

Jonah Is Angry that Nineveh Didn't Receive Judgment

Jonah 4:1-4

Jonah 4:1-4 - *"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. ² So he prayed to the Lord, and said, "Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore, I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. ³ Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!" ⁴ Then the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"*

Background Notes

In Jonah 3, God gave Jonah a second chance – and in chapter 4, Jonah gave God a second chance - another chance to possibly judge Nineveh after all! Seriously speaking, though, Jonah did not like the fact that God showed grace to Nineveh. That's why Jonah was angry! Jonah was hoping that, on second thought, God just might still judge Nineveh.

Nineveh, that great Assyrian city, had repented at the preaching of Jonah. From the king and the greatest of the people on down to the least of the people, they had believed in the one true God and repented of their sin. Look at Jonah 3:5-6: *"So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes."*

The king was probably King Ashurbanipal, the Assyrian king who ruled from 669 BC down to 626 BC. He was not only the king of Nineveh – he was the king of all of Assyria. But even the king put on sackcloth - a rough, coarse, uncomfortable fabric for clothing. That's why it was worn as a sign of repentance.

What would we have done if we were missionaries, and in Jonah's sandals? Imagine our joy at such an overwhelming response to our message – almost as soon as we got off the plane! People getting saved all over the place – taxi cab drivers, shop keepers, corrupt government officials, high school and college students, professional athletes, even movie stars!

Can you imagine our joy and rejoicing? We'd be sending letters and emails back to the home church for sure - and we'd be thanking and praising the Lord! We would joyfully pray the words of Jonah 4:2, *"O Lord, we know that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, relentless from doing harm"* – and we'd pray it with the right attitude.

But not Jonah! Notice the “but” of verse 1: *“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.”* What a contrast between God’s attitude and Jonah’s attitude towards the people of Nineveh. Luke 15:10 says that there was joy in the presence of the angels because Nineveh repented - but Jonah was displeased and angry.

Look at Jonah’s prayer in verse 2. Same words as we might pray if we were missionaries - but a very different attitude. *“Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.”* In essence Jonah said, “I knew it was going to happen. I knew people were going to get saved - and I don’t like it!”

Jonah was like a spoiled child having a temper tantrum - and the Lord had to deal with him on that basis. And that’s what the rest of chapter 4 is all about, as we’ll see.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers may be obedient, but not joyful.

Jonah was no longer a disobedient prophet. God used Jonah’s experience in the belly of the big fish to bring Jonah to repentance. Look back at Jonah 2:7-9: *“When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple. “Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy. But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord.”* Jonah had come back into fellowship with the Lord.

In chapter 3, when Jonah was re-commissioned and told to go to Nineveh, he obeyed. He responded to the “God of the Second Chance.” In fact, he obeyed without hesitation and without question. *“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord...* (3:2-3). And when he got to Nineveh, Jonah preached exactly what God told him to preach.

Jonah was an obedient prophet - but he was not a joyful prophet. Why? Jonah wasn’t joyful because he didn’t have the mind and heart of the Lord. Jonah’s ideas of what God should do and should not do simply didn’t line up with what God was actually doing. Jonah was obedient, but he wasn’t happy about it.

Do you see the teaching for us? It is possible to be an obedient Christian, but not a joyful Christian. Are you in that category? Maybe you’re an obedient Christian, but you’re not joyful because it seems that God is blessing other churches more than your church. Or maybe God is raising up other ministries, and you don’t quite agree with their message or methods. Or maybe as you look around at other individual believers, you’re not joyful because *from your perspective*, God’s not blessing you or using you as much as He should.

Or maybe you're an obedient Christian woman, but you're unhappy that God has denied women the "leadership role" in the church. 1 Timothy 2 is very clear about this, and you're obeying the teaching - but you don't like it. It's especially hard to understand this teaching in today's culture, when women are often found in leadership positions. And it's even more difficult if you see the failure of male leadership in the church. You're an obedient Christian - but you're not joyful, because you just can't understand why God would ordain this particular structure for the church.

So maybe you're an obedient Christian - but you're not a joyful Christian. You're like Jonah in Jonah 4. And just as God had to deal with Jonah for his shortsightedness and rebellious ways, so God will have to deal with you. He'll do it as a loving heavenly Father - but He will deal with your attitude.

God wants us to be obedient – and He wants us to be joyful as well! But sadly, sometimes believers may be obedient, but they're not joyful.

2. Believers may be orthodox, but not merciful.

Jonah was quite orthodox in his theology. In the midst of the storm, he told the sailors: "... *I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land*" (1:9). That's an orthodox creedal statement if I ever heard one! It doesn't get any more orthodox than that!

And in Jonah 4:2 he said, "*I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.*" That's a very orthodox statement, too - but Jonah was not happy about the truth of that statement. In fact, Jonah was wishing that God was **not** gracious and **not** merciful toward Nineveh!

Jonah certainly wasn't merciful. He was a lot like the older brother in the story of the "prodigal son" in Luke 15. Remember the older brother's attitude when the father showed mercy to the younger brother - the runaway son who had repented and returned home. Luke 15:25-32: "*Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.'*" "*But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'*" "*And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.'*"

Jonah's attitude was the same as the older brother. He was angry because he did not like God to show mercy to the sinful people of Nineveh. In the context of the parable, it's clear that the Lord was using the figure of the older brother to

rebuke the Pharisees. They were orthodox in their theology, and they would have certainly signed a creedal statement saying that “God is merciful” - but the Pharisees were certainly not merciful. They hated the fact that, in Jesus Christ, God’s mercy was going out to the sinners who repented, like the runaway son in the parable. The Pharisees did not want God to be merciful to the “Zacchaeuses” and the “Mary Magdalenes.” They were orthodox - but they were not merciful.

Well, It’s not difficult to see how wrong the older brother’s attitude was, and how wrong the Pharisees were - but what about us? Are we orthodox - but not merciful? What about our attitude toward the homosexual community, for example? Most of us are orthodox enough to agree that God loves gay people just as much as He loves straight people, but I’ve got to admit that I’m not as merciful as I should be. That is a Nineveh for me. It’s out of my comfort zone. I’m not as merciful in my attitude as God is. Are you? Some Christians, like Jonah, are not even merciful when they repent, and no longer practice this lifestyle.

Sadly, many other examples could be given to show that believers may be orthodox - but we are not always merciful.

Practical Application

Do you have a good reason to be angry?

“Then the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” That’s exactly what God asked Jonah in verse 4. “Do you have a good reason to be angry?” Maybe God is asking you that question. Are you angry about something that’s going on in your life? Are you uptight with God for allowing it? The Lord would say the same thing to you that He said to Jonah: “Do you have a good reason to be angry?”

There’s the good news and the bad news here. The good news is that God is willing to reason with us. Remember, Jonah was like a rebellious pouting child who wanted his own way - but in His grace, God was willing to tolerate Jonah’s bad attitude, and patiently deal with him. And God is willing to do the same thing with us.

The bad news was that Jonah was angry with God, and he didn’t have a proper attitude towards God, or a good reason to be angry. And that’s usually the way it is with us. Yes, there’s a proper place for righteous indignation, as the Lord was angry when He cleansed the Temple. Ephesians 4:26 says, *“Be angry, but do not sin.”* But usually our anger is uncalled for. Maybe someone got a better deal than we did. Maybe we think God is unfair. Maybe we think God has dealt too harshly with us, and not harshly enough with someone we consider to be unworthy of His grace.

If you’re angry, do you know what God would say to you today?

“Do you have a good reason to be angry?”