

Understanding and Embracing God's Grand Mission: A Missional God

Jonah 4:1-11

By [Rev. Michael Campbell](#)

Amen. Good morning. It's good to be here with you today, and may the Lord bless us as we look at His word. Would you please bow your heads with me in a word of prayer as we ask the Lord to help us as we read and begin to reflect upon His word. Pray with me.

Our Father God, as we once again settle our hearts and come to Your throne of grace in prayer, we do so, Lord, mindful that You are good and that You hear and answer the prayers of Your people; that, Lord, You have redeemed us by the blood of Christ; that we are Your children, and as we call out to our Father, You do answer. And our prayer even now, Lord, once again is for You to help us. We need it. Lord, help us to know Your will. Help us to rightly study Your word. Help us, Lord, to have minds and hearts that are open to be led and directed by You. Lord, prick our consciences this morning and draw us closer. Help us to know Your mind. Help us, Lord, to reflect Your will in service and ministry and missions. And so, Lord, today as Your word is read and then preached, guide us by the working of Your Spirit. Give to Your servant this morning insight and clarity of thought and speech, and boldness in the proclamation of the gospel. May You, dear Lord, do Your work in the hearts of Your people. And, Father, even if there's one here today that doesn't have a relationship with You, O Lord, may they hear the glorious grace of Christ and turn in faith to You. Thank You, Lord, for this time. Bless us now, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you would, please open your Bibles with me this morning to Jonah, chapter four. I'm going to be reading the entirety of chapter four of Jonah, from verse 1 down through verse 11. Let me begin though by setting the context for what we're going to be reading by looking at verse 10 of the previous chapter...chapter three, verse 10...before reading the text for today. In verse 10 of chapter three, we read this:

“When God saw what they [the Ninevites] did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that He said He would do to them, and He did not do it.”

Now here's our text for this morning, beginning in 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?”

May the Lord bless the preaching and hearing, and now our response, to His wonderful word.

Jonah, as you know, is one of the best known books in the Bible. I am certain that all of you probably know this book backwards and forwards. If you grew up in the church, you probably learned it from the time you were just this small. We know this story. We also know that the story of Jonah is one of the great missionary stories that we find in the Bible, one of the greatest ever told. And the reason is obvious. Here's the example of someone in the Old Testament who was sent out by God to preach and proclaim God's word, and the result of Jonah's preaching is magnificent —maybe the greatest response ever seen to the preaching of the word.

If you jump back up just to chapter 3 and you look at verses 4 and 5, notice what it says: that Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. It took three days to get through Nineveh...a day's journey, even, and he called out,

“Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” (Not the most seeker-sensitive of sermons.)

“...And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on

sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.”

By any measure standard, that's a pretty impressive response to the preaching of God's word. Most of us preachers would long for even a little bit, even partial response to the preaching of God's word that we see here in this response. This is a great, great story — a great missional story. I can imagine many of you love to read mission accounts, and love to read of the great adventures of missionaries, and this account is one of those kinds of stories. It is extraordinary. But the truth is what makes this particular story great isn't the missionary, it's his God. This is a story about our missional God, about His heart; and in fact, that is where missions must begin and end, in the heart of God. John Stott makes this statement about missions:

“Missions arises from the heart of God himself and is communicated from His heart to ours. Mission is the global outreach of the global people of a global God.”

That's a great definition of what mission is: the global outreach of the global people of a global God. Our God is a missional God. A global God is on mission; therefore, when we talk about missions it is important for us to understand that missions isn't just something that we came up with. Missions isn't something that we just decided to do. Missions isn't just something that would allow us to have Mission Conferences once a year and support missionaries. All that is important, all of that is great, but if that's all missions is to you then it's a lot like eating icing with no cake...or gravy with no mashed potatoes. I like icing; I like gravy; but I don't eat those things by themselves. We need to get to the essence of what missions really is, and it is about God.

Christopher Wright, in his book entitled *The Mission of God*, makes this statement. He says, “Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission - God's mission.” God's mission. That God is on mission, and that you and I have the great privilege of being a part of that. And so the fact is, then, if we were to only know Him better, to know the missional God better, then it would seem that it would then be unavoidable that missional living and missional thinking would become the reality of the church. Let me say that another way. The better we know God and the more consistently we are willing to follow God, then the more missional we should become.

