, he preaches what God told him to preach, and there is a great revival in Nineveh.

The A's in the structure demonstrate Jonah's disobedience to God. In chapter 1 he receives his initial commission and seeks to flee from the presence of God. In this chapter we see that he once again returns to his old ways and outright resents that God had called him to go to Nineveh. Jonah's displeasure is demonstrated by anger towards God.

But what we have seen throughout the story of Jonah is God's compassion. O. Palmer Robertson entitled his commentary on the book, *Jonah: A Study in God's Compassion*. God has demonstrated His compassion in Jonah's life in both his obedience and in his disobedience. His compassion is the highlight of chapter 3 where, when the Ninevites show true repentance, He "relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them." Then we have those precious words, "And He did not do it" (3:10).

God's compassion is once again demonstrated in chapter 4, right alongside of Jonah's resentment.

I. Jonah's Displeasure (4:1-5)

1. Jonah's overzealousness (v. 1)

"But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry." What was it that caused this bitter reaction in Jonah? It refers back to 3:10, "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it." That is why Jonah was angry. That is why he was greatly displeased. That is what was such an evil thing to Jonah. Jonah took issue with God's compassion on the people of Nineveh.

But again, we must ask, why Jonah's resentment? He should have rejoiced in the fact that these in Nineveh had been forgiven by God. His joy should have been even greater seeming as how he was the instrument that God used to bring these wicked pagan Gentiles to repentance. But that should have caused great joy in his heart was the very source of his anger. It was the *Ninevites* who had repented, not his own people.

Remember back in chapter 1 and our discussion on why Jonah ran from God in the first place. Jonah feared that Israel would be cut off for their unrepentance and that God would bless these Gentiles. Jonah's flight was an attempt to force the hand of God and to protect his people. He would rather see the pagan Ninevites perish than see the disobedient Israelites perish. Jonah knew that Assyria would be the natural choice of God to bring judgment on Israel. If they repented, what would stop them from becoming the tool in God's hands to wipe Israel out? Jonah knew what would happen, so he ran. If the Ninevites did not hear the message of repentance, then they would not repent and Israel might be spared, at least for the time being.

Now he has obeyed God's commission, and this fear he had in chapter 1 has now come about. It had happened just as he supposed. Now the reality of the situation is upon him and he once again reacts with spite towards God.

It is just here that we see Jonah's overzealousness or misplaced zeal. He had a great passion for his people. And who can fault him for that? But his error was not in his passion for his people but that this passion was excessive. His desire for repentance and holiness in his own people is to be commended. But his passion led him to lack compassion for others. His excessive zeal had caused him to disregard the good of others.

We can learn from Jonah's mistake. As Palmer Robertson astutely points out, "All doctrine is meant to lead us to holiness, and if your doctrine makes you insensitive to people, then you probably do not understand the doctrine. Be careful about justifying your anger as 'righteous indignation', or your impatience as zeal for truth."¹

This type of overzealousness is common in young pastors when they come to the doctrines of grace. They have an excitement about these newfound truths mined from God's Word and they want their congregation to immediately understand them as they do. And this excitement is to be commended. But often, just like Jonah, they go too far. They become brash and arrogant in their approach in the pulpit and somehow lose their love for their people. They become frustrated, angry, displeased. I cannot remember if it was Ernie Reisinger or R. F. Gates that made this observation, "Whenever a young pastor comes to the doctrines of grace, they ought to lock him up for two years so he can mature in these doctrines." Both of these saints had seen over and over again the destruction left by those who, though they began with right intentions, were overzealous with their congregations. The aftermath is often devastating to that church's ministry.

Jonah was overzealous. His passion went beyond what was righteous, and he was angry with God.

2. Jonah's provincialism (v. 2)

Then Jonah cries out to God. "**He prayed to the LORD and said, 'Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country?'**" He then gives great insight into his understanding of the nature of God: (1) "**a gracious and compassionate God,**" (2) "**slow to anger,**" (3) "**abundant in lovingkindness,**" and (4) "**one who relents concerning calamity.**" Jonah had it all right from the beginning. He shows his distinctiveness as a Jew in quoting verbatim these attributes of God that had been given to God's chosen people in His Word. These were the words of Moses, the psalmists and others. But it was this insight that actually caused him to run from God in the first place.

The key to understanding Jonah's resentment on this occasion is found in the little phrase, "**my own country.**" While Jonah would allow for the possibility that God may work elsewhere

¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *Jonah: A Study in God's Compassion*, 54.

with other people under other circumstances, he could not get past his belief that only His God and His people go together. This God that he so wonderfully proclaimed in all of his attributes was the God of Israel, not Nineveh.

