

*God's Steadfast Love: Jonah 4*  
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This is our fourth and final week in the Old Testament book of Jonah. Next week I'll be preaching on missions, and specifically on how our belief in God's sovereignty is our assurance and our source of strength as we pursue the goal of missions. The doctrine of election is our bedrock of hope in the missionary task. By the way, if you want to learn more about what the Bible teaches concerning God's sovereignty in salvation, I strongly encourage you to begin attending the adult SS class next week. Because beginning next week, and for the next 3 months, Cam will be focusing the discussion on the doctrines of grace. That's just one way of referring to what we believe the Bible teaches about God's sovereignty over all things, including who is saved and who is not saved. These are weighty and important matters to study and discuss, and I hope you'll make it a point to be in SS these coming months.

And next week the sermon will deal with the doctrine of election and missions. The following week Bob Ward will be here, and he'll be preaching in both the morning and evening services that day. Bob leads regular mission trips to Romania, and as a church it's our delight to provide some support to him in his work. And so it's going to be an exciting Sunday in two weeks when we get to have him here.

Unfortunately, Ed Ridge will not be able to be with us the last Sunday in March. We were planning on that, but then his trip to the US was cancelled, and so we'll have to have him here another time. Ed is a missionary in Brazil, and a dear friend of this church.

But for the next few weeks we're going to be putting a special emphasis on missions, and I'm praying that God will expand our vision and increase our joy as we hear about what He's doing around the world and what He promises to do as this age comes to a close.

I'm also praying, and I hope you will continue to pray as well, about a possible venue downtown where we can hold our Sunday morning service each week. We're looking and praying and watching to see what God is going to do. As the third phrase in our mission statement says, "We exist to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world." And we believe we can best do that by having a centralized and accessible location in downtown Pittsburgh. For all the neighborhoods of Pittsburgh and all the nationalities of people who have come to Pittsburgh, and for the peoples of the world, we want to have a growing impact and influence in this city to the glory of God.

Now to the book of Jonah, where we're already learning some important lessons about missions. Jonah is a wonderful example of how NOT to do missions. He rebels against God's plan, reluctantly obeys after a severe reprimand, and he despises those to whom God sends him. Jonah just wanted God to destroy them. And as we look closely at Jonah's heart, if we're honest, we'll see a lot of the same sinful thoughts and tendencies that still reside in our own hearts. We can't just look down our noses at Jonah and talk about how backwards he was. Because that's me in this book. And that's you. And the lessons God teaches Jonah are for us as well. We need to be attentive to our own hearts and the lessons God has for us this morning.

The Ninevites repented! Can you believe it? The Ninevites repented, and God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them. This was Jonah's worst nightmare. Chapter 3 ends with God's mercy on Nineveh, and then chapter 4 begins with Jonah rejoicing over the Gentiles' salvation! No. He was not rejoicing. In fact, he wasn't even indifferent. He was mad! Verse 1 says "it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry." I think he was angry for at least a couple reasons.

First of all, he was fearful for his own well-being and the well-being of his people. He was afraid from the beginning that Nineveh might survive. Because he knew if Nineveh was spared they would continue to pose a serious threat to Israel. Remember, the kingdom of Israel had once been united under Saul, David, and Solomon. But it was now divided. There was the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, and Jonah was a prophet from the northern kingdom of Israel. To the northeast was the Assyrian empire with Nineveh as its capital, and they were looming large on the horizon. It was only about a half century after Jonah's preaching that the Assyrians did, in fact, conquer Israel. So Jonah's fears were justified. He was angry because he wanted his people to be spared. He didn't want the Assyrians to be spared, because then that would mean the destruction of Israel.

God gave Jonah a very difficult assignment. Go preach repentance to your enemies, I'll spare them, and then I'll use them to punish you. That's basically how it worked. Jonah went, kicking and screaming, to Nineveh. Nineveh amazingly responded to the warning and repented of their evil ways. God had mercy on them and did not destroy them. Then a few decades later, in 722 B. C., the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, and Israel was exiled to Assyria.

This was God's punishment on Israel. 2 Kings 17:7 says very plainly, "And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods." God is using all these events to display his righteousness and mercy and to teach His people. And Jonah sees these things developing, and he just doesn't want to be a part of it. He doesn't want God to bless his enemies, and he doesn't want God to punish his own people. Jonah wants it exactly the other way around. Punish my enemies, God, and have mercy on us. Don't have mercy on them and punish us.

These thoughts and fears fueled Jonah's anger. He was mad that God was relenting of the disaster he said he would bring on Nineveh. The other thing that was probably feeding Jonah's anger was his own pride. He had declared the message, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" But now it appeared as though it wasn't going to happen, which puts Jonah in a very humiliating position. How could he go back home to Israel and tell them that Nineveh was not destroyed? In 2 Kings 14 Jonah prophesied that Israel's borders would be expanded. Good news! But now he was faced with the humiliating task of going home and telling the people that their most feared enemy was still alive and well.

