

God's Mercy at Jonah's Anger (Pt. 1)

Jonah 4:4-6

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In the previous sermon (from Jonah 4:1-3), we considered Jonah's sinful and unjustified anger at God's rich display of mercy to the undeserving Ninevites. Now in the sermon this Lord's Day, we shall turn that around in order to consider God's rich and undeserved mercy displayed toward Jonah who has fallen into a sinful and unjustified anger. Dear ones, it is at times such as these in the Holy Scriptures that we see so brilliantly the loving heart of our reconciled God even when we as His children shamelessly direct our anger, frustration, and disappointment toward the God who can do us no wrong. For all the trials, temptations, failures, afflictions, and persecutions we face in this life are appointed by a God who can make no mistakes and by a God who cannot love us any more than He does (who loves us infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably), for He loves us in Christ. Beloved of the Lord, to look by faith upon Christ (who voluntarily laid down His life and suffered the curse of God for unworthy sinners like you and me) is to look upon the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable love of God for His sheep.

We now come to the closing verses of the Book of Jonah, and in the next two sermons, I would like to consider a series of three contrasts between God's gracious words and actions toward Jonah and Jonah's sinful response to the Lord, and then the conclusion to the Book of Jonah. Today we will only be able to consider the first two contrasts between the mercy of God and the anger of Jonah.

I. The First Contrast (Jonah 4:4-5).

A. In this first contrast, as in all three of the contrasts which we

shall consider from our text, we begin with God's words or actions. But before we look at God's mercy to Jonah, we must not forget what precedes God's merciful words to Jonah. Remember that Jonah has already indicated that he was exceedingly displeased and very angry with the fact that God had mercifully repented of the judgment He had threatened against Nineveh (Jonah 4:1). Jonah was angry with God and the rich display of mercy shown to undeserving Gentiles in saving the great city of Nineveh from destruction. And what does the Lord say to Jonah? The Lord could have opened the earth and swallowed Jonah alive as He did with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram who rebelled against the Lord's appointed prophet, Moses (in Numbers 16:31-33). The Lord could have turned Jonah into a pillar of salt as He did with Lot's wife who looked back to Sodom and Gomorrah in disobedience to God's word (in Genesis 19:26). The Lord could have consumed Jonah by fire on the spot as he did with two different companies of 50 soldiers who came to seize Elijah the prophet (in 2 Kings 1:9-12). But no, the Lord bends ever so low in amazing condescension to Jonah's sinful weakness, and asks from a heart of infinite compassion (in Jonah 4:4), "Doest thou well to be angry?"

1. When the Lord asks Jonah, "Doest thou well to be angry?", that question might more accurately be rendered, "Art thou rightly (or justly) angry?" In other words, the Lord asks Jonah if he has a right or a just warrant to be angry at God's undeserved mercy shown to Nineveh.

- a. That really is the question isn't it, dear ones, that nails us between the eyes when we are angry, frustrated, discontented, or given over to despair at the disappointments in our life, at the disruptions that have occurred in our family, at the physical afflictions that we suffer, at the loss of a job or the loss of a home, at the death of a loved one, at the backsliding of a dear relative or friend, at the division and schism that destroys the church, or at wicked and unjust laws and leaders that God sends as judgment upon a nation. Are you rightly or justly angry with God

and with that which He has ordained for your life? Do you have a right to be angry with God and with His providence?

b. You see, there is a righteous indignation and just anger that we are to have in regard to sin and error (beginning with that sin and error which is within us): “Be ye angry, and sin not” (Ephesians 4:26). Young people, it is a good thing to be justly and rightly angry with the temptation and sin with which you are confronted by family members and by so-called friends to forsake the doctrine and worship revealed in Scripture and taught by our covenanted forefathers, and likewise it is a good thing to be justly and rightly angry with the temptation and the sin with which you are confronted by so-called friends to practice premarital sex and recreational drugs, to join them in their drunken parties, to watch pornography, to attend unfaithful churches, to break the Sabbath in order to work or to play on the Lord’s Day (yes, we are justly and rightly angry at all such temptations and sins). Dear Christian young people, regardless of what situation you may be in, true friends will not tempt you to desert the truth of Jesus Christ or to compromise what is right. True friends will rather encourage you to be faithful to Christ and encourage you to turn away from all the above temptations. We adults need to learn the same lessons as well. Yes, we ought to be growing righteously indignant with all temptation to lead us away from Christ (not with an uncontrolled, unbridled fury of anger), but with a holy hatred for temptation and sin. If our love for Jesus Christ means anything at all, it will mean that we are growing to hate what He hates and to love what He loves.

