

# JONAH

Part 4: “A God of Scandalous Grace”

Jonah 3:10—4:11

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## Scripture Reading

*“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. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 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. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’ And the LORD said, ‘Do you do well to be angry?’ 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. 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. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. 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.’ 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.’ 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?’” (Jonah 3:10–4:11, ESV).*

## Introduction

Jesus once told a parable about a father and his two sons. The youngest son demands his father give him an early inheritance, and when the son receives it, he squanders it by indulging his every appetite and urge. Quickly he is brought to poverty, brokenness, and suffering. The young son decides to humble himself and return to his father in hopes that he could at least work as a lowly servant on his father's estate.

But as the son returns home, his father is waiting for him. In fact, the father runs to him, embraces him, wraps him in his own robe, and throws a feast to rejoice in his return [show [1The Return of the Prodigal \(c. 1667-69\)](#)].! Such is the love of our Heavenly Father for all of his children, who turn away from their sin and draw near to God.

However, that is not where the story ends. There is another brother, an older brother, who is hard at work in his father's fields. When he returns home to find a feast for his wayward brother, he burns with indignation. He refuses to go in and participate in the feast. He refuses to celebrate that his brother, once as good as dead, has come home.

The father comes to find his elder son and pleads with him to lay down his pride and anger and come inside to join the feast. And then, without a conclusion, the story ends. Jesus purposefully leaves his parable on a cliffhanger.

After all, Jesus is aiming this story toward the Pharisees and the scribes—the religious leaders of his day who are scandalized that Jesus is allowing sinners and tax collectors to draw near to him. He is speaking to those embodying the very spirit of the elder brother. And like the father of the parable, Jesus is inviting them lay down their pride and come into the feast of God's grace.

But this parable shows us more than just the extravagant grace of God. In a brilliant and moving way, Jesus is showing us that there are *two types of lostness*. There is the lostness of *self-indulgence*; of purposefully discarding the commands of God and going your own way, headlong into death and destruction. This is the lostness of the younger brother, the prodigal son.

But just like there is a lostness that is defined by self-indulgence, there is also a lostness that is defined by *self-righteousness*. This is the lostness of the elder brother: it is cold, calculating, and critical. It is judgmental and indignant; without love and without grace. It is a spiritual posture that recoils at the notion that God would give his love and favor to those who are unworthy of it.

I bring this familiar tale to your attention because, throughout our study of the Old Testament book of Jonah, we have seen Jonah embody the lostness of both the younger and older brothers.

As the younger brother, at the beginning of this story, Jonah willfully rejects the command of God and instead leaves to go his own way. He is called to go east to the city of Nineveh, but instead, he sails west to the edge of the world.

Jonah spurns God's goodness and follows his own desires, but his desires lead him only to death and destruction. God sends a fierce storm upon Jonah's ship until Jonah tells the crew on board that he must be cast into the sea for the storm to cease. They obey Jonah's words with great fear and trembling, and the winds and waves are immediately stilled.

As Jonah sinks to the depths, God appoints a great fish to swallow him whole. And there, in the depths of the great waters, Jonah cries out to the Lord. He vows to obey and worship God, and God shows Jonah grace. Jonah is saved and safely returned to dry land, albeit in a rather unpleasant manner.

But then the word of the Lord comes again. God commands Jonah to preach to the city of Nineveh, the capital city of the brutal Assyrian nation. Jonah obeys, and he gives a half-hearted sermon of only doom and judgment. Nevertheless, God uses the words of his wayward prophet to spark a spiritual revival in the heart of an empire bent on violence and evil.

Yet, as we will see in the final passage of this book, Jonah is scandalized by this turn of events. Once the younger brother, who was an unworthy recipient of grace, Jonah now becomes the older brother—indignant that his enemies might be spared of death and judgment by *“A God of Scandalous Grace.”*

Now, Jonah chapter 4 is not the most famous part of Jonah’s story. But it is arguably the most *important* moment of this entire Old Testament book. As we dive further into this chapter, we’ll organize our discussion under three headings: *1.) Jonah’s Rage, 2.) Jonah’s Suffering, and 3.) Jonah’s Gospel.*

## **Exposition**

### **1.) Jonah’s Rage**

Right now, in Wilmore, Kentucky, there is a worship meeting happening on the campus of Asbury University. Students, faculty, and even people from out of town have been gathering non-stop for the last ten days to worship, pray, give testimony, and read Scripture. Many people have reported that it is a genuine revival. And I hope and pray that it is a revival and that it will bear much fruit for kingdom of God.

The initial spark of the revival was a simple sermon, preached in a student chapel service. The sermon itself did not convey anything profoundly new. Rather, it communicated a simple truth that Christian love for one another must flow out of a genuine encounter with the love of God.