It was not the outcome he wanted. Not the outcome that would bring him applause back home. It was bad news to this cold-hearted prophet.

The sins of selfishness and pride can quickly cause us to love what God hates and hate what God loves. We'll see this as we continue through the chapter.

Verse 2 is so interesting because it's a glorious statement about God's gracious character, but Jonah says it in anger rather than praise. This is Jonah's "I told you so" to

God. Isn't it bizarre? He says all these things that should bring such joy to one's heart, but he is saying it with disgust. "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." What makes it even more ironic is that he's using the language of Exodus 34 (and it's used in other places throughout the Old Testament as well), which speaks of God's mercy on Israel. The Lord says to Moses in Exodus 34, "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 . . ." And the word translated "steadfast love" in Exodus and in Jonah, is the Hebrew word *hesed*. It occurs over 200 times in the Old Testament, and it refers to God's covenant faithfulness. He will keep His promises, and He is faithful to His people. He abounds in this steadfast love and demonstrates it to thousands.

Apparently Jonah doesn't see the disconnect between his conflict in emotions. He expects God's steadfast love for himself and his people, but he's angry that God shows steadfast love to his enemies. Jonah doesn't see the disconnect between his thankfulness for his own deliverance and his anger over Nineveh's deliverance. What a double standard! It's the insanity of sin that enables us to justify these kinds of emotions. We expect and even demand that God bless us and bless those whom we love. But our enemies should be punished. They should receive God's judgment. And our selfishness and pride turn our focus inward so that we don't even recognize the contradiction.

We ALL deserve judgment. We all deserve God's punishment. Therefore we should be overwhelmed by God's grace in our lives, and we should be grateful for the grace He chooses to pour out in the lives of others as well. And even if God's blessing on someone else means a disappointment for us. Maybe someone else gets the job that you wanted, or the scholarship you wanted, or the house you wanted. Don't curse that person. Bless them. Rejoice with them. Or maybe you see God blessing someone else's ministry or some other church. That should be a reason for praise and thanksgiving, not jealousy or self-pity. Anytime someone else gets something we want, or it seems like God is blessing others more than He's blessing us, we need to remember that salvation belongs to the Lord, and that God is gracious and merciful. Everything we have is a gift. We do not deserve it. And so we should overflow with gratefulness without letting selfishness and pride steal our joy.

In verse 3 Jonah continues his complaint and asks the Lord to take his life. Jonah would rather die than live in a world where the Ninevites are spared, in a world where God has mercy on his enemies.

And then the Lord begins a series of events intended to teach Jonah, and us, a very painful and important lesson. God is going to show Jonah the foolishness of his anger. He begins with a question in verse 4: "Do you do well to be angry?" A straightforward, no-nonsense rebuke. It's a rhetorical question, of course, meaning, "You don't have any good reason to be angry!" "Your anger is sinful and wicked and absurd." Jonah, in his anger, didn't even respond to this first question from the Lord. He just went out of the city and made a little shelter for himself, probably still hoping that God would destroy Nineveh. He had visions of Sodom and Gomorrah in his head as he set up his little camp to watch the fireworks. He wanted to see fire fall down from heaven and burn up Nineveh.

But deep down he knew God had relented. No judgment was coming, and that's what made him so angry.

Now a very interesting series of events begins to transpire, and it's all part of God's plan to show Jonah the wickedness of his own anger. Verse 6 says, "God appointed a plant." Don't miss the emphasis on God's sovereignty over creation in this book. God hurled a great wind upon the sea in chapter 1, He appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah and then spoke to the fish to vomit Jonah out on dry land. And now in chapter 4 God appoints a plant (v. 4), He appoints a worm (v. 7), and He appoints a scorching east wind (v. 8).

The object lesson of chapter four comes in three parts. First of all, the plant. Notice Jonah's reaction to the plant. He "was exceedingly glad because of the plant." Do you see Jonah stepping right into the painful lesson God wants to teach him? Oh, Jonah loved the plant. He had been angry enough to die because God refused to destroy Nineveh, but now a little shade over his head makes him exceedingly glad. Talk about a mood swing! Jonah's emotions are all messed up. He gets angry for the wrong reasons and rejoices for the wrong reasons. God gave Jonah this brief sense of security only in order to take it away again, in order to rebuke Jonah for his lack of compassion.

The second piece of the lesson is the worm that comes and attacks the plant. And the plant withered. And then thirdly, God appointed a scorching east wind, and verse 8 says "the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint." Jonah has really been through the wringer in this book. Thrown overboard, almost dead at the bottom of the sea, three days in the belly of a fish, vomited up onto dry land, and now he's sitting in the scorching desert heat in the midst of a wind storm with no shelter. May we learn from Jonah's bad example!