c. But dear ones, it is a grievous sin (into which we all fall to varying degrees) to be angry with God or to be angry with that which He has ordained for His glory and ultimately for your good. Are you struggling with anger, frustration, discontentment, and rebellion at what God has providentially brought into your life? Have you turned your anger toward God because you despise and hate so much what you are

facing in your life? You know in your heart that it is the height of folly to allow anger to well up within you at the most holy, the most wise, and the most loving God who created you and who redeemed you. You also know in your heart that anger against the Lord and His providence will not change your circumstances in the least for the better (although it may change your circumstances for the worse), and your anger toward the Lord will not help you to better cope with the trials you face. If anything such striving in anger against the good providence of God in your life will only lead you to hopelessness and despair (like it did with Jonah when his anger led him to desire death because he was angry with God's plan and yet could not change it in Jonah 4:3, "it is better for me to die than to live"). Dear ones, we all are tempted to be angry toward God at the most holy, most wise, and most loving plan that He has ordained for your life and mine when that plan goes against our own plan, or our own desires, or our own comforts. But dear ones, if the Lord spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all who trust in Him, will He not then work all things out in your life for your good who love Him?

d. I read this week of the death of a very notable atheist, Christopher Hitchens, who died of cancer at 62 years of age. And as I read the article about Christopher Hitchens, I was impressed with what drove him in even his arguments against the existence of God. The author who had interviewed Hitchens sometime before his death wrote this,

Unlike many who won't let others below the surface of their intellectual arguments, Hitchens admitted that **he didn't want there to be a god, because he didn't want to be "under the permanent control and supervision of an unalterable celestial dictator"** (Art Moore, "Christopher Hitchens: God's favorite atheist?", December 17, 2001, World Net Daily, emphases added).

That really is a very honest and telling answer. Underneath all his intellectual arguments against the existence of God, Hitchens expressed a hatred for anyone other than himself to be in control of His life, especially the all supreme, almighty, all wise, and all loving

God of the Bible. Hitchens had “changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature [namely, himself] more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen” (Romans 1:25). And we who are Christians also wrestle to varying degrees with the sin of despising God’s absolute control over our life, over our family, over our job, over the church, and over this nation and this world? But dear ones, when you head down that path of anger toward God, please know that you will (like Jonah) eventually fall into despair of life itself if you do not come before the Lord with an attitude of trusting and loving surrender to the Lord and His most holy, most wise, and most loving providential will, confessing in faith and love the holy character revealed in Jonah 4:3: “Thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of evil.” Hear what I declare to you, dear children of God, the Lord yet comes to us (as he came to Jonah) with the same loving question: “Doest thou well to be angry?”

2. Dear ones, carefully note that God does not tolerate or condone Jonah’s sinful anger when he asks Jonah that question. The Lord does not sweep Jonah’s sin under the carpet for none to see. The Lord does not agree to disagree with Jonah’s grave and conspicuous sin. The Lord does not work out a compromise with Jonah over his sin that if Jonah will come half way, He (the Lord) will come half way. No, dear ones, the Lord deals directly with Jonah’s sin, but does so, not as a harsh judge, but as a sovereign yet loving Father. And so, dear ones, the Lord our God who is absolutely sovereign, who works all things after the counsel of His own holy and good will, always comes to us (who are justified by faith alone) as our heavenly Father, even when we are sinfully, foolishly, and grievously angry at His plan for our lives. God our Father always chastens us (as it were) with one arm around Christ who fulfilled all righteousness for us, and with one arm around us, His beloved

children to whom He has imputed that perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ by faith alone.

