

Jonah 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 September 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Jonah chapter 4. 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.

[1 : 19] And the Lord said, You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, 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?

The book of Jonah is a two-panelled book. Chapters 1 and 2 map on to chapters 3 and 4. There are two calls of Jonah, one in chapter 1 and one in chapter 3. Two cases of pagans repenting at his teaching, in chapter 1 with the pagan sailors, and in chapter 3 with the Ninevites.

And then in chapters 2 and 4, Jonah speaks with the Lord. As we read the book of Jonah, there should be a number of questions that are in the back of our minds at this point, that have not yet been answered by the text.

The big question at the beginning is, why does Jonah run away? What is he hoping to achieve by this? It seems to be a futile endeavour to flee from the Lord, who is the creator of the heavens and the earth.

Various suggestions have been proposed for this. Perhaps Jonah is a selfish nationalist, and does not want to see the word of God going to a pagan nation. Perhaps he is worried that the pagan nation will show up his compatriots for their failure to respond to the prophetic word.

[2 : 33] Rabbi David Foreman makes the convincing argument that the real issue for Jonah is the apparent failure of the Lord's justice, something that comes to the foreground in verses 2 and 3. It is important here to notice the verses behind Jonah's statement.

In Exodus chapter 34 verses 6-7, after the events with the golden calf, the Lord appeared to Moses and declared his name. 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, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.

We see this passage from Exodus chapter 34, also used in Nahum chapter 1 verses 2-3. The Lord is a jealous and avenging God. The Lord is avenging and wrathful.

The Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. We should here note the

contrast between the statement that Jonah makes and the Lord's initial declaration, and also the differences between Jonah's statement and that of the book of Nahum.

While the original statement speaks of the Lord's faithfulness or truth, that element is dropped from Jonah's words. Furthermore, in Jonah's statement, the reference to God not clearing the guilty and visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children and the children's children is not mentioned.

[4 : 25] Instead, the Lord relents from disaster. This again contrasts with Nahum's statement, where Nahum emphasizes those elements of the original statement, that have to do with the Lord's justice and punishment.

For Jonah then, the problem seems to be a theological one. His issue seems to be that in holding out this possibility of easy repentance to this nation, after all of its violence, evil and cruelty, the Lord is simply jettisoning his justice.

Once we appreciate this, a number of the other elements of the book start to make more sense. Jonah in chapter 1 was not just fleeing his mission, he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. If God was going to offer repentance to this city of Nineveh, Jonah simply wasn't interested in being in a moral universe that operated according to such divine laws.

Where's the justice? As Rabbi Foreman observes, this helps us to understand Jonah's actions. When he's fleeing, he's fleeing from the Lord's presence. He goes down into the inside of the boat and tries to fall asleep.

When he's singled out in the casting of lots, he's quite prepared to be cast into the sea. He's seeking to escape from God in any way that he can, whether that's running away from the realm of the Lord's special dealings, whether it's a matter of going into the insensibility of sleep, or even of going to death in being thrown into the water.

[5 : 41] Jonah simply isn't interested in operating in a world where there seems to be no justice. Here we might think back to the reference to Jonah's prophecy in 2 Kings chapter 14 verse 25, where Jonah prophesied about the extension of the territory of Israel during a time of incredible evil.

As a prophet, Jonah seems to be doomed to deliver messages that lead to blessing upon wicked people. As we read the account of Jonah here, we should also be thinking about some of the other texts that lie in the background.

We've noted the story of the golden calf in Exodus chapter 32 to 34. There Moses intercedes for the people. Indeed, he goes so far as to offer to be blotted out of the Lord's book in order that the people might be saved.

The Lord there relents of the disaster that he was going to bring upon the people, even though they are still judged. There is a contrast that we can draw between Jonah and Moses. Moses wants to give up his life, but wants to give up his life to save the people.

He's interceding for the people in order that the Lord might relent from the disaster that he was going to bring upon them. Jonah also wants to give up his life, but he wants to give up his life because it seems to him that the Lord's justice has been extinguished for the sake of his compassion.

[6 : 49] He does not intercede for the city of Nineveh, hoping that the Lord might relent from the disaster that he was going to bring upon it. Rather, he intercedes, as it were, that the Lord might relent from his relenting.

Kevin Youngblood observes another significant set of parallels and contrasts in 1 Kings chapter 19 in the story of Elijah. There another prophet flees to the desert, sits under a tree, is despondent and seeks death, and the Lord asks him the same question twice, just as the Lord asks Jonah here about his anger.

There, the Lord asks Elijah, what are you doing here, Elijah? And then as the Lord does to Jonah here, the Lord delivers a message to Elijah through nature. The contrast between Elijah and Jonah should stand out to us.

Elijah laments his failure, Jonah his success. Another curious intertext with the story of Jonah is found in Genesis chapter 4 in the story of Cain. In Jonah chapter 4, the Lord asks Jonah about his anger.

The Lord does the same in the story of Cain. When his brother Abel's sacrifice is accepted, but his is not, Cain's response is to be angry. And the Lord speaks to Cain concerning this.