Here we see Jonah's provincialism. His God was for his people, his nation, his Israel. Again, we see his passion for his people. But He wants God to be their God first, not someone else's. Again, we can learn from Jonah's mistake. We too can become provincial with God. I see this all the time in certain churches. They are all too willing to live for God as long as He benefits *their* church or *their* people. God is only a God to people "like us." But this shows a lack of compassion. Palmer Robertson points out how this looks in culture today:

The problem arises when by attitude or action we pull back from the people richer or poorer than we, those more educated or less educated than we, those that live farther to the North, the South, the East or the West than we. (I might add of a different color skin than we or more in the depths of sin than we). Then we become guilty of losing our heart of compassion. Then we have ceased to reflect the heart of Christ.²

Jonah was right to have a passion for his own people, but his sin was in viewing other peoples as not being the proper recipients of God's grace and mercy. May we guard our own hearts against such provincialism today!

3. Jonah's despair (v. 3)

"Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." Jonah cried out, "It happened just as I expected it would. My people have not repented for over 150 years and the Ninevites did it in a day." Just as Jonah suspected, the center of God's working in the world was shifting away from Israel. He now included the Gentiles in the blessings of redemption.

So Jonah does not want to live to see it. He knows that these very Ninevites would now be used to bring Israel to judgment. Unlike God, Jonah is unwilling to forgive them. In fairness to Jonah, this type of forgiveness is very difficult. It is one thing to forgive a person or a people after everything has worked out to our satisfaction. But what about when we are in the midst of the hurt? When our children have been wronged? When we lose our job over trumped up charges? When we give to someone and they use our gift against us? Again, we are not to forgive if there is no evidence of repentance. But when one repents, no matter how deep the wound, we have no other righteous response than to forgive and not hold their iniquity against them. After all, is that not what Christ has done for us?

We must recognize that Jonah's despair was brought about by his sin, his sin in not forgiving the Ninevites. When we fail to forgive and forget, it eats at us inwardly. We become consumed with the wrongs against us and we are driven to despair. All that Jonah needed to do, all that we need to do, is forgive those who have repented of their sins against us. If not, we too will have an unrighteous attitude towards God.

4. God's response (v. 4)

God's question to Jonah was penetrating. It struck right to the heart of Jonah's sinfulness. "The LORD said, 'Do you have good reason to be angry?'" God's question once again demonstrates his compassion for Jonah. He did not grant his wish to die, but patiently and lovingly responds to Jonah as a father to a child.

² Robertson, 56.

This is remarkable given Jonah's track record. First, he runs from doing the Lord's will. Then he repents, confesses his sin, and testifies of God's goodness. He obeys and goes to Nineveh. Now we learn that all the time he was obeying the Lord, he was doing so begrudgingly. Robertson observes, "He is the most half-hearted preacher you have ever seen."³ His desires were never totally God's desires. Though he knew what would happen, the last thing he wanted was for the Ninevites to be spared. As we noted last week, Jonah recognized that obeying God was better than receiving His divine discipline. Now we know that is the *only* reason that Jonah obeyed. It was never for God's purpose; it was for his selfish purpose.

Further, Jonah demonstrates that he is really jealous of the Ninevites. They were going to receive God's glory, not his own people. And yet, God gently rebukes him with a simple, profound question, "Jonah, do you really have any reason to be angry with Me?"

5. Jonah's sulking (v. 5)

Jonah does not answer God, but his unresponsiveness proves he knew the truth. But rather than ask God's forgiveness, he again tries to get away from God. **"Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city."**

Jonah goes to sulk. He goes and has his own little pity party. He is miserable. He shows what happens to a person that refuses to walk in the way and the will of God. But it is not just that he goes and sets up camp and wallows in his pity. He watches to see what will happen to the city. He is unwilling to let his arrogance subside. There were still 39 days left and he would not be convinced of God's compassion for Nineveh until he saw that they were delivered. However, this should not surprise us when we see that Jonah was unwilling to recognize God's compassion in his own life. He was going to fight to the bitter end in an effort to prove that he was right.

Jonah's actions are really childish. But do we not act the same way at times? You have heard the old adage, "It takes a real man to admit when he is wrong." We have difficulty admitting when we are wrong. We too can be stubborn like Jonah. That is our sin nature rearing its ugly head. Often we will look absolutely foolish or do just about anything rather than admit our sin. But we must understand that we will never truly repent of our sin until we are willing to admit that we have wronged God and others. Jonah looks foolish on this occasion because we know that he cannot win this battle with God. Perhaps you are battling with God with some issue in your life to night, quenching the Spirit and kicking against the pricks. Dear friend, it is foolish to think that you can outsmart God. Learn from Jonah.

II. God's Correction (4:6-11)

As obstinate as Jonah is, God once again shows His compassion for Jonah in His divine discipline.