Now, several days later after that sermon was preached, I imagine that the man who preached that sermon feels a wide array of emotions. One could imagine such a preacher would feel amazed, humbled, and profoundly grateful to be used by the Holy Spirit to launch a move of God.

But that is *not* how the prophet Jonah feels at the beginning of our passage today. Remember, God has just used Jonah to ignite a city-wide revival in the very heart of a wicked empire built on violence. The people of Nineveh heard Jonah's words as if God had spoken them himself, and they respond.

The people repent. God's divine judgment is stayed. But the prophet Jonah is incensed! Our text reads: *“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. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry”* (Jonah 3:10–4:1).

Jonah burns with hot anger because since the very beginning of this book, he never wanted to speak the word of God to Nineveh, and he never wanted the people of Nineveh to repent. Now the Lord God of Israel has used Jonah to show mercy to a nation of Israel's enemies.

Jonah is flabbergasted. Verse 2 says, *“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. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live’”* (Jonah 4:2–3).

Jonah decides to tell God, *“This is why I ran away from you in the beginning. I know you would do something like this.”* He then begins listing attributes of God's character. This is often something the writers of Scripture will do when they praise God (cf. Ps 103:3–5). But Jonah is not praising God—he *criticizing* God.

He is saying, *“You are gracious, but your grace isn't good. You give grace to the wrong people. You give grace to wicked people who don't deserve it at all.”*

Jonah is all for God's grace when it that grace is rescuing him from his own stupidity and sin, but it offends him to the core that God would give that same grace to Jonah's enemies.

Remember, the Ninevites are a cruel and wicked people. They deserve death and judgment. For God to show them mercy isn't just wrong in Jonah's mind—it is *scandalous* and unjust. The once wayward prophet, who cried out for God to save him from the depth of his sin, now stands in self-righteous judgment over the very God who saved him to the point he desires death over life.

I wonder, like Jonah and older brother of Jesus's parable, do you find it easy to be frustrated when God doesn't give you what you wanted or expected in life? Do you feel anger at God when he blesses someone else in way that you felt think only you deserve? Do you feel like your obedience to God means that God is obligated to bend his will toward your will?

If you have cried out in anger against God, you are not alone. The Bible is a profoundly honest book. It is filled with prayers of anguish, sorrow, and, yes, even rage. God is not taken by our tears, our fears, or anger. But he does not want to leave us there.

God asks Jonah a gentle and simple question that, for a while at least, silences Jonah's accusations: *“And the LORD said, ‘Do you do well to be angry?’”* (Jonah 4:4).

God is saying, *“Jonah, is it just for you to accuse me of injustice? Can you possibly possess the infinite knowledge and wisdom required to question my decisions? Are you qualified to challenge me about what is good and true when he alone is the essence of all goodness and truth?”*

In fact, when Jonah lists all the attributes of God that he now finds detestable, he is not just making things up. He is quoting a passage from the Old Testament book of Exodus, in which God reveals his glory as *"...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, but who will by no means clear the guilty..."* (Exodus 34:6–7).

When Jonah accuses God of being too merciful, he is quoting Scripture! However, did you notice that there was a part of that verse that Jonah left out? Jonah talks about God's mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness, but he leaves out God's dedication to justice. The Lord is compassionate, but he is also committed to punishing evil.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the Lord is so compassionate and committed to punishing evil that he would send his own Son to take the penalty for our sins on the cross so that we might be given mercy.

However, Jonah refuses to see God for who he has revealed himself to be. He sees God only in terms of his own bias and convenience. Moreover, Jonah is more committed to hating his enemies than he is to seeing them as God sees them.

We often define good and evil based on what we want to be true. God defines good and evil based on what is true. He is not just committed to justice—he is the foundation of all that good. And that is why we can trust him.

We can trust that our God has revealed himself to be a God who is infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, and infinitely good. He is bending all things toward his glory and our ultimate good. And though we will encounter moments in life when the will of God seems frustrating, confusing, and even enraging, we know the end of the story is redemption and restoration.

The end of our story is grace.

## **2.) Jonah's Suffering**

Jonah responds to God's piercing question by giving God the silent treatment. He doesn't repent for his hatred against Nineveh. He doesn't ask to be forgiven for mocking God's grace and goodness. He simply goes outside of the city to sit and *"see what would become of the city"* (Jonah 4:5). He is hoping for a front-row seat for the destruction of a people he hates. But he is more than willing to simply wallow in his own bitterness and self-inflicted suffering as well.

