

Jonah had tried to flee from God's presence only to end up in the belly of a great fish. Thinking he was at death's door he finally repented, embraced the steadfast love of God, and yielded to God's call.

Vomited up on the shore, he set off for the wicked city of Nineveh, the capital of a nation that was a threat to his own nation. He preached the message God gave him, "Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed." The people believed God and repented, and God relented of the judgment He threatened to bring upon them.

¹ *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.* Jonah 4:1 BUT - We saw that little word in chapter one verse three. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, *but Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.* God told Jonah to go, but... God relented of the disaster He said He would do, but... Is that not what goats do? Butting heads! And goats symbolize the ungodly (Matthew 25:32ⁱ, 41ⁱⁱ). Jonah's first "but" was trying to flee from God. This second one was displeasure in God's mercy on Nineveh. He is acting like a goat. Butting heads with God is a losing proposition.

You would think Jonah would be different after three days and nights in a fish and that wonderful prayer in which he prayed he would be completely submitted to whatever God would do. Did he not pray about those who forsake the steadfast love of God (2:8ⁱⁱⁱ)? Did he not declare salvation belongs to the Lord (2:9^{iv})? Now that he sees it apply to his enemies, he is angry and exceedingly displeased!

The Hebrew is even more telling of Jonah's attitude. It literally reads, "But it was evil to Jonah with great evil." In other words, the term 'evil' (*rā'āh*), which has been repeatedly applied to the Ninevites, now characterizes the prophet. By objecting to the character and actions of God, Jonah has effectively put himself out of fellowship with God as the evil and ignorant heathen (cf. Romans 2:1^v). But God showed him the same compassion as he had shown Nineveh.^{vi} There is a play on words here with the root *rā'ā*, which can refer to wickedness on the one hand (see 1:2^{vii}) or to disaster, trouble, or misery as here. The evil that was characteristic of the people of Nineveh here described the prophet of God.^{viii}

Did Jonah realize how merciful God was being toward his attitude? When we are upset with what God has allowed, do we realize how patient He is with us? Our old nature will almost always be opposed to what God has ordained. Then we get angry, complain, and fixate on our displeasure with what God has allowed. We take our eyes off all the goodness bestowed on us and become ungrateful. That make things worse. We should be trusting in God's love for us and trying to see the good that could come from our situation. We miss the lessons God is trying to teach us for our good.

We all have that old nature with its goat like tendency to butt against the will of God. Call it our Adamic nature, the sin nature, or flesh, it seems to always want something other than the will of God. Apostle Paul wrote: ¹⁷ *For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.* Galatians 5:17 One minute you think you have mastered it and are surrendered to God's will and the next you find yourself playing the goat, butt, butt! *Who shall deliver us from this body of death?* The Apostle Paul responds to his own question. ^{25a} *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* Romans 7:24b, 25a

This chapter is about God delivering Jonah from his fleshly mindset. Paul tells us Jesus can deliver us if we will walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh (Romans 8:13^{ix}). It is a continual choice, and Jesus will help us if we let Him. Sometimes that help comes in the form of what displeases us that opens our eyes to our own selfishness. That is what Jonah experiences later in this chapter.

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 4:2 In Jonah’s two verse prayer he reveals how selfish he is being by using the word “I” or “my” nine times in the original language. When we are upset with God it is usually due to a self-centered attitude. Jonah is complaining about God’s goodness applied to his enemies, as if he alone somehow deserved God’s favor.

In the prayer, he reveals one of the reasons he fled. Jonah did not want to see the evil people of Nineveh repent. He knew the nature of God and feared the enemy of Israel would be more responsive to God than Israel. And his fear was well founded. God will use Nineveh to judge the northern tribes and take them into captivity just as God declared would happen if Israel ignored from His commands.

Jonah’s description of God’s nature is almost identical to **Joel 2:13**, ¹³ *and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.* It is also similar to God’s self-disclosure in **Exodus 34:6,7a**, ⁶ *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ^{7a} keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,”* God would rather see us repent so that He can show us mercy. James tells us ¹³ *For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.* James 2:13 When we are unmerciful to others, we invite the same toward ourselves.

What a blessing it is to know that this is the heart of the God who created us and all things. He is *abounding in steadfast love*. This expression in Jonah 4:2 is the eighth time it is repeated in Scripture. Could we dream up a better God? We want a God who is just, but we want mercy to prevail when we truly repent. We want steadfast love to abound toward us. We all desire to be loved, and not just a fickle love that loves when it gets what it wants, but to be loved with a steadfast love that is patient with us.

I was just listening to the song Jireh. The line that grabbed my heart is: “I can never be more loved than I am right now!” That is because God’s love for us is based on Jesus’ righteousness. He will finish the work in us and make us like His Son (1 John 3:2^x), but He sees that future condition right now. I understand it theologically, but my heart has a hard time accepting the wonder of it.

Though Scripture declares that God loves the world, the Jews seemed to have a hard time accepting it. Jonah had a really hard time as we see in the next verse. He wanted the grace of God upon him when he came to his senses in the belly of the fish, but he did not want the Ninevites to experience the same grace.

