

IT STANDS TO REASON
JONAH 4

I'd like to begin this message by asking you to do something that I'm pretty sure you would rather not do. I'd like you to think about your enemies. Bring to your mind some people that you don't get along with, that you don't really like, and who really doesn't like you. Think about some people who are constantly putting you down or treating you with contempt or running roughshod over your feelings. Anybody come to mind? You might be thinking, "Pastor, what are you talking about? I'm a Christian; I don't have enemies!"

Look, if you're a Christian and you are living the way Jesus wants you to live, you *will* have enemies, through no fault of your own. Even Jesus had enemies. And the reason He had enemies, according to John's Gospel, is because He is light and some of those He encountered were living in darkness. They hated Him because He exposed the darkness, making them feel ashamed and guilty (3:19-20). Everyone who walks in the light will have enemies for the same reason.

Most of us don't like having enemies and most of us wish we didn't have enemies. But since we do, here is another more relevant and more revealing question: What would like to happen to your enemies? Would you like something *bad* to happen to them? Would you like God to severely punish them?

It's perfectly natural to want your enemies to suffer for how they have treated you. But if you are a Christ-follower—if you belong to Jesus—it is not appropriate for you to have a *natural* response to your enemies. You have been asked, you have been enabled, you have been equipped to have a supernatural response—which is love. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who have it in for you" (Matt. 5:44). Which means instead of wanting something *bad* to happen to them, we want something *good* to happen to them. We want their blessing, their success, their highest good.

And why would we want that for our enemies? Because that is what God wants for His enemies. God loves even those who hate Him, defy Him, deny Him, and say He doesn't exist. God loves them so much that He sent His one and only Son into the world to do something for them so that they would not be destroyed but have eternal life (John 3:16).

And Jesus said that when we love our enemies, we prove that we are His sons—that is, we prove we have His nature and that there is a family resemblance between us and our heavenly Father. His nature, imparted to us when we put our faith in Jesus, allows us to have a supernatural response to our enemies. We can love them like God loves them.

That is the theme of the passage in Jonah that we will look at this morning. We are in chapter 4, coming to the end of the story. To summarize the story so far, Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, and preach against their wickedness. The Ninevites were enemies of God's people the Jews, and Jonah hated them. So, he tried to run away from God. He boarded a ship going in the opposite direction. But God sent a severe storm that threatened to break up the ship. When the ship's crew discovered that Jonah was responsible for the storm, they reluctantly threw him overboard.

But God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah and preserve him. It was in the belly of the fish that Jonah came to his spiritual senses and resolved that he would obey God. After the fish vomited Jonah onto dry land, Jonah received a second commission from the Lord to go and preach to Nineveh. When he got there and started preaching, the message God gave him was merely five words in Hebrew (eight in English). "*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*"

When the Ninevites heard the message "*[They] believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them*" (3:5).

Chapter 3 goes on to tell us that even the king participated, decreeing that the entire city repent and fast and plead for Yahweh's mercy for forty days.

Then the last verse of the chapter declares that "*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, He relented of the disaster that He had said He would do to them*" (3:10).

What an impressive demonstration of God's mercy! Yet it failed to impress Jonah. Look at chapter 4 **verse 1**. *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and He was angry.*

The author uses strong language in the Hebrew language to express great displeasure. Using the words for "evil" and "calamity" this verse could also be translated, *"To Jonah it was a disaster, a great disaster."* There is *irony* in this statement. Jonah hated the Ninevites so much that it was a disaster that Nineveh had *averted* disaster. And it caused Him to burn with anger.

That is literally what the word translated *"he became angry"* means. It means, "He burned" or "He was inflamed". Incidentally, it's the same word used in 3:9 to describe God's *fierce anger* over Nineveh's sin. Which leads me to say that it is perfectly appropriate to be incensed about *sin*. That is a *godly* reaction. But it is evident from the text that Jonah's anger was not aroused by the Ninevites' sin; it was aroused by God's compassion on them *despite* their sin. Jonah was angry with *God*. He thought that God had done a very bad thing by having mercy on the Ninevites instead of punishing them.

Look at **verse 2**. *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 is venting at Yahweh. "I knew this was going to happen! I predicted things would turn out this way and this is precisely the outcome I dreaded!" Then he goes on to defend his decision to go to Tarshish, saying that he suspected all along that God would change his mind about the Ninevites and not destroy them. And Jonah is so distraught that he says in **verse 3**. *³ Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

I have known a lot of people who have railed against God for allowing bad things to happen. I have talked to some who have been despondent because they felt God was harsh or cruel. And I have encountered a few who have abandoned their faith because they thought God *lacked* compassion.

But here we read that Jonah wanted to die because He felt that God was not harsh *enough*; that God was *too* compassionate and *too* gracious and *too* patient and *too* lenient. Here we read that these divine qualities irritated Jonah so much that he didn't want to live in a world that was ruled by that kind of God; a world where *he* could not decide to whom God could be gracious and to whom he could not be gracious; a world where his enemies were given mercy instead of justice.

