

Pitiful Prophet Jonah 4:1-11

Introduction

Haters: We love to be **haters**. The only thing Americans seem to love more than a success story is a fall from grace. We love to build people up just to tear them down. I saw something interesting happen earlier this year.¹ A young woman who was very successful in the adult entertainment industry came to faith, repented of her sins, and was baptized. Some Christians cheered, but there was a segment of self-proclaimed Christians who seemed unhappy with her turnaround. They argued that she was a fake, that she still wore too much makeup, that she shouldn't be on social media, etc. Whether there is validity to any of this is a conversation for another day. I just found it interesting that some people's first instinct was disgust and cynicism to rather than joy that the person they might see as too far gone got saved!

Pity Party: Jonah, come to find out, wanted the Ninevites destroyed, not saved. Instead of rejoicing in God's mercy, he's sulking. He can turn anything into a pity party! Jonah is a clown. He's the anti-prophet. Don't be a Jonah. **We should rejoice in the God who saves the wrong kind of people.**

- God's grace doesn't just save us; it transforms us to love like him.

¹ But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 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. ³ Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?" 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. 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. 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." 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." 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. 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 much cattle?"

1. Pouty Prophet (vv. 1-4)

Unhappy Mercy: ¹ But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

¹ NalaFitness (Nala Ray) saga.

- **What displeased Jonah?** Not even the Ninevites repentance but God's mercy (3:10).
 - The mercy of God should never make us mad. The grace of God should never stir our jealousy. We should never be jealous when God blesses someone else (e.g., Greear, revival through someone else's church; is it about God's kingdom or mine? Is it about God's glory or mine? Is it about God's will or mine?).
- Jonah isn't just a little angry but a lot angry (exceedingly).
 - Group project (barely showed up, did nothing, didn't contribute, slacked off). Yet, when it comes to grades, everyone gets an A. You know the type. How would you feel? Frustrated? Crank that feeling to 11. That's Jonah. He's not just a little upset; he's furious (steam shooting out his ears). That's how Jonah felt when God showed mercy to the Ninevites. But here's the twist: God's mercy isn't like a group project grade. It's not about who did the most work; it's about God's grace. Jonah's anger highlights a deeper issue—his struggle with understanding and accepting God's boundless mercy.
- Without Chapter 4, we might assume this book is a **morality tale** with a happy ending. God saved Jonah to share his message and the Ninevites repented, "and they all lived happily ever after." With Chapter 4, we learn that this book is a **cautionary tale**. "The end of Jonah shows us what preaching repentance without love and mercy can do to the heart of a prophet" (Frank).

Deficient Gospel: 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 wanted a god who supported his personal and political agenda. He wanted a gospel that justified his prejudice and apathy. He wanted a church that would prop up his preferences. He wanted a theology to rationalize his enmity.
- **The gospel doesn't come to tell us what we want to hear; it gives us the good news we need to hear.** Too often, we want God to bless our lifestyle rather than change our hearts.
- Surprisingly, Jonah *does know* God's character; he just *doesn't like* it. Quoting Exodus 34:6, he does understand God's mercy and steadfast love. The real reason Jonah ran (ch. 1) finally boils to the surface in Jonah's angry prayer. **It wasn't the fear they'd kill him but the fear they'd repent.** He wanted them to be destroyed.

The Hypocrisy of Forgiveness: The worst part of Jonah's racism is that he experienced God's forgiveness (remember the whole being swallowed by a fish thing?) but refused to give it to his enemies. He was willing to **receive** grace but unwilling to **extend** it.

- I call this the **Grace-for-me-and-Justice-for-you Paradox**. From the earliest days of our lives, we have competing desires for **fairness** and **forgiveness (justice and grace)**. We long for justice when someone does something wrong unless that someone is us, then we crave forgiveness. We all want justice (built into our souls), but we know that justice also demands payment for our sin (and none of us can escape our sin). So, **we love and**

fear the justice we crave (I had my picture taken and complained the picture “didn’t do me justice.” Photog said it wasn’t “justice I needed, but mercy”).

- Most of us are better at **pointing out sin** than extending grace. GOP pundit critiquing Obama girls at 13 and 16 as classless even though she was arrested as a teenager.