This is a dangerous attitude. Jesus said that the measure we use toward others will be what He uses toward us (Matthew 7:2^{xi}). If we dish out just a of mercy and refuse to give anymore to those who offend us, we are asking God to be the same way toward us. That scares me to the core, for I know I need a lot of mercy. Are you upset because

someone is not maturing in Christ as fast as you think they should? Take a look in the mirror. You are asking Jesus to be that way toward you. Yikes!

³ *Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.*” Jonah 4:3 Jonah was upset because God had given a message through him that saved an enemy of Israel. This is another example of Jonah being the opposite of Jesus. For Jesus endured the cross to save us which was the joy set before Him (Hebrews 12:2^{xii}). Jonah wanted God to play favorites, but that would mean His nature was inconsistent. He was so disappointed at the grace shown the Ninevites that he wanted to die.

Jonah used words very similar to those of Elijah (1 Kings 19:4^{xiii}). Elijah reacted the same way when Jezebel threatened to have him killed. He had just seen a great victory over the Baal priests, but Israel was not repenting, and that disappointed him. With Jonah it was just the opposite. He was upset because those to whom he preached did repent.

Sometimes we go from great heights to great depths. Depression can afflict even the best of saints. The prince of preachers, Charles Hadden Spurgeon struggled with it. We have everything to be thankful for in the love of God for us, but we get our eyes on our circumstances and forget the most important thing. Our disappointments overwhelm our souls, and we have a difficult time taking our eyes off them. We have a pity party that things did not go according to our plan. We must **remember God is sovereign and that we could not be more loved than we are right now.** That means the circumstances, as difficult as they can be, are not to harm us but to bless us if we can see from God’s perspective (Jeremiah 29:11^{xiv}). We may not understand it at the moment, but we are to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7^{xv}). We must trust the One who holds our destiny.

“Here we see how bad theology may also lead to despair. If the Israelites had not had such a limited understanding of their God, an understanding that, among other things, tied together much too closely faith in God and social/political/economic prosperity, they would have been better enabled to cope with the realities of life.”^{xvi}

Smith and Page make an important point that we should heed. Our faith should never be tied too closely to our society, our politics, or the state of our economy. If it is, the rude realities of life will have us thinking our faith has failed us which leads us to depression.

⁴ *And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?”* Jonah 4:4 After all the grace bestowed after Jonah’s effort to flee from God and now his complaint against God’s wonderful nature, you would think God would just say, “As you wish,” and strike Jonah dead. But as Jonah declared, God is *“slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”* God often graciously confronts our waywardness with a question to have us do some self-reflection. **“Do you do well to be angry?”** We should ask that to ourselves every time we get angry. God asked the first couple, “Where are you?” and “Who told you that you were naked” (Genesis 3:9^{xvii}, 11^{xviii})? Those questions are meant to convict us if we will be honest with ourselves. God asked Cain, “Where is your brother?” Only after he rejected conviction did God ask, “What is this that you have done” (Genesis 4:9, 10^{xix})? The mariners had remarked to Jonah when they found he was running from God, “What is this that you have done” (Jonah 1:10^{xx})!

You will notice that Jonah did not answer the question. That is because it was more like a statement of shock. God will ask him again under different circumstances if

he does well to be angry. It seems that like Cain, Jonah did not at first receive conviction. He clung to his anger and hoped that God might still destroy the city.

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 4:5 Jonah left the city. When he saw their repentance, you would think he might be encouraged to tell them more about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham was from that area. Why not use that connecting point to tell them of the steadfast love of God? Jonah is not happy about their repentance, which is hard for us to understand. It is the one time in Scripture we see a prophet disappointed that his message was well received.

At the time, Jews saw faith in God as connected to the land and the government. They had a difficult time thinking God would give favor to another people group. It reminds me of an old joke. A man arrives in heaven and sees a great wall. He asks what is on the other side. An angel tells him, “That is a certain denomination’s section. They cannot believe anyone other than those in their denomination would be here.” Their attitude was similar to Jonathan Swift’s poem.

*We are God’s chosen few,
All others will be damned;
There is no place in heaven for you,
We can’t have heaven crammed.^{xxi}*

Other nations were either allied with Israel, subservient to Israel, or were an enemy. Assyria was an enemy. Jonah saw their repentance as a threat to Israel. He knew the northern tribes of Israel needed to repent but would not. Perhaps he was looking forward to the annihilation of Assyria as way to bring those tribes back to faith in God. He certainly did not want to return to tell them his message spared their main enemy from the wrath of God.

Sometimes we think we know what God wants to do. We create a scenario in our minds that makes us out to be a great hero. But then when God does something different, no matter how wonderful, and we get no credit, we are disappointed. Jonah may have even seen this as a humiliation.

Jonah seems unsure if grace is God’s final word. He seems to still be hoping for fire and brimstone. That area has extremely high temperatures, so to get some shade from the sun he built a booth. A booth is a simple stick structure to help one get some relief from the elements, but the sun would still shine through the space between the sticks.