B. But now, let us consider Jonah's response to the Lord's loving question directed to him ("Doest thou well to be angry?"). I want to emphasize again (as I have in previous sermons) that Jonah was a faithful prophet of the Lord God, but one who was struggling with God's purposes to save the Gentile capital of Nineveh, believing that the effect of Nineveh's salvation would be the hardening of God's people, Israel. Jonah was struggling with submitting to God's most wise plan for Israel and the nations of the world. Jonah's response to God's question directed to him is a very odd response indeed because there is nothing recorded here by way of a verbal response from Jonah to the Lord's question to him—he says nothing, but rather he leaves the city, he builds a little booth or hut outside the city, and he sits under the shadow of it in order to see what would happen to the city, apparently still hoping that God's judgment might fall upon Nineveh (Jonah 4:5). Although there is no direct verbal response given by Jonah to the Lord's question, Jonah's actions speak loud enough even without words. What did Jonah's actions say in response to God's question to him?

1. First, the fact that Jonah didn't answer God's question (at least the text gives no answer) indicated that he chose to wallow in his sinful anger for a time, rather than repent of it. When the Lord comes to you by His word and Spirit and asks you, "Are you justly or rightly angry?", your silence and reluctance to answer the question is simply a reason to continue to wallow in your anger, bitterness, resentment, disappointment, discontentment, or despair. But, dear ones, the first step to the forgiveness of your sinful anger is to confess to the Lord, "No, Lord, I am not justly angry, but to the contrary, I am unjustly angry."

2. Second, the fact that Jonah did not seek shelter and accommodation with any of the repentant Ninevites (though it would

seem he would have been welcomed with open arms even into the king's palace and treated with the utmost friendliness and hospitality by the grateful Ninevites), this must indicate that he yet believed he was justified in his anger against the mercy of God shown to the Ninevites. Rather than treating the believing and repenting Ninevites as brothers and sisters in a like precious faith, Jonah treated them as yet godless heathens with whom he would not fellowship.

a. The Lord Jesus said in His instructions to the ministers he sent out into Judah and Galilee, that they were to bless those that received and heard with faith the word of God preached unto them, and to shake off the dust of their feet as a testimony against those who would not receive or hear with faith the faithful preaching of Christ's ministers (Matthew 10:11-14). However, Jonah had apparently decided to shake off the dust of his feet as a testimony against the Ninevites who had received and heard with faith the preaching of Jonah.

b. Why did Jonah not rejoice with the Ninevites in their salvation and not enjoy their grateful hospitality? Because Jonah's plans were not realized—namely, to see God's judgment poured out upon Nineveh so that Israel might yet be the focus of God's salvation. God (who is all wise, all just, and all good) had a different plan than Jonah—namely, to use the salvation of the Gentiles to provoke Israel to jealousy (Romans 11:11), and Jonah didn't like it and chose to stew in his anger toward God's most wise, just, and merciful plan. Dear ones, we must be broken and contrite in heart and always willing to receive into our fellowship those who have demonstrated their repentance from sin and error. We cannot allow memories of past offenses to harden us to receiving into our fellowship those who have evidenced repentance for grievous past sins and errors. What hypocrisy is ours in such a case; for we have become the heirs and beneficiaries of God's rich mercy and reception into His gracious fellowship, even though we had offended the Lord infinitely more than anyone might offend us. For that reason, we

must not cease to pray for the full reconciliation of those brethren from whom we are separated due to their sin or error. We must cherish in our hearts and in our prayers the hope of restored and renewed fellowship with all backslidden brothers and sisters.

3. Third, the fact that Jonah was waiting to see if God would yet pour out His judgment upon Nineveh surely speaks volumes as to the self-righteousness of Jonah in believing that he had just warrant to be angry with the mercy of the Lord shown to Nineveh (“till he might see what would become of the city” Jonah 4:5). Rather than rejoicing in the mercy of God shown to undeserving sinners, Jonah was hoping that God would yet bring destruction to Nineveh.

a. Being resentful and bitter towards those who have mistreated you, spoken against you, cheated you, or deserted their good confession of faith, will eventually destroy you. It will eat you alive. You see, beloved, your greater problem in such a case is not with the one who injured you, but is rather with God in accepting and submitting to His most wise, most holy, and most good plan for your life.