This is not your typical image of a prophet of the Lord in the Bible. The prophet Elijah boldly defied a wicked king and called fire down from heaven! The prophet Isaiah beheld the glory of the Lord high and lifted up! The prophet Daniel witnessed the mouths of lions be shut and beheld apocalyptic visions of the kingdom of God!

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 128.

But the climax of the prophet Jonah's story is an image of a fully grown man dramatically pouting that he did not get his way. This does not look like a mighty man of God. This looks like an emo kid from the mid-2000s.

Now, at this point, there is a really interesting word that appears all throughout the book of Jonah, and it now appears in this final scene in a very important way. That word is "ra'ah" (רָעָה). It a pretty flexible word that can mean "evil, disaster, or misery."<sup>2</sup> And in the book of Jonah, this word is used to convey all of those meanings.

The reason that God sends Jonah to Nineveh is their "evil" or there "ra'ah" (רָעָה) had come up before him (Jonah 1:2). When Jonah finally comes to Nineveh, the king issues a decree that calls all the people to turn away from their "ra'ah" (רָעָה) (3:8). As a result, God relents from the "disaster" or "ra'ah" (רָעָה) that he was going to bring upon them.

So by the time we get to Jonah chapter 4, Nineveh is out of "ra'ah" (רָעָה), God is all out of "ra'ah" (רָעָה), but there is one character who is filled to the brim with "ra'ah" (רָעָה). And that character is Jonah.

When Jonah sees that God will stay his judgment upon Nineveh, he overflows with exceeding "displeasure" or exceeding "ra'ah" (רָעָה). In fact, he is not just filled with "ra'ah" (רָעָה), he is *burning* with it. And left unchecked, the "ra'ah" (רָעָה) in Jonah's heart will poison him until he withers and dies.

So just like God appointed the great fish to save Jonah from death in the first chapter, God now appoints a plant to save Jonah from the "ra'ah" (רָעָה) to which his bitterness has brought him.<sup>3</sup> Verse 6 reads: "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 [ra'ah]. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant" (Jonah 4:6).

But Jonah's gladness and relief are short-lived. God also appoints a worm to attack and kill the plant that provides Jonah's shade. Then, he immediately appoints a scorching wind and burning sun that beats down on Jonah's head and brings him to a place of such weariness that Jonah is finally ready to break his vow of silence toward God.

God again asks Jonah a question: "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'" (Jonah 4:9).

You see, the plant, the worm, and the scorching wind were not arbitrary, meaningless acts of God. God did not send the plant to appease Jonah or to make him comfortable. Nor did he send the worm and wind to make him miserable. God has given these visual

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<sup>2</sup> James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

<sup>3</sup> There seems to be an intentional ambiguity to the word "ra'ah" (רָעָה) in this verse. Is Jonah being saved from his discomfort or wickedness? The implied answer is *both*.

images to expose and deliver<sup>4</sup> Jonah from the deadly danger of the sin and hatred that burns within his heart.

Jonah again says that he wants to die in grieving the loss of the plant, and here the Lord will confront his prophet one last time: *“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?’”* (Jonah 4:10–11).

That last phrase *“and also much cattle”* seems strange every time I read it. It seems like such a weird ending to such a fascinating book. We don't get to see how Jonah's story ends. We don't get to see how Nineveh's story ends. We don't even get an answer. We are simply left with a question.

God is saying, *“Jonah, your heart breaks for a non-sentient plant that has no soul, no feelings, and a lifespan of only twenty-four hours. Am I not allowed to have mercy on more than a hundred thousand people—who though they are your enemies—are nevertheless made in my image and my likeness? Is my heart not allowed to break for them too? And if you are not willing to entertain mercy for the people of Nineveh, would you at least extend the same pity for their animals as you did the little plant that you did not create or sustain?”*

It is a symptom of a bitter heart when we are able to easily find sympathy for things and pets and causes, but our hearts are callous and cold toward the suffering of people that we simply don't like or agree with.

The Lord reminds Jonah the people of Nineveh don't know their right hand from their left. They have not been given the law of God. They have not been instructed in the words of Scripture. They don't even know God's name. That's *why* God sent Jonah to them.

In the same way, we should not be surprised when the world does not think the way we think or honor the words of Scripture or worship Jesus. That is why God sent us to this time and this place and this moment.

Is this how you see those who do not know Jesus around you? When you see people who disregard the commands of God, do you see people who need to encounter the beauty of Christ? Or do you simply see those that you feel justified to hate?

But our culture is lost, you might say. Jonah would say no one could have been possibly more lost than the city of Nineveh. Yet no one is beyond the reach of God's grace.

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<sup>4</sup> The word “save” (לָצַד) in Jonah 4:6 can be translated as “deliver.” It is the same word used to describe the salvation of the Exodus and countless other forms of deliverance in the Old Testament (cf. Ex 3:8; Ps 51:14).

