

#4 Letting God Be God

**Jonah-
Reluctant to Serve**

Introduction

Jonah 4:1

“But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.”

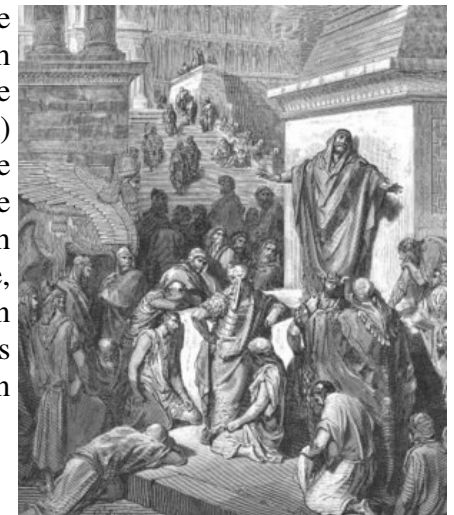
Recap

After responding to God’s second call to go to Nineveh with a message (3:1-3), Jonah observed a great turn-around; twice! Firstly, the city of Nineveh, including its king and even its animals (!) responded to God’s message through Jonah and turned from their evil ways; they repented. Secondly, and most confounding to Jonah, God saw the repentant hearts of the Ninevites and had compassion on them and relented from meting out the punishment he had planned for them.

Study— Chapter 4

4:1 Jonah is **absolutely furious** at God’s response to Nineveh.

Along with the acute sense that Nineveh thoroughly deserved to be “overthrown” (1:2; 3:4) Rabbis of old spoke of the shame that would come upon Israel if Nineveh repented. As an Israelite, he would rather die than see the heathen Ninevites repent and shame his own people.



See how Paul argues that the inclusion of the Gentiles has a purpose for Israelites in God's plan— READ Romans 11:22-32.

3. Jesus speaks of there being much joy among the angels in heaven when even one sinner repents (Luke 15:10). How is this good news to you? ... to others?

4:2 This is the **third statement of faith** (cf. 1:9 and the psalm in chapter 2), by this faithless prophet.

Note how Jonah almost only speaks in two ways, these pious platitudes and his death wish (1:12; here; 4:8-9), his extra brief preaching in Nineveh is the striking exception.

Note a similar understanding of God in the prophet Joel.
READ: Joel 2:13-14. What are the key characteristics of God here?

Notice that the next phrase in Joel was previously echoed by the "king of Nineveh" in Jonah 3:9. Jonah is not the only one able to use "the language of Zion"!

4. The contemporary issue of redistribution of land in Zimbabwe has contributed to much suffering and widespread famine in southern Africa. Justice has been elusive and people have had to live their lives with unresolved anger and suffering. We can list many other situations such as: theological justification of apartheid in South Africa; American presence in Vietnam and Iraq; the Israel-Palestine conflict; Northern Ireland, East Timor, The Balkans, and more. In theory we know God can forgive, but in practice we discover that forgiveness is hard to practice. What are some of the ways forgiveness can be played out in the real world?

Gracious

This Hebrew word (*hannun*) is used only of God in the Scriptures. READ Exodus 22:26-27 as a telling illustration of this attribute of God.



Going Further

1. Jonah had faithfully held on to the hope of God's judgment. He knew God would relent (4:2) but the experience of such a deviation from justice was too much for him to handle. Jonah was intensely angry with God; literally, "it was *ra*' to Jonah" which here means absolutely furious. God had turned away from the heat of His anger, but Jonah burned inside. What would you say to someone, who like Jonah, thinks God is soft on sin and weak on justice?

2. "Jonah blustered about godless Nineveh, until he was sent there; then he preferred to go in the opposite direction. Then in his resistance he became ridiculous. And God became great, pathetically or offensively great - or simply superabundant in his love; God glorified himself in the very antithesis to himself, namely the disloyal, the cowardly, the absconding church." (Miskotte, K.H. *When the Gods are Silent*. London: Collins, 1967) What do you make of this statement?

Merciful

This word (*raham*) is like the word for 'womb' and points to a 'motherly love'. Once again this word always appears in reference to God. READ Deuteronomy 4:30-33 for an example. For a 'fatherly' example, READ Luke 15:11-32.

Slow to Anger

This is the opposite of a quick temper. Forbearance is the key element at play. God's patience with Jonah is a good example. See Jeremiah 15:15 for the prophets appeal to God.

Love

Hesed is the Hebrew word, often translated 'steadfast love'. It is a committed love like a marriage vow: 'till death do us part.' Hosea is the prophet most aware of this love (Hosea 3:1).