Unforgiving Servant:² When Peter asks about the limits of forgiveness, Jesus figuratively tells him there is no limit to forgiveness³ (110%, to infinity and beyond). **There is no end to the forgiveness we offer because there’s no end to the grace we’ve been given.**

- Jesus tells Peter a story of a servant who owed a debt to the king of 10,000 talents. 1 talent = 6,000 denarii. 1 denarii = 1 day’s wages. So 1 talent would take 20 years to earn if you worked 300 days a year. ChatGPT tells 10,000 talents = \$22.8 billion in today’s money. + 10,000 is the largest number for which there is a Greek word, so it’s like saying a zillion or a jillion (both made-up words). **The king forgave the debt**, then he turned around and threw another servant who owed him 100 denarii (about \$10,000) in jail.
- For Jonah to be unwilling to extend the grace of God to the Ninevites when he experienced himself shows you that God’s grace has not transformed him.
- Those who have experienced the extravagant grace of God should extend it generously to others.

The Overwhelming Gospel: God didn’t just **forgive** our debt; he **paid** our debt, a debt greater debt than \$22.8 billion.

- “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (1 Pet 3:18).
- “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). **Do you see your sin debt as this large? If not, you’ll miss how extravagant God’s grace is** (sin on the cross, worst moment, emotional turmoil, worst than physical pain, etc.).

A Bit Much:³ Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” As Andy Bernard (St. Bernard) from *The Office* would say, “That was an overreaction.” This is the absurd and sad end of idolatry. Instead of conforming our hearts to God’s, we get mad that God doesn’t conform his heart to ours (out of fries, “why God, why?”).

Are You Done Yet?:⁴ And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?” God doesn’t respond with the same emotional immaturity as Jonah (waiting for a child’s tantrum to end). **Are you done yet? Feel better? How’s your attitude working for you?** Jonah doesn’t answer, he just runs away (the emotional equivalent of slamming the door).

2. Petty Prophet (vv. 5-11)

² Matt 18:21-35

³ 77 times (e.g., perfect, perfect); some translations 70 times 7. Peter said 7 times (which was generous compared to the Rabbinic limit of three times).

Popcorn: 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.

- Jonah grabs his popcorn and is hoping for a fireworks show. *Shadenfreude*⁴ (taking joy in the misery of others). “The misfortunes of others taste like honey” (Japanese proverb). E.g., Cops, Reality TV, (church) fails, etc. Why do we love seeing other peoples flaws? Because we don’t want to admit our own? **We would rather point out someone else’s shortcomings than deal with our own.** We feel if we can bring someone else down that it somehow lifts us up.

Happy: 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.

- This is the only time in the entire book that Jonah is **happy**. And he’s not just a little happy he’s exceedingly happy. He went from exceedingly angry (v. 1) to exceedingly happy (v. 6). What made him so happy? A plant.
- He was angry that the people repented and angry that God relented but happy for a shade tree. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate a good shade tree (cf. Bamako, Mali shade; vs. humidity we have on the East Coast).
- This is the definition of disordered love. I’m not saying to be *mad* at the shade tree but keep some perspective. What is really more important? It’s not just important to love the right things but to love them in the proper order (e.g., Augustine disordered loves, hotdog shouldn’t be more important than my kids).

Addicted to Comfort: God, in his kindness, gave Jonah comfort (save him from his discomfort). Jonah appears to love comfort not simply as a gift, but *more* than the giver. The end goal becomes comfort. God comforts us in our distress but doesn’t promise us comfortable circumstances.

- One of the reasons God *allows* us to **suffer** is to call us to himself. The depth of your hope is produced in the trials of life. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (Jas 1:2-4). **Comfort** can be more of a **faith killer** than suffering. Grass: If you overwater, the roots stay near the surface and can’t survive the heat (they need to grow deep). Too often we’ve settled for shallow expression of faith that can’t stand the storms of life. We’ve substituted **depth** for **hype**.
 - Hype loves a good worship service, depth lives the gospel the rest of the week.
 - Hype is attracted to emotional experiences, depth is committed to daily obedience.
 - Hype wants a quick fix, depth perseveres for the long haul.
 - Hype thrives in comfort, depth embraces suffering.