Even more, I believe the Lord's desire to save both the people and cattle of this non-Israelite nation displays the magnitude of God's saving work.

In this moment, God is showing that his saving grace isn't just for Jonah and Israel. God's saving grace isn't just for us as individuals and American Christians. God's saving grace is an invitation to all people from all nations. God's saving grace is for all of creation!

As we sing in the old Christmas hymn, "*Joy to the world! The Lord is come. No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.*"

God doesn't just want to end your suffering or our suffering—he will end all suffering.

In light of that glorious hope, are you willing to let go of the bitterness that may still be burning in your heart and withering you with weariness? Your bitterness will accomplish nothing. But God's grace will make all things new.

### **3.) Jonah's Gospel**

As I said toward the beginning of this sermon, Jonah chapter 4 is not the most familiar part of Jonah's story, but it is arguably the most *important* part of Jonah's story.

Most people think that the story of Jonah ends after the fish saves him or his sermon in Nineveh that launches a revival. But it is in the final chapter that we find the point of the whole book.

Jonah ends on a cliffhanger, but just like the cliffhanger ending at the end of Jesus's parable of the prodigal son, the final question of this book is an invitation.

Jonah is invited to be set free of preconceptions about who God is and who God is allowed to save. He is invited to be delivered from both his sinful rebellion and his sinful self-righteousness. He is invited to encounter amazing grace.

Does the prophet ever come around? The words of Scripture never tell us for certain. Nevertheless, I believe we have every reason to trust Jonah did truly repent and come to embrace the grace of God. Why? Because the book of Jonah *exists*.

How else could we know the prayer that Jonah prayed in the belly of the whale? How else could we know about Jonah's anger at God, his sorrow over the plant, and the exchange between God and his prophet in this final chapter?

The answer is that Jonah had been so transformed by God's grace that he was willing to share the tale of how God saved him from his folly and fear; how God delivered him from his prejudice and pride.



The book of Jonah is Jonah's confession, and it testifies to the power of a God who rescues the unlikely and the unworthy by the power of his grace.

And it is important that Jonah's story was told. Because when the people of Jesus's day and age asked him for a sign to confirm that he was the savior, Jesus said the sign you will be given is "*the sign of the prophet Jonah*" (Matt 12:38)

Why did Jesus say this? Because ultimately, the whole book of Jonah is not about Jonah. The book of Jonah is a sign that points us to Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Savior of the world, who is the true and greater Jonah.

Jonah was cast into the waters of death because of his rebellion against God. But Jesus is the greater Jonah, who was cast to death on the cross because of our rebellion against God.

Jonah lay within the figurative tomb of the fish for three days before he was delivered by God onto dry land. But Jesus is the greater Jonah, who laid within a literal tomb for three days, and through the power of his resurrection, delivers us from the powers of sin and death.

Jonah went from Israel to Assyria to preach a word of condemnation and judgment. But Jesus is the greater Jonah, who has been sent from heaven to earth not to condemn the world but to save it (cf. John 3:17).

Jonah sat outside the city of Nineveh to judge his enemies. But Jesus is the greater Jonah who died outside of the city of Jerusalem to reconcile his enemies to himself (cf. Rom 5:10).

Jonah cries out to God, "*My will, not your will, be done.*" But Jesus is the greater Jonah who cries out, "*Not my will, but your will, be done*" (Luke 22:24).

God sends a plant to die so that Jonah might let go of his hate and his sin. But God sends Jesus as the greater Jonah to die so that we might receive his love and righteousness.

This is the scandal of the gospel; the scandal of grace.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we have eyes to see "the sign of the prophet Jonah." May we trust the wisdom of God when his will offends us. May we let go of the bitterness that burns within us. And may we marvel and the brilliance and beauty of the gospel of grace that saves us, and may we declare and display that gospel to the world around us.

AMEN.

## **Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities**

- 1.) *Read Jonah 3:10–4:11 out loud. Now that we are at Jonah's final chapter, review the major events of Jonah's entire story in your own words.*
- 2.) *Why is Jonah angry at God in chapter 4? Have there been moments in your life when you have struggled with anger toward God? Have you been able to draw near to God in your pain? Take this time to comfort one another regarding any situations in which members of your community may be struggling and are willing to share.*
- 3.) *How does the withering plant represent the type of spiritual death that comes from holding onto hate and bitterness in our hearts?*
- 4.) *In the book of Matthew, Jesus refers to his ministry and redemptive work as "the sign of the prophet Jonah" (see: Matt 12:38–41). In what ways have you seen how the story of Jonah is a signpost that points to Jesus as the greater Jonah?*