But that actually puts before us what is really the challenge of this book and the challenge of this chapter, in that as we reflect upon Jonah and Jonah 4 what we see is this: we see the missional heart of God. That's clearly on display, and I'll show you that in just a moment. But what we also see here is the prophet of God, Jonah, who only partially and reluctantly got that. And that should challenge us because, like us, Jonah knew God. Like us, Jonah knew what God was like, but he didn't consistently live that out in his practice. Do we?

As we think about this whole book, and as we think particularly about this chapter, you see two things in Jonah that stand out that Jonah understood and knew about the character of God. He knew these things; and both of these things, if fully embraced by us, make us missional people. He knew that God was both sovereign and merciful. Jonah got that. He knew that about God, that God is a sovereign God, that God is a merciful God. And Jonah knew this not just simply as head knowledge. He didn't just know it as a theological abstraction, he knew it in his head but it also had somehow taken his life. He understood it as he had personally experienced these attributes of God. And so if we were to go back to the beginning of the book of Jonah and think about God commanding Jonah to go to Nineveh, he runs away. The text tells us that God hurled this wind, this great storm upon the sea, and it almost caused the wreck of the ship that he was on. And the sailors that were with him were afraid, and as a result, they cast lots and they found out that Jonah was responsible for that. They approached Jonah, and Jonah introduced himself in this way in Jonah 1:9. "I am a Hebrew," he said. "And I fear the Lord." And listen to how he describes the Lord — Yahweh. "I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

Now what is he saying? What he's saying is 'I know God. Here's who He is. He is the Lord of heaven, and He is the creator of the sea and the dry land.' In other words, Jonah is affirming right there his understanding of who God is. God is the sovereign creator of all things.

But it wasn't, again, just that Jonah knew this here; he had experienced it. We see him experience the sovereignty of God even in chapter 4. Notice again what it says. If you look again at verse 6, down through verse 8:

Now the Lord God appointed... [Important word, *appointed!*] ...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.

Notice the repetition of ideas. God appointed...God appointed...God appointed...God appointed...God appointed...God appointed. This isn't the first time this language comes up. If you go back to Jonah 1, you will remember when they tossed him overboard, God *appointed* a fish that swallowed him, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. And now God *appoints*. This is what Jonah is experiencing. God appointed a plant; God appointed a worm; God appointed a scorching east wind. Jonah knew of God's sovereignty. He could declare it with his lips, he knew it in his mind and head, but he had also experienced the sovereignty of God. As a matter of fact, when he complains — and he does here — when he complains, notice when he says, "I would rather die than live," he's not complaining to himself. He's not complaining to Mother

Nature. He's actually complaining to God because he knew that God was the one ultimately responsible for all of this. Jonah knew the sovereignty of God, and he also knew here and in his life the mercy of God.

You know, after he sees that Nineveh is going to repent, notice what the text says in verse 2:

“And he prayed to the Lord, and he 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...for I knew that You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.” Notice what Jonah said he knew. He knew. He knew that God was gracious. He knew that God was and is merciful. He knew that God is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, relenting from disaster.

Now how in the world did he know that? Well, in fact, the prophet knew his Bible. He knew his Bible, and this language that he uses here is not the first time that you see this in the Bible. You could go back and run through the Old Testament and find it. One of the instances you find it is in Exodus 34:6-7, where Moses there says [and notice the similarity of the words]:

“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin....”

But that's not the only place in the Old Testament you find that. You could go through the Old Testament and find it multiple places: II Chronicles 39; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 145:8; Joel 2:13. On and on, Jonah knew the word, and therefore he knew that God is merciful and gracious. In other words, Jonah had an orthodox theology. Jonah was a Calvinist before Calvin! He got it. He got it here.

But he also had experienced God's grace. Just like he knew of the sovereignty of God, he had experienced the sovereignty of God, he knew the grace of God and he had experienced the grace of God. He experiences it here.

This plant...he knew this plant was from God. God appointed the plant. Jonah built the booth. He had nothing to do with the plant. God grew the plant. As a matter of fact, when God speaks to him in verse 10, notice what He says:

“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.”

That plant was the mercy and the grace and the kindness of God. He was experiencing it there. He had already experienced it when he was thrown over

that ship and that fish was there to swallow him. Remember what he said from the belly of the whale? He cried out, "Salvation belongs to the Lord."

Here is a prophet. He knew and he experienced sovereignty. Here's a prophet who knew and experienced grace. He knew it. And so do we. If there are two theological realities that bode true and define us as Reformed folk, they are these two things, are they not? The sovereignty and the grace of God. I mean, we are Calvinists. We are Presbyterian. We understand the five points of Calvinism. We understand the doctrines of grace. We understand that if we are saved we are only saved by God's sovereign electing purposes. We know that it's about Him and not about us. We love the words of Abraham Kuiper when he said there is not one square inch where God does not cry, "Mine!" That's our heart. Sovereignty...grace. We get it, here. We've experienced it. We know it. And yet, in the case of Jonah — and many times with us — there are those moments in our lives where it becomes extraordinarily difficult for this to be practically lived out in certain situations with us.