Repents

The concept of *naham* is spelled out in Jeremiah 18:7-10 in his visit to the potter's workshop. These words complement the idea that God fashions the clay; an affirmation of his sovereign rule as creator and lord. However, they also affirm that he is responsive to his creation:

- 7 If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed,
- 8 and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.
- 9 And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted,
- 10 and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

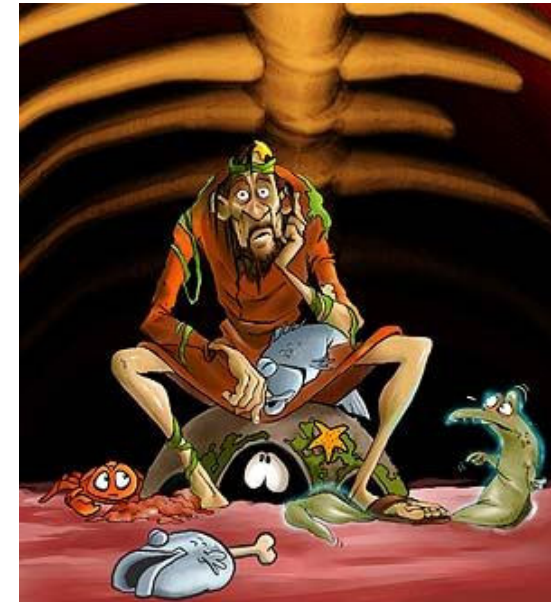
Jeremiah 18:7-10 (NIV)



Note the Apostle Paul's belief about God's responsiveness in his imperative statement about evangelism— READ Romans 10:14-16.

of the Universe himself undermining our notions of power and sovereignty. Jonah's story demands that we recognise these in God's power and grace to forgive even Nineveh.

Perhaps Jesus' parables provide a parallel. One cannot understand Jonah without becoming Jonah; it is when we condemn ourselves in ridiculing this reluctant, recalcitrant, complaining prophet that we have heard the word of Adonai through the book of his servant Jonah.



Concluding remarks

Jonah, in the end, could not accept the law of grace, especially if it worked in favour of his enemies and at risk to his own people. Can we not sympathise with him? Perhaps he wanted a God who was partial like himself– he **could not let God be God**.

Ancient Hebrew readers were invited to identify with this famous prophet from the past (2 Kgs 14:25) and yet to laugh at his pathetic antics. Contemporary Jews and Christians are likewise invited to identify and learn.

"When God lets us know that he is concerned with us in these depths where we are disingenuous or only half genuine, when the Word overwhelms us, then we too will share in his truthfulness by faith in the truthfulness of his work." (Miskotte, K.H. *When the Gods are Silent*. London: Collins, 1967 p.426)

We must hear the story of Jonah, and hear it as if we were among the Hebrews, perhaps from some not-very-well-defined time after the exile. We might need to confess that we come with our baggage of somewhat triumphalist theology, and we hear the King of the universe call to his prophet. Like those earlier hearers we need to be sure of Nineveh's guilt and the justice of punishment - references to the holocaust in commenting on Jonah might give some contemporary sense of the feelings towards Nineveh in those times.

As we listen we find the Lord



4:3 What motivates Jonah's deathwish?

Q. Is Jonah's death wish a matter of a lack of faith?

Q. Is perhaps Jonah's theological preference that he live in a world where God rules "*with justice*"? After all, Nineveh's guilt is evident and longstanding, why should one brief repentance cancel out the due punishment?

Q. Or, is it that Jonah's despair is about Israel's salvation– he is not saddened by pagan's repenting, but by a fear that Israel will perish?

Q. How, in the light of Jonah's attitude, do you respond to the New Testament's presentation of grace? READ Romans 5:6-10 and Acts 17:30-31.

Note how Jesus uses this context when speaking to the faithless religious leaders in his time– READ Matthew 12:41.

4:6 Compare the gourd plant (or vine) over Jonah's head with the weed in Jonah's psalm (2:5).

Some interpreters suggest parallels between the gourd & the tree of life, the worm & the serpent - note the use of "Lord God" or *Yahweh Elohim* (10% of the occurrences of which are in Gen 2-3). Perhaps we are being reminded of the God who is the creator of the land and sea and all creatures.

4:6-10 How does God comfort and teach Jonah in this passage?



4:9 What is God probing for in asking a second time about Jonah's anger?

4:11 God shows pity.

Jonah showed pity for a plant he had no investment in but for his own comfort. God had compassion for the people and animals he had made, even though they were not yet his covenant people. Verse 11 speaks of those who 'cannot tell their right hand from their left'. This is a reference to ignorance. Here is the irony of Jonah one final time. Jonah and the Hebrews knew of God's compassion but wished to withhold it from others. The most powerful nation on earth knew little of Yahweh, and their ignorance provoked God's pity. What might this say about the attitude of Christians today?