Even when we see God acting in a way that was different from our imagined scenario, we can still hold out hope that things will change. This was where Jonah had determined to be. “Come on God! Let me see the fireworks! Surely their repentance is insincere.” And so, he sits uncomfortable in the heat thinking he is better and more deserving of grace than those Gentile Ninevites.

Some of us may be sitting in our own booth, uncomfortable in the environment where God has us, and disappointed in what is happening. God asks us, “Do you do well to be angry?” Are you angry over your family, your spouse, your singleness, your job, your church, your health, or your current circumstances? Were you hoping for God to intervene in some dramatic way, and He did not?

God is sovereign. He knows exactly what each of us needs. He never promised the road would be easy. In fact, Jesus calls following Him a denial of self and taking up a cross (Matthew 16:24^{xxii}). He said that in this world we will have trouble (John 16:33^{xxiii}). He never promised things would turn out like we hope. Job asked if we should receive good from God and not trouble (Job 2:10^{xxiv}). He works with the choices we make, and many of those choices determined our present circumstances. Nevertheless, He is there with us seeing us through it. He is using it all for our good. Even in great difficulty know that you have never been more loved than you are right now.

Jonah certainly did not realize that what God was taking him through was about God's great love for him as much as it is about the Ninevites. **Your story is about God's great love for you.** Jonah could not look to the cross and declare it as the greatest demonstration of love the world has ever witnessed, but you and I can (John 15:13^{xxv}). We can face the difficulties of life knowing He is with us and working all things together for our good because we live on this side of the cross (Romans 8:28^{xxvi}). We can give Him thanks in every situation (1 Thessalonians 5:18^{xxvii}). We can count it all joy when we fall into various trials (James 1:2^{xxviii}). Or we can sit uncomfortably in our little booths hoping for that miracle that will never come because God is doing something greater, even though we presently do not understand it. God graciously lets us choose which it will be. It is a matter of trust and faith in who God is. We believe God or we do not.

Jonah knew of God's steadfast love. He expected it to be poured out on the Ninevites. He just did not want God to be gracious to his enemies. He did not want to share God's steadfast love with enemies. Do we want to share God's heart for a broken and wicked world? Remembering that the measure we use for others will be applied to us should make us generous in giving grace and mercy. And that comes from letting Jesus have His way in our hearts.

Are you angry with God for something in your life or a past experience? You do not have to understand it, but you should never let it cause you to be angry with God. People have free will. We do hurtful things. If you are holding anger toward God this morning, learn from Jonah. Forgive, believe in God's love displayed on the cross, know that He felt your pain when you went through that experience. Let it go and ask Him to heal the hurt and use it for His glory. He wants to because He loves you. You have never been more loved than you are right now!

Questions:

- 1 How did Jonah react to his preaching success?
- 2 How was Jonah acting contrary to his own prayer?
- 3 What is Jonah complaining about?
- 4 Do you realize you can never be more loved than you are right now?
- 5 How can hard times be the best times?
- 6 Why does God confront us with questions?
- 7 What is Jonah waiting for?
- 8 What was the typical Jew's attitude toward Gentiles?
- 9 How easy is it to follow Jesus?
- 10 What is this account all about?

ⁱ **Matthew 25:32 (ESV)**

³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

ⁱⁱ **Matthew 25:41 (ESV)**

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Jonah 2:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

^{iv} **Jonah 2:9 (ESV)**

⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

^v **Romans 2:1 (ESV)**

¹ Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

^{vi} H. L. Ellison, “[Jonah](#),” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Daniel and the Minor Prophets*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 384–385

^{vii} **Jonah 1:2 (ESV)**

² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”

^{viii} Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, [Amos, Obadiah, Jonah](#), vol. 19B, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 271

^{ix} **Romans 8:13 (ESV)**

¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

^x **1 John 3:2 (ESV)**

² Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

^{xi} **Matthew 7:2 (ESV)**

² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

^{xii} **Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)**

² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

^{xiii} **1 Kings 19:4 (ESV)**

⁴ But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.”

^{xiv} **Jeremiah 29:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

^{xv} **2 Corinthians 5:7 (ESV)**

⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight.

^{xvi} Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, [Amos, Obadiah, Jonah](#), vol. 19B, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 274.

^{xvii} **Genesis 3:9 (ESV)**

⁹ But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”

^{xviii} **Genesis 3:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”

^{xix} **Genesis 4:9-10 (ESV)**

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” ¹⁰ And the LORD said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.

^{xx} **Jonah 1:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

^{xxi} David Guzik, [Jonah](#), *David Guzik’s Commentaries on the Bible* (Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik, 2000), Jon 4:2–3.

^{xxii} **Matthew 16:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

^{xxiii} **John 16:33 (ESV)**

³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

^{xxiv} **Job 2:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

^{xxv} **John 15:13 (ESV)**

¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

^{xxvi} **Romans 8:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

^{xxvii} **1 Thessalonians 5:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

^{xxviii} **James 1:2 (ESV)**

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,