You know, the fact is Jonah — think about this — he knew God's character, but he didn't reflect it here. That's part of the tragedy of this book, that God's sovereignty and grace should have led this prophet willingly and joyfully towards Nineveh. It should have made him a joyful missionary, a willing missionary...but it didn't. No, sovereignty means that God has absolute right and absolute authority, absolute freedom to work with whomever He wishes, whenever He wishes, wherever He wishes, and to call you and me to get on board with that agenda. The people may be our enemies, as is the case here. They may be those that you and I want nothing to do with. They may be those that we despise and look down upon, but God extends His grace to broken, miserable, sick people...the unlovable. Those are kinds that we would rather avoid and maybe have nothing to do with, or wish they didn't even exist anymore. That's what Jonah felt about Nineveh. That's what he wanted for Nineveh. That's why he ran, according to verse 2, to Tarshish in the opposite direction from what God had called him to do, because he knew something about God. He knew that God's grace...if it really was grace, it would not be confined to Israel. He knew that. He knew that God's mercy would extend beyond the parameters of Israel; it would go beyond to Israel's enemies and even to the nation (Assyria) that was going to destroy Israel. He knew that. He knew God's mercy in that way. That's why he didn't want any part of it.

And so notice verse 1 again, that the thing about verse 1 is that it's one of these brutally honest verses that shows how wrong we can be. Notice what it says: "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry." Well, what displeased him? Well, the fact that Nineveh repented. The fact that God was going to relent. That displeased him. This could literally be translated like this: "It was an exceeding evil to Jonah, and he burned with anger." In other words, when he saw this it wasn't just simply a matter of him being somewhat displeased with what happened and got a little bit irritated with God. That's not what's being said here.

He actually saw this response — their response of repentance, God's response to relent — he saw this as an evil, and it made him so angry that if you go on to verse 3, notice what he says. Right after talking about who God is, verse 3 says, “Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” This isn't just a pity party on his part. What he's saying is this: ‘God, if You're going to be like this...if You're going to be this gracious, this kind, to even those that I would see as enemies...if You're going to be like this, then I might as well die than to live.’

Now we hear that, and immediately we respond by going, “That's just awful! That's horrible to think that, and there's no way in the world I could possibly ever think that. And there's no way in the world I would ever say anything like that to God.” But before you move past it and think that that can't be you, let's let it land a little bit closer to home. Think about it in a slightly different way.

If you were to go into the New Testament, one of the parables that you know so well is the parable of the prodigal son. You remember that story. You remember what happened. When the younger son took his inheritance and he went off and squandered it in all kinds of sinful living, he came to his senses and he came back. And what did the father do? The father graciously received him back, and he put on this banquet. Fatted calf for the younger brother. And the older brother was invited in. And in Luke 15:28 it says this: the older brother was angry, and he refused to go in. Why was he angry? He was angry because his father was gracious to someone that he felt was unworthy of it...gracious for someone he felt unworthy.

Now as soon as those words come out of my mouth you should be thinking, “That doesn't sound right.” How could you be unworthy of grace? You see, it's tweaking the understanding of it. I mean, grace is to the unworthy. It's for the undeserving. It's unmerited favor from God. In other words, you can never find anyone that you could actually look at and say that somehow they're unworthy if you're not talking to yourself! All of us are unworthy! Without exception, all of us are unworthy.

Somehow what happens is we can build this...C.S. Lewis describes it as sort of an inner ring that we find ourselves in, and everybody else is on the outside. Or we put certain people on the outside of the inner ring, and so we kind of understand that we're unworthy of it, but they're really unworthy; and they're so unworthy that, you know, grace can't go to them. And just think about who that may be to you. Someone who has done you wrong; someone who has hurt you in your past; some enemy of yours; some group of people that you look at and you go, ‘They've had so many chances, so many opportunities; why don't they make themselves right?’ Some group that we put on the out as being unworthy of grace, whoever that may be. And in our heart of hearts, what we do is we disdain God's sovereign grace being poured upon them, if it means we have to do it. And if that's where we are, we're standing in opposition to our missional calling. We

can't get it then. We can't live it consistently. We won't follow through on it.

