

The End of the Matter

Jonah 4

Tonight we've come to the end of the book of Jonah and, as the title states, "the end of the matter." Tonight we see what this book is truly about, and the essential message for the church. In our text tonight we see the devastating discrepancy between Jonah's heart and the heart of God. God cared about Nineveh – Jonah cared about himself. Here we see the fatal sin of Israel, the besetting sin of the modern church, and the marvel of God's grace.

Collin Smith begins his chapter on this text with these words:

"The greatest challenge I face as a pastor is to wean Christians off a self-absorbed faith that views God as a resource to be drawn on in the pursuit of a picture-perfect life for 'me and my family.'" (Smith, 121)

The besetting sin of Jonah, Israel the nation, and the church today is a self-absorbed faith that doesn't see the world with the compassionate eyes of God.

In Jonah chapter 4 we see a battle of wills, a contest between what Jonah wants and what God wants. Consequently, our text begins with a jarring, unexpected word: "But." That should not be the first word to appear after 3:10. There we read about the miraculous, glorious grace of God as he responds to repentance with mercy, and rescues Nineveh from the judgment they deserved.

3:10 *When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*

You see? "But" should not be the next word. Chapter 4 should begin with a word like "Then" – "Then Jonah rejoiced before the Lord and sang a song." We have just such a song in chapter 2, when Jonah was miraculously and graciously delivered from his own death. Chapter 4 should be another song, this time praising God for his saving mercy to others.

But that isn't what we see in chapter 4. Instead we read,

"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry."

The Hebrew literally reads,

"It was evil to Jonah, a great evil and it burned him."

Jonah is not simply upset about God's grace to Nineveh, he's outraged. Furious.

And he's furious with God. His prayer, verse 2, is meant as an accusation:

4:2 *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."*

Jonah feels set up, betrayed. Jonah knows that God is a gracious God, slow to anger and relenting from disaster. That's why he didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. God just might relent from bringing disaster on the Ninevites – and that's the last thing in the world Jonah wanted. He wanted judgment for the Ninevites. He wanted destruction and wrath for them. He wanted this down to the marrow of his bones. They were the filthy, reprobate enemies of Israel. They raped Israelite women and killed Israelite men. They kidnapped Israeli children to offer up as sacrifices to their blasphemous pagan gods. They deserved nothing but the fire of hell. And Jonah was absolutely furious at the thought of God showing mercy to them – so angry that he asks God to take his life.

We mustn't be too quick to condemn Jonah. Jonah feels the evil of Nineveh deeply. He was born and raised in a village on the northern border of Israel. It is very possible, if not likely, that his hometown had experienced the devastating evil of a Ninevite war party. It's possible he had lost loved ones or knew those who had. This isn't theoretical for Jonah. It's personal.

Furthermore, Jonah has been taught that the world is neatly divided into two groups: Jews and Gentiles. God's people and God's enemies. And so, for God, Israel's God, to show mercy to Israel's fiercest enemy feels like betrayal. If God allows Nineveh to live, Jonah doesn't see how Israel will survive. And he is right. Forty years after this event, the Assyrians will annihilate the tribes of Israel and they will disappear from human history. The children of these Ninevites will murder, rape, and pillage the people of God.

And so, he stomps out of the city to a hill overlooking Nineveh, and set up a booth, waiting to see what God will do; hoping and praying that God will rescue Israel and destroy Assyria. Jonah the prophet has become Jonah the spectator. He looks out over a wicked world and prays for judgment to fall. God and his prophet are clearly at opposite ends.

So, what does God do for Jonah? He blesses him. But it's a blessing with a lesson attached.

4:6 *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.*

This is a noteworthy event! This is the first time in the story we read about Jonah being glad! And he isn't simply happy, he is "exceedingly glad." Why was Jonah so happy? God had

blessed him with shade. God gave him a gift. It was a clear evidence of God's compassion to him. And Jonah was delighted.

