

Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Disturbing Grace

Jonah 4

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Now take your Bibles in hand please and turn to Jonah chapter 4, page 775 in our church Bibles. Jonah chapter 4. Before we read let's turn to God together as we pray. Let's pray.

O Lord, You have given to us this treasure in earthen vessels, this Gospel - precious, wonderful, arresting, glorious, good news for the world. We confess to You, our Lord and God, that we often do not prize it nor thrill at its sound nor rejoice in the knowledge that You have provided for wayward rebel sinners full and free forgiveness in Jesus. We easily take it for granted and we regularly, perhaps even mostly, keep it to ourselves. We're glad of the Gospel for ourselves but we are slow to share it with the world. Would You have mercy on us? Would You have mercy on us and deal with our hearts and captivate us again with the wonder of the Gospel of grace that we may love the world enough to proclaim the gift of Your Son knowing that You have loved the world so much that You would freely give Him for the world? Wield Your Word in our hearts to that effect we pray tonight, in Jesus' name, amen.

Jonah chapter 4, reading from verse 1. You will remember Jonah has been preaching in Nineveh, the people of Nineveh have repented - verse 10 of chapter 3, "God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, and he relented from the disaster that he said he would do to them and he did not do it." Chapter 4 verse 1:

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?'

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken to us in His holy and inerrant Word.

A Perfect Ending?

We come tonight to the climax of our studies in the book of Jonah. Next Lord's Day Evening, as I said, we will be beginning a short six-week series of evangelistic messages to which we hope you will be prayerful and invite friends and neighbors to come and hear the Gospel. And in many ways, that sequence of six messages follows the teaching of the book of Jonah rather well. Jonah's story is the story, after all, of perhaps the most reluctant evangelist of all time. Maybe you can relate to that. The thought of inviting your friends to come to church and hear the Gospel may well fill you with dread. For his part, Jonah was sent, remember, to preach to pagan Nineveh. But instead of obedience he ran away instead. And as we have seen, God has had to lead Jonah by the rockiest of roads back again. But by the end of chapter 3, Jonah's waywardness notwithstanding, a great awakening has swept through the city in response to his ministry. The people, the pagans of Nineveh have responded to the message and they have turned from their evil ways and sought the forgiveness of God and God has relented from the judgment He had said He would pour out upon them for their sin.

And if you think about it, wouldn't that have been the perfect ending to the story? Especially as we look for some encouragement in this whole area of evangelism ourselves? "Jonah ran away but God arrested him and brought him back and then at last Jonah began to be an obedient evangelist and he began to preach and Nineveh repented and so God saved them. The end. Beautiful!" It's a beautiful story. It moves as every good story should from crisis to resolution, from Jonah's rebellion all the way to his obedience, from Nineveh's impending destruction all the way to its immediate deliverance. It's a perfect narrative arc. If

we're looking for encouragement to be faithful witnesses ourselves as we prepare for a season of evangelism as a church, a story that ends at Jonah chapter 3 verse 10 would have done the job nicely, don't you think? Here is God saving Nineveh through the witness of even the most reluctant evangelist - that's me; that's you. God used him, his waywardness nonetheless, and He can use you too.

Isn't that encouraging? It'd be a great ending to the book of Jonah but that's not at all how it ends, is it? In fact, chapter 4 has to be one of the most disappointing chapters in Holy Scripture. After all he's been through, after all God has taught him, after all God has done to him and then through him in the city of Nineveh, after all of that still Jonah doesn't get it. Still he's locked in the old patterns of xenophobia and racism and ethnic and religious superiority. His besetting sin, dormant, subdued while preaching to Nineveh in chapter 3 to be sure, now suddenly flares up again in chapter 4 and Jonah spirals into a darker place than even his disastrous flight to Tarshish precipitated. What a disappointment chapter 4 is. I mean, what kind of way is this to end a book designed to remind us that salvation belongs to the Lord, that evangelism is our calling, that the nations are our mission field. The last word of the book, look at it, at least in English is "cattle." What kind of ending is that?