[7 : 57] Why are you angry? And why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.

Cain, of course, ends up killing his brother, and he is cursed from the ground as a result. The ground would no longer yield to Cain its strength. Just as Jonah's gourd withered, so Cain would find that his working of the ground was futile.

Cain had gone away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden, in verse 16 of chapter 4 of Genesis. Like Cain, in chapter 1, Jonah had fled from the presence of the Lord, and now he has gone out towards the east.

Much as Cain was a marked man by the Lord, Jonah was a marked man by the Lord. Chapter 1 is a great pursuit narrative, the Lord chasing down the fleeing Jonah as his quarry.

Perhaps in paralleling Jonah with Cain, the original murderer, we're seeing something of Jonah's willingness to take the lives of others into his own hands. He wants to be the means of destruction upon the Ninevites, and when the Lord relents from destroying them, he will intercede for their destruction.

[9:04] Apparently hoping that the Lord would register and act in terms of his displeasure at the sparing of the Ninevites, Jonah goes out towards the east of the city and makes a booth for himself, sitting there under its shade, hoping that the Lord would change his mind again and destroy the city.

Perhaps we could see some similarity between Jonah's booth and the city that Cain builds when he leaves the presence of the Lord and goes towards the east. The Lord does not give a direct verbal response to Jonah.

Rather, he gives him a sort of physical parable and a sign. The sign takes the form of a plant. We don't know exactly the kind of plant, but it's most likely a gourd. Jonah already had some shade in his booth, but the plant gives him some shade outside.

Rabbi Foreman draws our attention to the way that this gourd is described. It is literally there to save him from his evil. Rabbi Foreman observes a chain of the uses of the word for evil throughout the book of Jonah.

In chapter 1 verse 2, Nineveh's evil. In chapter 1 verse 8, the evil of the storm. In chapter 3 verse 8, the repenting of Nineveh's evil ways. In chapter 3 verse 10, the Lord repenting of the evil that he was going to bring upon the city.

[10:11] In chapter 4 verse 1, Jonah feels a terrible evil. The evil that he feels is seen in verse 2, the fact that the Lord renounced the evil that he was going to do to the city.

And then in verse 6, the Lord grants Jonah this plant to save him from his evil. While we can see the plant as just providing Jonah with shade, it's quite likely there's something more going on here. The plant is a lesson that's being given to Jonah. And it will be through that lesson that he will be saved from his evil. What is his evil? It's his sense of deep displeasure at the Lord's sparing of Nineveh.

The Lord's relenting from the evil that he was about to bring upon the city. The plant seems to be almost miraculous. It grows up very suddenly, to the point that it's able to provide Jonah with ample shade.

But at the arrival of the dawn the next day, a single worm attacks the plant, and the whole plant withers. The whole narrative of Jonah seems to be set in the world of Genesis chapter 1 and 2 in particular.

[11:07] There are elementary things. There's the winds. There's the waters. There's the deep. Man and beast. The sea creatures. The worm. And the Lord is sovereign over these forces.

The Lord appoints the big fish. The Lord appoints the plant. The Lord appoints the worm. And the Lord appoints the scorching east wind. All of these forces, from the great force of the east wind, to the smallest creature like the worm, has an orchestrated part to play within the Lord's purpose.

There are no rogue forces in God's universe. We might see the worm here, perhaps, as a sort of miniature serpent. The worm eats the dust. The worm is a bringer of death. It's associated with the eating of dead bodies.

And of course, like the serpent, it crawls upon its belly. The east wind is used on a number of occasions in the prophetic literature as a symbol of destruction that comes upon people and nations.

Hosea chapter 13 verse 15. Though he may flourish among his brothers, the east wind, the wind of the Lord, shall come, rising from the wilderness, and his fountain shall dry up, his spring shall be parched, it shall strip his treasury of every precious thing.

[12:13] Ezekiel chapter 17 verse 10. Behold, it is planted. Will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it? Wither away on the bed where it sprouted?

Or chapter 19 verse 12. But the vine was plucked up in fury, cast down to the ground. The east wind dried up its fruit. They were stripped off and withered. As for its strong stem, fire consumed it. People fainting under the scorching heat of the sun is also an image of the Lord's judgment elsewhere in scripture. The connection of this with the sun rising and the dawn coming might also evoke some of the images of the day of the Lord as a day of judgment and destruction. The day of the Lord is of course the recurring image within the book of the 12. One can imagine that Jonah would have taken the miraculous flourishing of the plant and its granting of shade to him as a sign of the Lord's favour towards him.

And the fact that maybe the Lord did see things his way and if he just waited long enough and the shade of the gourd would help him in this, he would see the destruction of the city, likely within the original timeline of 40 days.

[13:15] When the plant was suddenly destroyed, one can imagine his hopes being dashed. Once more he expresses his desire to die. It would be better for him to die than to live. The Lord here speaks to Jonah again and he asks him pretty much the same question as he asked back in verse 4.