And then the Lord took it away. *"God appointed a worm that attacked the plant so that it withered."* The Lord gave, and the Lord took away. The writer wants us to see the direct, divine hand of God in all this. Notice the reoccurring use of the word "appoint." God **appointed** a worm to attack the plant so that it died. And then God **appointed** a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint.

One of the great struggles with being a biblical Christian is the struggle of God's sovereignty. Many of you have experienced that sovereignty in deeply painful ways. The Lord gave a pregnancy, and then he took it away. He gave health and then took it away. He gave success and then took it away. And God did it. We don't live in an accidental world. We live in an appointed one. And somehow, we have to come to terms with the God who is, the God who appoints things we would never choose.

How do we do that?

Our text doesn't give us the entire answer to that question, but it gives us the essential foundation. God asks Jonah to consider the reality of his grace and the reality of his sovereign right.

"Do you do well to be angry?" In the Hebrew, the emphasis is on "you." Do you, Jonah, do well to be angry? Do you, the recipient of grace upon grace, do well to be angry when I show grace to others?

Think of all the grace Jonah had received in his life:

- He was born a Hebrew, born into the covenant community. He could just have easily been born in Nineveh.
- He was the recipient of God's law - the light of the knowledge of God and his way. He didn't deserve that blessing. It was a gracious, undeserved gift of God to Israel.
- He was the beneficiary of God's saving acts in the past – the history of God's goodness to Israel was the story of God's goodness to Jonah. If God had never delivered Israel out of Egypt, he would be slave. If God hadn't listened to Moses' plea for mercy when Israel rebelled, Jonah would have never been born. Every material and spiritual blessing Jonah enjoyed, he enjoyed by the grace and mercy of God.

- He was the personal recipient of salvation by grace alone. God could have justly and rightfully drowned him in the sea for his rebellion. But God had delivered him.

Do you, Jonah, do well to complain about my grace to others when your whole life is a story of grace? Of course, the answer is "no" – but Jonah is angry and hurt, and he can't see it. And so, God gives and takes away, and then asks him again, "**Do you do well to be angry for the plant?**" "Yes, I do! Angry enough to die." He continues to feel justified in his anger.

And so the Lord asks him to consider the simple, irreducible goodness of God.

10-11 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?"

In all of Jonah's thoughts about God's dealings with Nineveh, he has never considered it from God's perspective. It's always been from his. God shows us the world as he sees it.

First, God reminds Jonah that He, the living God, is the Creator of men. And as the Creator, He reserves the right to deal with his creatures as he sees fit. It is part of the glory of God to reserve the right to show mercy to whomever he will. "I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Jonah thought that God should be on his side. But God doesn't take sides.

We hear today that God is always on the side of the oppressed. But that isn't true. Israel is the oppressed. Nineveh is the oppressor. God doesn't submit to our pre-conceived notions of sides. God takes God's side. Always.

Secondly, God wants us to know that he has compassion for this wicked, lost world.

"Should I not pity Nineveh?"

When Jonah looks at Nineveh, he sees wicked people doing wicked things. He sees the enemies of God's people intent on destroying God's nation. He sees people who hate God and are opposed to all that is good; people who are fully deserving of divine judgement.

When God looks at Nineveh, what does he see? God sees all that – but he sees more.

1. He sees people created by his hand, made in his image. People who, like the plant, are here today and gone tomorrow.

Ps. 103:15-16 The flower is withered by the wind that smites with blighting breath.

So man is quickly swept away before the blast of death.

2. He sees spiritual ignorance and blindness. These people don't know their right hand from their left. In other words, they are morally blind, stumbling about in spiritual darkness. Evil looks good to them. Righteousness looks oppressive. They love what is evil and hate what is good. And God has compassion. "Should I not pity these 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from the left?"

If you were a doctor treating a person with cancerous tumors on their face, you wouldn't simply recoil in disgust at the disfigured face. You would have compassion on them and would do all that you could do to treat the disease.