Jonah 4: A Call to Spiritual Inventory

It's hardly an encouragement to go with the good news to our city - a parting word about cows - but actually, actually Jonah chapter 4, as we think about reaching out, ending like this while hardly the happy-ever-after ending we might prefer, actually Jonah chapter 4 is much more realistic. It spoils the nice, neat ending no doubt, no question. Jonah doesn't come out looking like a hero at the end of the book. Instead, the real ugliness of his heart is laid bare for all to see. It's an uncomfortable chapter. It's supposed to be. It does not let us off the hook. It presses relentlessly on our hearts the vital questions that remain unresolved for Jonah and may remain unresolved for all of us. Jonah, remember, had been an effective preacher in the court of Israel's King Jehoshaphat. He was a man with a respected career already, a proven track record in ministry, and now he's been used by God as the human instrument of a mighty revival and awakening in the vast urban sprawl of wicked Nineveh. Jonah was an evangelistic success story. He's a man our Missions Pastor Search Committee might want to interview. But chapter 4 shows us that for all his outward accomplishments and his ministerial gifts, his inner life is a mess; it's a mess. God may use us wonderfully, you know, in the lives of others; that doesn't mean there isn't still a great deal of unresolved sin in our own hearts also. Jonah's public successes can't make up for or hide his private sin. While part of the lesson of Jonah's story certain is to call us to reach out with the Gospel to people not like ourselves, to learn as it seems now Jonah never really did, to love our own great pagan city and tell its citizens both the bad news and the good news. That is part of the message of the book of

Jonah. But the rest of the story, chapter 4, is much, much more personal than that.

God will not let us get away with public service as a cloak for private sin. We can't hide behind our works of service in the church and for the kingdom as though they could somehow obscure God's sight of the real condition of our hearts. Diligence and effectiveness in public duties is no substitute for faithfulness and purity in private godliness. So Jonah chapter 4 asks us to examine ourselves. As we prepare to reach out to others, Jonah 4 wants us to do some spiritual stocktaking, to do spiritual inventory in our own hearts lest after having shared the good news with others we make shipwreck ourselves.

Do notice with me how the chapter is structured, how it's put together, just for a moment. It's composed in three great movements, beginning and then ending with an interview between God and Jonah. And between those two bookends is a kind of enacted parable, a little object lesson God uses to work on Jonah's wrong thinking and his hard heart. So this is a play in three acts. Each act exposing our hearts to the contradictions that plague them. In verses 1 to 3 we see the first contradiction. It is grace confessed but rejected. Confessed but rejected grace. The second contradiction in 4 to 9, providence enjoyed but ignored. Providence enjoyed but ignored. And then the final contradiction in verses 10 and 11, love felt but misplaced. Love felt but misplaced.

I. Grace Confessed, but Rejected

Let's think about verses 1 to 3 first - grace confessed but rejected. Jonah is angry at God, verse 1. Notice his self-justifying, accusatory tone in verse 2 as he begins to pray. "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was yet in my country? This is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish! I told you this is what was going to happen but would You listen to me? Oh no!!" Jonah is wagging his finger at God. He's become so self-absorbed, so filled with self-pity, so consumed with himself that he has forgotten to whom he is speaking. Notice especially the grounds of his frustration here. Why was he so sure this was going to happen? Look at the text. "For I knew - you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster." It is possibly the most conflicted contradictory confession of faith in the Bible. It's all true of course, wonderfully, gloriously true. This is God; in fact Jonah is quoting Scripture here. These are the very words of God describing Himself first used Exodus 34 and verse 67 when God passed before Moses on Mount Sinai. He declared of Himself that He is a God slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And they echo, they occur again and again throughout the Old Testament Scriptures - Numbers 14:18, 2 Chronicles 30 and verse 9, Nehemiah 9:17 and 31, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103 verse 8, Psalm 111 verse 4, 145 verse 8, Joel 2:13. Again and again and again they echo throughout the whole Bible. It is one of the great summary statements of the character of God. Jonah is confessing truths here

that stand at the core of a vital orthodox faith in the one, true, and living God.