Jonah's gripe that God's grace is too abundant can only be understood in the context of Jonah's immense hatred for the Ninevites. His response here demonstrates that his bitterness toward them was a driving force in his life. It shaped his worldview; it controlled his attitudes and his behavior, and it triggered his emotions. Even his theology was filtered through that hatred and bitterness.

Look at **verse 4**. *⁴ And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"* This is an extremely important question. But it is a rhetorical question; that is, it has an obvious answer. Does Jonah have any right to be angry?

What is intriguing at this point is that Jonah does not answer the question. God asks the question because He wants to engage and instruct Him. But Jonah isn't ready to talk...or listen, and so he walks away from the conversation without responding.

Verse 5. *⁵ 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.*

In his despair, Jonah went to a hill outside the city where he could be by himself and wait out the forty days. Remember, God's message through Jonah was, *"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."* I told you last week that "overthrown" can mean "destroy", or it could mean "a change of heart." Jonah already knew that the Ninevites had had a change of heart and that God had changed his mind about destroying them. But presumably he hoped the Ninevites' repentance would be short-lived, and that God would change his mind again.

God, who doesn't waste any opportunity, uses this time of solitude to instruct his pouting prophet with an object lesson. **Verse 6.** *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.*

Imagine being Jonah. You've constructed a flimsy shelter to shade you from the hot desert sun, a shelter that apparently proves to be inadequate. Suddenly, out of the sandy soil a green plant emerges, and starts to grow. You can see it grow right before your eyes, as though you were watching a time-elapsed video. In the span of just a few hours it becomes so large that it towers over you, and its leaves become so broad that they produce enough shade to provide ample relief from the blazing sun. And you are fascinated, amazed, relieved, content.

The text says that this giant vine aroused some strong feelings in Jonah. It made him very happy.

Now look at **verses 7-8.** *7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. 8 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."*

Before we look at Jonah's response, I want to remind you that God is sovereign over all creation. The words, "God appointed" appear three times in three verses, and it's the same word used in chapter 1, when the author says, *"The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah" (1:17)*. The LORD also appointed the plant, the worm, and the scorching east wind. He is sovereign over all creation.

Once again, I'd like you to imagine yourself in Jonah's situation. You had a great day yesterday—you got to see a huge plant grow up, you got to sit in its shade, you got to be comfortable, and you felt very happy. And then this morning, you wake up to see a worm with a ravenous appetite eating the stalk of your shade plant. And all of a sudden, the leaves start to wilt and the vine starts to droop and then the whole thing collapses to the ground. And you're saying to yourself, "No! NO! This can't be happening. My plant! My precious plant!"

Remember, this is an object lesson for Jonah. Jonah had walked away from God without answering his question about whether or not he had a right to be angry about his compassion toward the Ninevites. God's method of engaging Jonah was by arousing His emotions. By providing a vine that produced shade and thereby relief from the hot sun, Jonah became very happy. By providing a worm to destroy the vine and eliminate the shade, and then a "scorching east wind" so that Jonah succumbed to sunstroke, Jonah became enraged and depressed.

In just twenty-four hours Jonah went from intense anger and despair to intense happiness and back to intense anger and despair. His emotions, both positive and negative, had been sufficiently aroused so that he was ready to listen to God, and ready to understand why God's emotions were aroused about the Ninevites.

Look at **verse 9.** *9 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."*

Did Jonah have a right to be angry about the vine? Jonah certainly thought he did. Why? Because in the span of twenty-four hours, he had developed a relationship with that vine that caused him to become emotionally attached to it. He had watched it grow; he had been mesmerized by it, entertained by it, distracted by it, and relieved by it. He even felt compassion for the vine. So, when the vine shriveled up, he took it personally. He felt a sense of loss. And he was angry.

And those strong feelings are precisely what Yahweh wanted to arouse in Jonah through this object lesson. **Verse 10.** *10 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."*

"Jonah, you didn't create that vine. You didn't plant it, water it, tend it, or make it grow. What's more, you benefitted from that vine and enjoyed its company for a scant twenty-four hours. And yet look how emotionally attached you've become to it! Now, maybe you can understand how I feel!"

Verse 11. *11 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 many cattle?"*

This conversation was not really about the vine. It was about the people of Nineveh and how God felt about them. Jonah felt deeply about the vine, even though he didn't create it or tend it or have anything to do with its growth; even though the vine was just a plant and not a person.

Yes, the vine was amazing. Yes, it provided comfort and companionship. But, c'mon, it's not comparable to a person! There were 120,000 persons in Nineveh, all of whom were *designed* and *created* by Yahweh! Why *shouldn't* God care? Why *shouldn't* God feel deeply about their well-being? Why *shouldn't* He be willing and even eager to save them?