God has compassion on the wicked citizens of Nineveh. This doesn't mean they are without fault. The book of Nahum is a prophecy of God's judgment against Nineveh for their sin of destroying Israel. But God doesn't only see wicked sinners – he also sees helpless, lost, blind, ignorant, sin-captivated image bearers. And he has compassion on them.

There is a critical lesson here for us. We need to learn to see the world the way God sees it.

We tend to react to experiences according to how they impact us – how they help or hurt us, how they further or thwart our desires. But how often do we stop to consider God's perspective, to see how this occurs to God?

We tend to look at the world through a very narrow lens. Those of us who grew up in the church have a strong tendency to see the world the way Jonah saw it. We believe, on the basis of the Word of God, that the church is God's holy people, his chosen possession. We were taught that God hates sin – and that the world hates God. And all of those things are true! They are all true.

And on the basis of these truths, it is easy to see how we could look at the world as an alien race, they are not like us: they do drugs, they sleep around, they blaspheme God, they applaud the murder of unborn children, they promote policies that destroy lives, families, and societies. We see the assault taking place in our society against God, against his good creation, and it breaks our heart.

We are reading Nancy Percy's book *Love Thy Body* in HS Theology class, and this week we discussed transgenderism. And I confessed to the kids that I vacillate between anger and

despair when I read the lies being told to young children. I get sick reading about parents with broken hearts because their children were seduced into transgender ideology by school counselors and pediatricians, and have begun taking hormone blockers and embraced surgeries that will profoundly violate their body and wreak havoc on their soul. A 2014 report found that the suicide rate for those who identify as transgender is 41%, compared to 4.6% for the general population. Transgender ideology is killing kids, all because those who hate God insist that nothing, absolutely nothing, should be allowed to stand in the way of sheer, demonic human will.

As our culture descends in to the dark night of spiritual chaos and rebellion against God, and as the body count rises, it would be very easy for us to sit on the hill, just like Jonah, and wish for fire to fall. If we are honest with ourselves, we've already been there. That's why it's so important for us to see the heart of God. We have GOT to learn to see the way God sees. Should God not pity San Francisco and New York and Hollywood? Yes – there are people there who are destroying our society. But they don't know their right hand from their left.

God's whole argument with Jonah concerning the plant is that Jonah is miffed because a plant has died but he has no concern for image bearers who are headed for eternal destruction.

A week or two ago I was standing outside watching our community flow out the door – red, yellow, black, and white. All made in the image of God. Most unchurched, unconverted. Lost in sin. Quickly moving towards an eternity without Christ. God has pity on them – and we have no strategy to reach them.

How do we get a heart like God's heart? Begin by realizing that we are, by nature, Ninevites. The wicked people who are devoted to rebelling against God and wreaking havoc on his creation and destroying what God calls good – they are simply doing what we would be doing had God not rescued us by grace. "There is none who does good. No not one."

But how do you get free from the righteous indignation you feel when real violence is being performed by these wicked people? How do you move from a bitter heart to a compassionate heart? You remember the price God paid to rescue you – while you were lost in transgression and sin.

Jesus is the anti-Jonah. Jonah sat on the hill, gripped by bitterness and self-righteousness, waiting and praying for justice to prevail and judgment to fall. Jesus, the perfect son of God, left his throne in heaven, came down into this Ninevite world, to bear our sin and purchase our rescue with his own blood.

Nothing less than an experience of the love of God in Jesus Christ for you, revealed in the cross as Jesus died for you, will be able to set you free from bitterness and move you to compassion.

Do we have the right to be apathetic? We who have received such grace, so many blessings?

Michael Oh: "Our circumstances are by the grace of God alone. Avoid the temptations of our blessings. Have you ever considered the incredible grace and mercy of being born into your circumstances? You could have just as easily been born in the slums of Bangladesh or the son of a Shinto priest. And if you had been born in the slums of Bangladesh or the son of a Shinto priest, or as a Ninevite, how would you want the people who know the name and grace of Jesus to respond?"