But do you notice that as he confesses God's grace and mercy, His patience and love, His readiness to turn aside from wrath and show mercy and save instead of destroy, as he confesses all of that it comes to his lips as a complaint not as grounds for praise. It is a complaint. "God, You're gracious, You save sinners, You love showing mercy, and I am so angry about it I could die." That's what he says in verse 3. "Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me for it is better for me to die than live." Jonah loves the idea of the love of God, grace is a precious concept to him, but only in so far as the love and grace of God are turned towards Israel. The moment they turn towards Israel's enemies, Nineveh, well now suddenly God's grace is a problem not a prize. His love is a source of frustration to Jonah, not a source of joy. Jonah confesses the doctrine of grace, doesn't he, but he denies the reality of it. He confesses the theology of grace but he has no room for the work of it. He's happy with grace as long as it stays within the boundaries Jonah's own comfort levels have established. Jonah has forgotten the lesson that Lucy learned from Mr. Beaver, remember, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, famous incident? Hearing about the great lion, you remember what she asked? "Is he quite safe?" "Safe?" comes the reply. "Safe? Of course he's not safe, but he's good." That's grace, isn't it? Untamable. Untamable. Not safe. Breaking our bounds. Spilling over our comfort zones. Always good; never safe. How easy it is to confess a truth we have no room for the reality of. To confess the truth that we have no room for the reality of. To use orthodox theology to cloak unchanged hearts.

Sound Theology, yet an Unchanged Heart

Doesn't the dreadful way Jonah uses the Bible here especially remind us that good doctrine is no immunization against arrogance, that truth is no antidote to narrowness? Jonah, Jonah is a fine theologian. His doctrine of God is impeccable. He confesses the character of God with precise fidelity to Biblical revelation but it is a confession utterly incompatible with his racism and exclusivity and pride. Jonah loves his own people more than he loves the Gospel of free grace. And so much is that the case that when the untamable grace of God reaches Ninevite hearts Jonah is apoplectic. We're being reminded that grace confessed is not good enough if it's not also grace embraced. If Gospel truth is something you take pride in knowing but you never share, you may well have fallen into the sin of Jonah. Grace is for the world. It is for other people.

Let's have a moment of honesty with ourselves before God here shall we? What class or group of people in our society do you find it most difficult to trust or relate to, however you define that group? Maybe it's racial or economic or educational or professional or political. Or maybe it's more personal than that. You were abused, so the thought of grace for abusers is beyond you. You've watched a loved one drink themselves to death and so grace for alcoholics is beyond you. Perhaps homosexuality promotes a visceral hostility within you. Which group of

people do you find it hardest to trust, to be around, to talk to, to want to know? Be honest. What if next Sunday they were sitting in your seat when you showed up for church? What happens in your heart? What if our church began to fill up with people like that - our beloved church, our beautiful sanctuary? What happens in your heart? Is there room in your Gospel for them? Is there room in your Gospel that you might become the agent of grace in their lives? Would you talk? Would you do the hard work of building a relationship? Or is grace just for you and only those of whom you approve? That was Jonah's problem, wasn't it? Beware of grace confessed but denied. It is an ugly sin of the heart and it is being displayed in Jonah chapter 4 for all to see.

II. Providence Enjoyed, but Ignored

Then secondly look with me at verses 4 to 9. First grace confessed but denied, then secondly providence enjoyed but ignored. Jonah's prayer is answered in verse 4 with a question from the mouth of God. "Do you do well to be angry, Jonah?" Here is the finger of God pressing into the festering wound of Jonah's sin. "Do you do well to be angry? Look at your heart, Jonah!" Jonah, I think here, has fingers in his ears. He is not listening. He does not answer. Instead he marches out of the city in a fit of high dudgeon and builds a makeshift lean-to, sits in the shade, and then starts the stopwatch; let's the countdown begin. Forty days, twenty, ten, nine, five... God does not destroy the city of Nineveh; He saves it. And Jonah is plunged into the darkness of his anger and despair. And then comes the divine object lesson. Three times we read the phrase, "God appointed" - verse 6, verse 7, verse 8. It's the same verb used back in chapter 1 verse 17 when the Lord appointed the great fish to swallow Jonah. It's a word designed to highlight the absolute sovereignty of God extending over all His creatures and all their actions as He works in providence to order all things according to the counsel of His own will.