b. But how could that awful treatment I received be for my good? First, because God says so, and He cannot lie (Romans 8:28; Ecclesiastes 3:11). Second, we can learn valuable truths and lessons not only from good experiences, but also from painful experiences as well. We do not have to allow the pain from the past or the present to make us bitter and resentful (think of Joseph sold into slavery by his own brothers, lied against by his master’s wife, and cast into prison for years, but yet able to say to his brothers later in life without bitterness or resentment, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive” Genesis 50:20). Third, know that from what you have experienced and learned from it, you will be able to help others in a way that I may not be able to help, because you know very personally both the pain and heartache, as well as the power of God’s grace in your life to battle the hatred,

resentment, and even personal vengeance within you (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

II. The Second Contrast (Jonah 4:6).

A. Very briefly, in this second contrast, the Lord mercifully prepares or appoints a plant with broad leaves to quickly (and supernaturally) grow over the booth that Jonah had erected in order to provide Jonah with shade from the hot sun that beat down upon him.

1. Just as God had shown His absolute control over the animal world in preparing or appointing a great fish to swallow Jonah (Jonah 1:17), so the Lord now shows His absolute sovereignty over the plant world in preparing or appointing a leafy plant to grow with immediate success for shade over Jonah. The Lord supernaturally speeds up the process in the natural world so that plants immediately grow and cover a booth, so that water is turned into wine, so that five loaves of bread and two fishes are multiplied to feed 5,000 men (plus women and children).

2. Dear ones, when the Lord desires to show forth His mercy, not even the laws He has ordained in the natural world shall prevent Him from coming to the aid of you, His people, who are in need. Yes, the Lord surely desired to show compassion to those who were blind, lame, deaf, hungry, and dead who lived at the time of His earthly ministry, and He also desired to give confirmation that He was the Son of God by such miracles which He performed as well; but I submit that the Lord also desired to show forth His power by such supernatural acts so as to encourage your faith to lay hold of Christ who is able (whenever it pleases Him) to work above and beyond the ordinary laws of nature for the sake of those whom He has redeemed. Dear ones, let not your faith limit the Lord or confine Him to a box, but rather let your faith embrace the Lord in all of His wisdom, power, and mercy who rides upon the

heaven to the help of His beloved children (either to remove the trial or to grant the grace to endure the trial).

B. What was Jonah's response to this mercy of God? "Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd" (Jonah 4:6). What a change in Jonah! Whereas Jonah had been angry with God's plan in showing mercy and bringing salvation to the great city of Nineveh, Jonah now rejoiced with great joy at the bodily comfort and refreshing shade provided by the plant appointed by the Lord.

1. Jonah would not enjoy the refreshment and hospitality of the Ninevites, and so he rather chose to endure the unbearable heat of the sun in a temporary booth. But even in such an angry state of mind toward the Lord and an unfriendly state of mind toward new converts to the Lord, the Lord mercifully causes a plant to sprout which grows at such a rapid pace (by God's great power), so that Jonah might be immediately refreshed (though as we shall see in the next sermon, there was a greater end which the Lord had in providing the plant for Jonah than his mere physical refreshment). The Lord might have said to Jonah, "If you are foolish enough to subject yourself to the scorching heat of the day (rather than to enjoy the hospitality and fellowship of new converts to the Lord), then live with the pain that comes with that foolish decision." But again the Lord comes to Jonah not as a harsh judge, but as a sovereign yet loving Father.

2. Sadly, Jonah had not rejoiced with great joy in the salvation of the Ninevites, but he does rejoice with great joy in a plant that provides him shade from the sun. Creaturely comforts are indeed a merciful blessing from the Lord and we are to enjoy them to the glory of God, but they do not excel the merciful blessings of salvation to lost souls. Jonah is angry over the salvation of Nineveh, but rejoices with great joy over the shade of a plant. Dear ones, has your pursuit of earthly comfort overshadowed the concern that ought to be in your life for the

salvation of family members and friends, overshadowed the advance of Christ's kingdom through a faithful ministry, overshadowed the time you spend in prayer and study of His Word, overshadowed your joy in the Lord? Dear Christian, in closing, we ought to love the Lord our God and our neighbor, and to use the earthly blessings we have to help and serve them. But so often, it is just reversed, we sadly love the earthly blessings, and use God and our neighbor to serve our own selfish ends. The words of Christ in this regard will always be true, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:34). Dear ones, where is your treasure? Is your treasure in your job, in your accomplishments, in your applause from men, in your home, in your car, in your investments, or is your treasure in Christ, in the gospel, and in serving, praying for, and supporting the advance of Christ's kingdom? "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

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