Running from the will of God and rebelling against the will of God is not a rewarding path to take in life.

As God continues to try to get this message through to Jonah, Jonah digs in his heels. He's angry and stubborn and bitter and selfish and full of pride. He asks again to die. God responds with another question in verse 9, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" In verses 1-3 Jonah was angry because of God's mercy on Nineveh. Now he's angry for something much less significant, but just as foolish (and just as selfish). He's angry because a worm destroyed his shade plant. And he says to God in defiance, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."

This scenario is difficult to observe, because that's me so often. So selfish and prideful that a petty inconvenience like a withering plant can cause such anger and frustration. Study yourselves, brothers and sisters. Do you find yourself acting like Jonah? Assuming that you deserve certain things in life, and angry when you don't get them.

I think of times when I can't get a key to work, or when I can't figure out how to make my computer do what I want it to do, or when I have problems with a car or a lawnmower. And I can get so frustrated, I guess because I assume that I deserve everything to work the first time and cooperate with my desires. I don't deserve to have computer problems or car problems. I have the right to an easy life. And God says: WRONG! You don't have rights. You don't deserve anything, except punishment. And the fact that you're alive and have air to breathe and the sun came up this morning, that's

pure mercy and grace. Don't whine about the car or the computer. Those are blessings. And when you have problems with them, it's for your sanctification.

Sometimes in those moments of frustration I remember one of Jonathan Edwards' resolutions in his life. He had seventy of these resolutions, and number fifteen reads: "Resolved, Never to suffer the least motions of anger towards irrational beings." It's one thing to be angry at an injustice that a person is doing intentionally. But irrational beings, inanimate objects, it's not like they're out to get you. When we're angry at a computer or a key or a plant, we're acting as the irrational being. It's foolish to get angry over the petty inconveniences of life.

The larger point I want to make is that we shouldn't act as though we have rights. We shouldn't live thinking we deserve certain things, and then constantly feeling angry because we're not getting what we think we deserve. We're all like Jonah, at least sometimes. We can get so bent out of shape because we aren't getting something we want, and we don't care about the things we ought to care about.

Nancy Leigh DeMoss talks about this issue of rights in her book *Lies Women Believe and the Truth that Sets them Free*. Some of the women in our church are going through this study right now, and I just want to read you a couple sentences of what she writes about how Jonah was trying to claim his rights and how that's what we often try to do, too. She says, "All too often, I find myself annoyed and perturbed when things don't go *my way*. A decision someone makes at the office, a rude driver on the freeway, a long line at the checkout counter, a thoughtless word spoken by a family member, a minor offense (real or perceived) by a friend, someone who fails to come through on a commitment, a phone call that wakes me when I have just fallen off to sleep—if I am staking out my rights, even the smallest violation of those rights can leave me feeling and acting moody, uptight, and angry. The only way to get off that kind of spiritual and emotional roller coaster is to *yield* all my rights to the One who ultimately holds all rights."

Jonah thought he had a right to see his enemies destroyed. And when he didn't get what he wanted, he felt like he had the right to be angry and to wallow in self-pity. What he needed to realize, and what we need to realize, is that in the broad scheme of things, we don't have any rights. God can do with us as He pleases, and the fact that He has shown us so much mercy ought to set our feet to dancing! Rather than griping about the things that aren't going our way, we should rejoice over God's amazing grace that rescues us from hell! That puts things in perspective.

God's response in verses 10-11 show Jonah how foolish he has been to be angry about Nineveh and about the plant. "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?" God shows Jonah how insignificant the plant is in light of the spiritual predicament of Nineveh. Jonah wanted Nineveh to perish, all the morally corrupt people, and the animals as well. He had no concern for the well-being of that great city. On the other hand, he had much concern for the well-being of the plant. He was exceedingly glad when it appeared, and he was angry enough to die when the worm killed it.

That kind of attitude will shrink our souls and erode our joy. It's dangerous and toxic when we get so consumed with our selfish desires and are unaffected by the things

that SHOULD be a burden on our hearts. The unreached peoples of the world, and the unsaved people in our city are on the broad road to destruction, and all I want is a newer car or a nice vacation or a bigger TV or a more comfortable house, or whatever the plant is in your life. The petty pleasure that gets us so excited, when weighty eternal realities are staring us in the face.

Let's learn the lesson that this book leaves us with. We're not told how Jonah responds in the end. The real consideration is how we will respond. Are we going to follow in Jonah's footsteps, fighting for our "rights" and ignoring the spiritual needs around us? Or will we rejoice in God's plan to bless all the peoples of the earth and jump on board the most exciting endeavor going on in the universe? As we see in the story of Jonah, his heart shriveled and his joy diminished further and further as he fought against the marvelous plans of God. Let us rather increase in joy as we join in the work of God to redeem individuals from every tribe and language and people and nation.