And this time God appointed first a plant. If you read the commentators, they waste endless ink trying to identify this particular plant. On and on and on they go! We don't know about the plant, okay? Don't ask me afterwards; I can't help you! There was a plant and it grew up and covered Jonah with shade and Jonah was thrilled about it. And then the next day God appointed a worm to eat the plant so that it would wither. And then when the sun is beginning to pound on Jonah's head, He appointed the sirocco wind, the deadly, desiccating desert wind to sweep over his pathetic lean-to. And Jonah feels his strength ebbing away; he grows faint. Understand what is happening. Jonah is not a little hot and sweaty. Jonah is in danger now, real danger. These are brutal, dangerous conditions. Once again God brings Jonah to the very brink of death, only this time, unlike his previous experience, remember sinking under the storm to the roots of the mountains, to the gates of Sheol, the realm of the dead, this time Jonah doesn't cry for mercy; he is utterly obstinate. "I want to die! I've had it with a world where God does things like this and shows mercy to people like this!"

Providence: A Giver of Comfort and a Teacher of Discipline

And then, just then, verse 9, the challenge comes again, doesn't it? "Do you do well to be angry about the plant, Jonah?" You remember he'd been, verse 6, "exceedingly glad because of the plant God gave him." And when it was taken away he was furious. He had enjoyed the benefits. He was comforted. It eased his discomfort verse 6 tells us. He enjoyed the comforts providence provided but he was unwilling to listen to the lessons providence was teaching. There's another warning for us, isn't it? Providence is often comforting but its design is for more than our comfort. It's also instructive. God is a teacher. We are too quick sometimes to run to Romans 8:28 and not nearly quick enough to run to Hebrews 12:9. We're so glad that "for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose" - Romans 8:28. But we also forget so often that in God's providence we are to "endure hardship as discipline because God is treating us as sons" - Hebrews 12:9. God is teaching us in His providence and we need to learn to listen, to listen to the lessons as well as find comfort and reassurance in the truth. The fact is that providence is a teacher and sometimes the lessons are hard.

Actually, Hebrews 12 goes on to say something startling in verse 11. Listen to this. "For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." Let that last phrase sink in for a moment. It is possible, Hebrews is saying, to endure the providential discipline of the Lord and not bear fruit because we weren't trained by it, we didn't learn, we weren't listening. The lessons that providence teaches have gone completely over our heads; we've missed them altogether. Not instructed by providential rebukes, only willing for providential comforts. There is, I think, a word here for all of us as we are called to share the Gospel with the world. Perhaps especially there's a word for those of us in or training for Gospel ministry. Understand what God is really doing. Here's the lesson God is teaching in the hard blows of a frowning providence - He's doing sermon preparation in your life. That's what He's doing. He's shaping the preacher and the preaching. He's crafting a useable servant as He wields the surgical instrument of providential trial. If we are to be mature and effective instruments in the Master's hand as we pray and as we reach out to our city we need to bear the peaceful fruit of righteousness having been well trained by the disciplinary hand of God in providence.

III. Love Felt, but Misplaced

Grace confessed but rejected, providence enjoyed but ignored, and then the last contradiction in Jonah's heart there is love felt but misplaced. Look at verses 10 and 11 please. God asks Jonah if he's right to be angry about the plant that died. And Jonah's indignant in his response. "Angry? Angry? Yes, I'm right to be

angry! I'm angry enough to die!" The truth is, Jonah had no right to the plant, did he? It was all a gift of undeserved grace. It was nothing but a misguided sense of entitlement that made Jonah resentful when the plant was taken away. He had no right to be angry, none at all. Who are you, old man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this? Has the potter no right over the clay?'" - Romans 9:20-21. Jonah has no grounds for dissatisfaction at all. God is the Lord; Jonah is His creature. Jonah cannot call God into his own tribunal and put Him in the dock as the accused and himself on the bench as the judge.