For Jonah, his personal comfort was more important than the Ninevites salvation. Jonah loved the plant (i.e., comfort) because he really loved himself. **Until you love God more than the temporary pleasures of this world, he will have to uproot them to give you the fullest joy.**

⁴ *Shaden* (damage or harm) + *Freude* (joy or pleasure).

- If you only love God when he gives you what you want, you actually only love yourself.

Give and Take Away: The goal of faith is not to understand everything God does but to trust who God is. It is all about trust, to say with Job, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). God is good, and he is God in all circumstances. Even if... Sin is real. Brokenness is real. Pain is profound. Run *toward* God in faith.

Teach a Lesson: 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.

- God uses a divine object lesson to clarify Jonah’s misplaced priorities. The same God that sent the plant sent a worm and a wind to destroy it. God appointed the storm, the whale, the worm. He is in control.⁵
- The **sovereignty of God** is not meant to minimize our participation in daily decisions but to provide us comfort and reassurance when things happen that we don’t understand.
- Even worms and whales are appointed by God to get our attention. Not everything “bad” that happens is from God’s judgment for our sin. Some bad things happen because the world is broken by sin. But every bad thing is an opportunity to trust and follow him.
- College, drunk friend mad when I took his keys. Thanked me in the morning when he was sober and thinking clearly. Now that I think about it, my kids are the same way. Toddlers are like little drunks. I don’t mind if my kids are mad at me, I still do what’s best. I want them to grow up to be healthy, mature, happy, responsible, etc.
 - God isn’t worried if you’re mad at him. He wants to help you grow up into godliness. He knows the person you *should* be.

Kill Me Now: And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” The king of overreactions strikes again. This is not the first time he has wished for death rather than simply surrender to God.

- With this kind of attitude, he might be alive, but he certainly isn’t living. When you fight God, you lose. When you wrestle with God, at best you limp away. **Jesus is not only the path to eternal life but the path to a meaningful life.**

Q&A: 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.” Same question again but this time he doesn’t run away, he answers. He doubles down on his pettiness. Would you rather win an argument than do what is right?

- God is patient with him. You aren’t going to scare God away with your angry rants and frustrated tantrums. You are not God. You have emotions. You need to feel them (e.g., Adam). Emotions are good and helpful at pointing us to how to a lot of things about ourselves. They are great passengers but terrible drivers. They can advise us but shouldn’t guide us. Your emotions are not God; God is God.

⁵ Repetition of the word “appointed.”

Misplaced Anger: But Jonah does not have a good reason (he does not do well) to be angry! He isn't mad about some great injustice, he is mad about a plant.

- **How many of us love “the plants” in our lives more than the people in our world?** We'd be more upset if the AC goes out than someone dies without a relationship with Christ. We might say we care about people but the way we act, the way we treat them, the way we spend our time and money, often says otherwise.
- We get inordinately attached to silly little things. Our perspective is stilted (e.g., driving rage). Cf. Man escaped house fire, ran back in to get his cell phone and died.
- Jonah is so focused on himself rather than God's glory, so obsessed with his own perspective, that he can't see how great it is that the Ninevites repent.

Transformative Grace: What right does Jonah have to be angry? None. God saved him from an ocean grave and gave him a second chance. Jonah has no rights; it's all grace. We don't have any rights before God. We all deserve death but have been given life.

- Jonah wanted God's grace on his (Jonah's terms), not on God's terms. Grace only works when it's all his (terms).
- The scary part of grace: if we don't earn it, we can't control it. We have nothing to bargain with God. One woman came up to a pastor after a service and said that unmerited grace scared her. He “asked her what was so scary about unmerited free grace? She replied something like this: ‘If I was saved by my good works, then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with rights. I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if it is really true that I am a sinner saved by sheer grace — at God's infinite cost — then there's nothing he cannot ask of me’ (Keller).
- God is showing Jonah that his grace is wider than he imagined and inviting him to be part of sharing it with others. Grace is more **free** than Jonah wants, because it is offered to people Jonah doesn't want to give it to. It is more **expensive** than Jonah wants because it demands obedience that he doesn't want to give.
 - Grace is free, but it is not cheap, because it cost Jesus his life (Bonhoeffer).
- Jonah was glad to receive God's grace but not glad to give it, which means he didn't truly receive it. God showed pity on him, yet he didn't want to show pity on others.
- He didn't internalize the gospel; it didn't transform him.
 - A true experience with grace always transforms us, it binds us to Christ, so that we joyfully participate in his life. We love what he loves. We have compassion toward those he has compassion with. We follow the path of suffering he walks.
- Jonah's self-absorption deceived him from understanding his own sin, which prevented him from truly experiencing the grace and freedom of the gospel. “People give as much grace as they think they need” (Edmondson). The gospel tells us that we are more flawed than we want to believe, but more loved than we dare hope (Keller).