"Jonah, you love that vine even though you've only had a relationship with it for twenty-four hours. Good for you! But why shouldn't I love the people of Nineveh that I've known and observed all their lives! I designed and created each of them in their mother's wombs. I watched them be born. I saw them nurse from their mothers; I saw each of them take their first steps; I saw each of them learn how to talk. I was there when they got married and had children of their own. I've seen them cope with tragedy and death and hunger and hurt.

"Jonah, just like you saw that vine grow up before your eyes yesterday, so I've seen all these people grow up before my eyes. I have an interest in them just like you had an interest in that vine, only they are far more precious to me than that vine is to you!"

Having coaxed some concern in Jonah over a living thing, God asks him to understand his concern for an ignorant population. Yahweh says, *"...there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left..."* In calling attention to their ignorance God asked Jonah to consider something else that might arouse his compassion. Jonah saw the Assyrians as a cruel and violent people.

But *why* were they cruel and violent? It's because they were ignorant of Yahweh! They had never known anything *other* than false gods who couldn't hear them, love them, or do anything for them. They were pawns of a ruthless government! God was asking Jonah to look more deeply into the causes behind their reprehensible behavior. (Bruckner, 116).

God wanted Jonah to see the tender heart of the Creator, eager to be reconciled to the creation he had tended and made grow. And it wasn't just people. Did you notice God's tenderness and compassion extended to the animals of Nineveh as well? Why? Because He created them, too.

The book ends with an open question about God's way in the world, and it neither gives us a concluding statement about the fate of Nineveh *nor* Jonah's response to God's question. We already know from 3:10 that the city will *not* be destroyed. The story ends, however, with Jonah left sitting on the hillside pondering God's logic: "I made them; therefore, I pity them!" (Bruckner, 117).

As we have done in each of our previous four lessons on this book, I want to conclude our time this morning by offering you a couple of principles from this passage. First, God *loves* all His creation and has compassion on all His creatures, even those who consider themselves His enemies. God's love for wicked, arrogant, abusive, violent, and idolatrous people is the fundamental theme of the Book of Jonah (the whole Bible). Which tells us that God's love is unconditional. It is not based on what we do, how we act, or even how we relate to Him. God so loves all the people in the world simply *because He made all the people in the world*. Every person was and is formed and fashioned by Him, which makes every person precious and every person a masterful work of art.

What does that mean for us today? God loves the Russians who support what Putin is doing in Ukraine; God loves the North Koreans who think Kim Jong-un is their god. God loves the Iranians who are oppressing the women in their country. God loves the people and the candidates that are in the political party that you don't like or agree with. God loves the Black Lives Matters protesters. God loves the Proud boys and the Oath Keepers.

I'm not saying that he likes or accepts what these people stand for or what they are doing. I'm not saying that these people won't face His fierce wrath for their sin if they don't repent. I'm saying that God *loves* them; that He is not willing that any of them should perish but that all should come to repentance.

Which brings me to the second principle: *Since God loves His enemies, we ought to love our enemies, since we are His children.*

Earlier we considered what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, that we should love our enemies and pray for those who hurt us, and that when we do we prove that we are His sons. That is, we prove we have His nature and that there is a family resemblance between us and our heavenly Father. His nature, imparted to us when we put our faith in Jesus, allows us to have a supernatural response to our enemies. We can love them like God loves them.

I began this message by asking you to think about your enemies—those people who put you down or treat you with contempt or run roughshod over your feelings. Then I asked what you would like to happen to your enemies. The answer to that question reveals a lot about who you are.

If you have put your faith in Jesus, not only ought you to be like Jesus, but you most certainly can be like Jesus. How? By trying really, really hard to love them? No. That never works. It's by allowing the Spirit of God who lives inside of you to express the love of Jesus through you. You have his Spirit, and you have His nature, something Jonah did not have, and when you allow the Spirit to be in control of your faculties, He most assuredly will express His love for you enemies. Which means, you will want their blessing. You will want them to be in a right relationship with God so that they can have what you have.

It Stands to Reason Jonah 4

Main Idea: *It stands to reason that the Creator would feel deeply about His creation and not want any of it to be destroyed.*

The angry prophet (1-3)

Venting at Yahweh (2a)

Despising God's compassion (2b)

Wanting to die (3)

Yahweh calls out Jonah (4)

Object lesson for a pouting prophet (5-8)

God provides comfort (5-6)

Made in the shade

Misery loves comfort

God provides discomfort (7-8)

The ravenous worm

Sunstroke

Death wish

Yahweh's Challenge (9)

Object Lesson Explained (10-11)

There's no comparison (10)

What really matters (11)

Principles:

- God loves all of His creation and has compassion on all His creatures, even those who consider themselves His enemies.
- If God so loves His enemies we ought to love our enemies since we are children of God.