And so God's answer in verse 11 makes all of that plain to Jonah. Look at it please, verse 11. "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. You didn't earn the plant. You didn't grow the plant. The plant was all gift and still you're upset that it's gone. Shouldn't 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? I made them. I'm their God. I'm their Lord. They are mine. They depend on Me. Ought I not to have pity on them? Don't I have rights as the potter over the clay? Am I not free to have mercy on whom I shall have mercy?" It's a rebuke, actually echoed by the Lord Jesus in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20. Remember the story? Each worker labors for different hours in the vineyard but each is paid the same at the end of the day. And when someone complains, Jesus makes the master of the house reply, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me or do you begrudge my generosity?"

The Love of God for the Nations

That's the force of the rebuke to Jonah's heart here isn't it? Jonah begrudges God's generosity. "You're not wrong to love fervently and feel strongly, Jonah. You just love the wrong things. You love your own comforts. You love your own people. You love a God who conforms to your own expectations. Your problem is not a lack of love, Jonah; it is misplaced love that's your problem. I love the nations. I love the lost. I love Nineveh," God is saying to him. It's a love just glimpsed here in Jonah, isn't it? It does find its supreme expression at the cross of our Savior, the Lord Jesus. Here is the God of covenant love, a God gracious and merciful indeed, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; a God who relents from disaster and here He is, made flesh, nailed to the tree, that people from every tribe and language and nation might be gathered into His kingdom. Jesus died that Ninevites and Jacksonians might find a home in His family. The measure of the love of God for the nations is ultimately the cross of Jesus Christ. Romans 15:9 - "Jesus came in order that the Gentiles, that the nations, might glorify God for His mercy." That's what the cross was about - to bring into His kingdom men and women, boys and girls, from every tribe and language and nation under heaven.

What do you love more than your neighbor that you'd put before the great need of their souls for Jesus? Your reputation? Your comfortable life? Your undisturbed relationships? God calls Jonah to give up his misplaced pity and learn to pity the nations instead. He calls him to give up his misplaced love - love for himself, for his own comforts - and love to love like God loves, like Christ loves. This is a call to a cruciform love; a love that gives and goes and serves and sacrifices for the sake of the lost.

Lesson Learned?

There is one last question that remains unanswered - Did Jonah learn his lesson? It's been asked of me more than once during this series of expositions. Sometimes it's pointed out the only person who could really have told the story of Jonah is Jonah himself. Perhaps that means Jonah did learn and he did repent in the end. But the truth is, we really don't know, at least not from the text of Jonah. We really don't know. Did he come to love the lost with something that echoed the love of God? Who knows? In the end that's not really the point and it's not the question Jonah 4 wants us to ask. The real question is not, "Did Jonah learn his lesson?" The real question is, "Will you? Will you learn the lesson? Will you learn the lessons providence has been teaching you? Will you give up being satisfied with knowing truth but never sharing it? Will you learn to love this great city in which we live, in which there are more than 175,000 souls, many of whom do not know the Gospel of Jesus Christ?" Those are the questions Jonah presses upon us. Are you Jonah, are you listening, and will you learn the lessons God is teaching?

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we praise You that unlike Jonah who was reluctant to go to Nineveh and angry when You began to save them, the greater than Jonah, the Lord Jesus, gladly came and gave His life for the world. And we are the beneficiaries of it. We have received grace, undeserved and free. O have mercy on us anew that the grace we have received might be grace we freely proclaim, that this great city might know of Your saving love in Jesus because of our witness. Make us bold to share Christ with the world and to learn the lessons that Your Word and Your providence teach. For we ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

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