This is where Jonah was. This is what caused him to run. This is why he's sulking in this particular passage. And we can be right there. And if we are, we need to hear how God confronts Jonah, how He challenges Jonah. And He does it by asking him three questions. And the reason He asks these questions is because the questions get at the heart, the questions get at what's going on in the inside. The questions begin to dig under the surface as to what actually is happening in Jonah.

And you see the first question if you look again with me at verse 4: "And the Lord said, 'Do you do well to be angry?'" Now Jonah doesn't answer that question, but this question is key because what He's actually saying to Jonah here is this: 'Jonah, do you actually think you are justified in being angry? Do you actually think that what you are considering about this is right, and My way is wrong?' That's a question that all of us have to think about. I mean, in the midst of these times when God's grace goes to the broken, to the miserable, to the sinner, to the enemy, to whomever...and we're going, 'No!' we're right here. God's asking us, 'Do you think your way is better than Mine?'

Notice the second question, verse 9: "But God said to Jonah, 'Do you do well to be angry for the plant?'" Now this is right after the object lesson of the plant and what God had done in raising it up, bringing it down, pouring the scorching east wind upon his head. "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he answers this time. "Yes, I do well to be angry enough to die." Jonah answers this time. His answer is important to think about because it begins now to flesh out where he is in his self-centeredness and the way that it's okay for kindness to be shown to him, but not someone else; that he somehow is deserving of this. And in one way, Jonah stands here as a type for Israel because Israel got into that bondage, that trap, that mindset of actually thinking that somehow they had become worthy of God's mercy; that somehow they had become worthy of God's grace. But in fact, for Jonah, for Israel...for you, for me, for our churches...we are no more worthy...Israel was no more worthy...than Nineveh.

Here's something that Jonah had forgot, and Israel had forgot. It's what Moses writes in Deuteronomy 7:6 and 8 when he says this:

"The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession out of all the people on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set His love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping His oath that He swore to your fathers."

Do you hear what he's saying there? He's saying to Israel, 'It wasn't because you were great; it wasn't because you were mighty; it wasn't because you were this huge number of people. You weren't anybody! I loved you because I am loving. I

loved you because I am gracious. I loved you because I am merciful. You are unworthy of this. You are unworthy of this kindness...and you have it.'

In Christ, you have it. The absolute wrong response to grace is to ever think that we deserve that and others don't. The only way for you and me to truly be the missional people that we're called to be is to understand on a daily basis how much we need and are recipients of the grace of God; that we're constantly drawn back to the gospel of grace every day, every moment, every second; that the gospel wasn't something that just got you into the kingdom, it keeps you day in and day out; that we're always unworthy of this, and it's always being showered down upon us. And that understanding of grace, what it does is it gives us different eyes for the broken. Maybe that's a family member. Maybe it's a neighbor. Maybe it's someone you work with or go to school with. Maybe it's a subordinate. Maybe it's a city that seems to be falling apart around us. Or a nation. Or a world. It levels us at the cross and gives us eyes towards the needy, because we know we are right there as well.

You know, God asked Jonah one more question, and it's in verse 11. Notice what He says:

“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?”

You know — the first question He asked Jonah, Jonah doesn't answer. The last question in this book — it's not answered. The book ends with this. It just ends with this question, right? So we don't know how Jonah responds. He doesn't say anything to this. It just ends with this. And the reason for that is important for us to understand. This question is a question that really rests before God's people through the centuries. It is a question that is before us even now: “Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city?”

You know, to pity isn't just to sympathize. To pity is a sympathy that acts. It's not from a distance. It engages. It responds. It is a heart that responds in missional love: “For God so loved the world that He gave....” He gave His only Son, that whoever believes on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

“Should not I pity Nineveh?” Should not I pity...Jackson? Should not I pity...it's just a blank. You fill it in. That person. That group of people. That whomever. Should I not pity? When we begin to understand how much God has pitied us and live that way; when we begin to really understand how much God has been gracious to us; when we truly begin to understand how unworthy we are of His constant and continual mercy and love and kindness and compassion that is showered upon you each and every day of your life.... You have it right now. You're gathered here in worship because you know it's here for you. You know that grace is here for you. You know that kindness is here for you. When you get

that, your need for it every day, it can do nothing else but push you out to a people who are equally in need with the only answer, the only hope — and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ, His grace. That's what makes us missional, getting the heart of God not just in our heads, not just something we've experienced, but something that moment by moment defines us — as sinners in need of grace. That's the gospel. That's the missional life.

Pray with me.

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