People Matter: 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. 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 much cattle?”

- Jonah valued the wrong thing. He failed to see the value of people made in the image of God. Every person you see is made in the image of God and will last forever. They are deeply loved by God. If God made them and loves them, shouldn't I?
- How bad of a prophet must you be to be *mad* that hundreds of thousands of people repented? We do the same thing when we care more about...
 - ...our comfort than other people's salvation.
 - ...our possessions than others' well-being.
 - ...our convenience than others' needs.
 - ...our preference than others' eternities.
- God says, Jonah, you care more about this plant than people or even cows (some of you care more animals than people).

Conclusion

Jonah or Jesus?: We need to leave the spirit of Jonah for the spirit of Jesus.

- Jonah is **reluctant** to go tell, Jesus is **relentless** in pursuing us.
- Jonah is **addicted** to comfort, Jesus is **committed** to serving us at the cost of his own life.
- Jonah is **unhappy** to suffer at all, Jesus is **joyful** to go to the cross.
- Jonah's turnaround was **temporary**, Jesus' transformation is **eternal**.

The Bible describes Jesus as someone who has compassion when he sees others who are hurting. He cries when he sees the pain they feel. He is a "man of sorrows." Do you know why? When you are not absorbed in yourself, you can feel the sadness of others (Keller).

Question?: This book actually ends on a cliffhanger. It asks a question and we don't hear the response. The question isn't for Jonah, it's for us. How will we respond?

There Are Lots of Ways to Be a Jonah: Are you a Jonah? There are lots of ways to be a Jonah.

- Foolishly run from the call of God.
- Selfishly think you know better than God.
- Ignorantly withhold God's grace from others.

Missional Transformation: The true impact of the gospel is not just rescue from the belly of the fish but transformation to the mission of God. The true hallmark of the gospel is not when we want it to save us but when we want it to save them. The gospel transforms, and the same gospel that birthed the early church is still at work today. I think of missionaries like **Karen Watson**. A relatively late convert to the faith, Watson sold her house and belongings, quit her job in Bakersfield, CA, and joined the International Mission Board to go to Iraq as a missionary in the early 2000s, ironically very close to the ruins of the ancient city of Nineveh. She went to be the hands and feet of Jesus, working on water purification and other projects and trying to share the love of Jesus with as many as she could. In 2004, she and four other missionaries were ambushed by armed gunman. Karen and three others were killed. Knowing the danger of her assignment, she left a letter with her pastors, written one year before she passed:

You should only open this letter in the event of death. When God calls, there are no regrets. I tried to share my heart with you as much as possible, my heart for the nations. I wasn't called to a place. I was called to Him. To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected. His glory, my reward.

The Missionary Heart

Cares more than some think is wise.

Risks more than some think is safe.

Dreams more than some think is practical.

Expects more than some think is possible

I was called not to comfort or success but to obedience. There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving Him.

God's Heart: I want your heart to break for the people in your life and in our world who are lost without Christ. I want the grace of Christ to overwhelm you so that you can't help but extend it to others. God's grace doesn't just save us, it transforms us to love like him.

- He gave his life away so that others could live, and he invites us to do the same.
- Don't pity Karen, pity those who will never know what it looks like to walk so deeply with Jesus that they live for him rather than themselves. There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving Him.



- Has the gospel transformed your life?
- How has God called you to go with the gospel?
 - Foolishly run from the call of God.
 - Selfishly think you know better than God.
 - Ignorantly withhold God's grace from others.
 - Or you can surrender to God and find the joy and freedom of a life transformed by his grace for his purposes.