Do you do well to be angry for the plant? This creates a parallel between the plant and Nineveh. This provides a basis for the Lord teaching Jonah a lesson concerning his compassion and perhaps provides us with a way to reconcile the Lord's seemingly contrary attributes that are mentioned in Exodus chapter 34.

How can the Lord relent from evil and also be the one who does not spare the guilty and visits people's iniquity upon them? Jonah has been thinking in terms of justice. As Rabbi Foreman observes however, the plant does not have any right to its existence.

By sheer justice, it will be removed from existence. And when it is destroyed by the worm, on the grounds of justice, it would seem that no one has any right to complain. The gourd is merely a gratuitous act of God's goodness, a creation out of nothing that gives the blessing of shade.

Its existence is a good and positive thing, something for which Jonah himself is immensely grateful. Jonah has no claim over the plant. He did not create it. He did not work for it.

[14:31] It is God's creature and he has the freedom to dispose of it as he wishes. Nevertheless, Jonah rightly realises that there is a goodness to its existence in its time. Jonah has been thinking in terms of strict justice.

But now the Lord provides Jonah with a different way of looking at things, a way of looking at things in terms of the gratuity of their existence. As Rabbi Foreman observes, from this perspective, the key question is not, what are you entitled to?

What consequences should you face for your acts? The question from this perspective is, what could it become? What good could be realised through this creature? God is the God of justice, but he is also a God who sees things in categories beyond those of strict justice.

He sees his creatures in terms of their goodness in their time, and what could be realised through them. Nineveh isn't merely a city filled with violence and evil. It is a city with more than 12 myriads of people who do not know their right hand from their left, and many cattle.

The final verse of the book of Jonah is typically read as a rhetorical question, leaving Jonah and the hearer with a challenge to their typical way of viewing things, as if the Lord is inviting Jonah to see things from his perspective, to see the city of Nineveh, not so much in terms of its evil that it has done, but in terms of its sheer existence.

[15:47] Think a bit more carefully before wishing for such a great city to be snuffed out. More recently, however, a number of commentators have argued that the final verse of the book of Jonah should not be read as a rhetorical question, but as a statement.

Amy Erickson translates it as follows, The message then would be symbolised by the Gourd, just as the Gourd was made to flourish for a time, so Nineveh was given time in which to flourish, and when its time was up, it would be destroyed.

This destruction of Nineveh is proclaimed in the books of Nahum and Zephaniah. Understood this way, the compassion of God is not denied. He really does spare Nineveh when it repents, but that compassion is not at the expense of his justice.

The time will come when Nineveh returns to its sins, and it will be destroyed, as the Lord had originally declared. It has had a stay of its execution. It has not escaped God's justice.

Why the reference to 120,000 persons? It seems to be a strange detail in the context. Although historically plausible, as the city of Nineveh was of that sort of size at the time, it is oddly specific.

[17:02] We can read in English the number as 120,000 persons. The actual Hebrew, however, would be better translated as something like 12 myriads. Speaking of 12 myriads might make us think of Israel itself, and here we can see something more of the message that's being delivered through the Gord and through the events at Nineveh.

This is not merely a story of the word of the Lord going to a pagan nation. It's a story for Israel. Israel is supposed to recognise itself in this great city. Nineveh's 12 myriads should remind us of Israel's 12 tribes.

Through the message of Jonah, the Lord might be inviting his people to see in Nineveh a mirror of themselves. The Lord looks at them as he looks at Nineveh. He values their very existence.

Of course, Nineveh repented, but they did not. The other thing that we should recognise in this chapter is a symbol of the Lord's dealings with the forces of the geopolitical situation. The story provides a symbol for all of that.

There is an unfaithful Israelite prophet who's gone away from the presence of the Lord. He's in his booth, which we might think of as the city or perhaps the temple. And then the Lord causes this great Gord to spring up, a Gord that shades him from the heat of the sun.

[18:14] This Gord, as we have already seen, is associated with Nineveh and the Assyrians. The Assyrians, as they rise up, are a means by which Israel is sheltered from the Arameans so that their territory could expand as it did according to the prophecy of Jonah during the reign of Jeroboam II.

It is also a shelter from the burning heat of the sun, in which James Bajon has suggested we should see the figure of Babylon. The scorching heat of Babylon would come upon the nation when the Assyrians were removed.

Babylon, of course, is also the big fish of chapter 1 and 2. The Lord appointed the big fish, the Lord appointed the plant, the Lord appointed the worm, and the Lord appoints the scorching east wind.

The plant of Nineveh would be short-lived, but the Lord had a good purpose for it while it flourished. Just as the Lord pursued and taught his wayward prophet, so the Lord, through the message of the prophet, was going to pursue and to teach his wayward people Israel.

When thrown into the deep of the nations, when facing the scorching east wind and the burning sun of Babylon, they should not be afraid. The Lord is the master of all of these forces.

[19:22] A question to consider. How might reading the story of Jonah alongside the story of Noah and his ark help us to see even further lessons for Israel beyond those already mentioned?