1. God's instruments of discipline (vv. 6-9)

The heat on the hill overlooking Nineveh on that day was brutal. Jonah had pitched his shelter and sat under it in the shade, but the shade was not enough to relieve him. **"So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort."** In His compassion, God again intervenes. Here we see the name of God given as "Yahweh Elohim." This is instructive for what follows. "Yahweh" is God's covenant

³ Robertson, 58.

name, referring to the One who swore that He would redeem His people and be their God. "Elohim" refers to the God of creation and His power in creating *ex nihilo*, "out of nothing." So this dual name refers to the covenant, Creator God who chose a people for Himself and is the sovereign God over all of His creation.

We then notice His first instrument of discipline, a great plant. As was the case with the fish, we are not certain what type of plant this was. Some versions translate it "gourd." Others believe it to be a castor oil plant while others believe it to be some sort of tree. Regardless of its identity, it was tall enough and had leaves broad enough to provide a delightful shade over Jonah. The language is such that we see a miracle. The plant suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Jonah might possibly have watched it grow quickly or perhaps God simply placed it in his presence. We see that God "**appointed**" the plant just as He had appointed the fish, again demonstrating His tender mercy and compassion.

"And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant." But not repentant. He was glad that he was comfortable. He certainly knew that the plant had been provided by God, whom he had just spurned. And yet he still fails to recognize God and repent. He was happy, but still as stubborn as ever.

So God prepares a second instrument of discipline in the worm. The worm attacked the plant, and it withered and died. Imagine what Jonah must have thought. God provided shade and comfort, and then He takes it. But Jonah does not seek the Lord. He still does not repent. So God prepares a third instrument of discipline. He sends a scorching east wind. Jonah's present condition was worse than his initial discomfort. The sun beat down on him and he is faint and thirsty. But he still does not repent. He does cry out to God, but in exasperation, not repentance. He again is in the pit of despair. He begged with every ounce of his being, "God, let me die!" Despite all that God had "appointed," "prepared," "provided" for Jonah out of His compassion, Jonah refuses to repent. He now has a death wish.

Not only did he remain unrepentant, but he accuses God of being unjust. In v. 9, God again speaks to Jonah, **"Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?"** This time Jonah responds to God's question. Notice Jonah's hard-hearted response, **"I have good reason to be angry, even to death."** Jonah justifies his actions and in doing so shows that he believed that God was unjust. He was unjust in sparing the Ninevites and He was unjust in killing the plant. Jonah was unshakably convinced that he is right and God is wrong. So much so that he is willing to die for the cause.

2. God's tender rebuke (vv. 10-11)

"Then the LORD said, 'You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. ¹¹ Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?'"

The story now reaches its climax. To demonstrate how out of sync Jonah's heart was with His, God contrasts Jonah's attitude with His own. God contrasts their compassion. Jonah had become completely indifferent to the fate of the Ninevites. As we noted in v. 2, Jonah knew his God well. Nevertheless his appreciation for God's love for Israel had evidently so pervaded his life that it crowded out any compassion for these people who lacked knowledge of and relationship with God. To reveal his lack of compassion to Jonah God dealt with him as any ordinary person. He exposed him to the pleasures and discomforts that everyone faces and made

him see that his theology made him no more compassionate than anyone else. It should have. Knowledge of a sovereign, compassionate God whom He feared should have made Jonah more submissive to God's will, more compassionate toward other people, and more respectful of God.

However, Jonah's compassion extended only to the plant and not the people. God's compassion extended not only to the plant, and by implication Jonah, but to the people of Nineveh as well. The 120,000 people that God cited as the special objects of His compassion were probably the entire populace that did not know how to escape their troubles. The expression "**do not know the difference between their right and left hand**" is a Hebrew idiom, meaning lacking in knowledge and innocent in this sense. They were morally ignorant. Though responsible for their wickedness, they did not have the same advantage of divine revelation that Jonah had.

The reference to animals concludes the book and is the final climax of God's lesson to Jonah and through him to God's people in Israel and in the church. If God has compassion for animals, and He does, how much more should we feel compassion for human beings made in God's image who are under His judgment because of their sins. We must never let our concern for the welfare of God's people keep us from reaching out with the message of hope to those who oppose us.

The book closes without giving us Jonah's response, but that is not the point of the book. The point is the answer to the Lord's question in verse 11 that every reader must give. Yes, God should have compassion on the hopeless Ninevites, and we should have compassion on people like them too.⁴

B. H. Carroll noted, "This is a beautiful lesson of God's attitude toward the irresponsible and gives us a splendid Old Testament view of God's attribute of mercy."⁵

⁴ This section from Dr. Thomas Constable's *Notes on Jonah*.

⁵ B. H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible*, vol. 2, "Jonah," 33.