

SERIES: The Battle of the Wills: A Study of the Book of Jonah¹

SERMON: **Take My Life and Let Me Be!**

SCRIPTURE: Jonah 4

SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black

DATE: October 4, 2009

I've been learning a lot from the book of Jonah and I hope you have too. But as we move into our last week in this book together let us commit to not be like Jonah who knows the Word of God well, but doesn't live it well. For those of you who are joining us for the first time in this series let me quickly catch you up to speed. We've been learning how to live within the will of God. We've learned that to live within the will of God one must respond...

- Obediently to the Word of God (Ch 1)
- Authentically in conformity to the Word of God (Ch 2)
- Completely to the Word of God (Ch 3)

The writer has helped us come to these conclusions as he has compared Jonah with everything in the story. The sailors, the fish, and the Ninevites all respond appropriately to God. These characters have repented of sin. They have humbled themselves. They have cried out to God for mercy. And they have experienced the grace of God in their lives. They have obeyed God. They believe God. But there is one character still holding out. Jonah has not repented, he has not obeyed completely, and he has not humbled himself; his will is still in opposition to the will of God.

As we come to chapter 4 all of the other characters are gone; what happens in chapter 4 is exclusively between God and Jonah. Others have been saved in spite of Jonah and they are now a backdrop for what will happen between God and Jonah. In chapter 4 God will continue to try to get through to Jonah. And I have prayed that God will get through to us this morning as we examine our relationship with Him.

Sermon in a Sentence: ***To live within the will of God one must respond continuously to the grace of God.***

We'll organize our time this morning by describing three characteristics of those who respond to the grace of God continuously...

The first characteristic of those who are responding to the grace of God continuously: They...
Celebrate when others experience the grace of God. (1-5)

The end of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4 are so closely related I'd like to read them both together; let's begin in 3:10.

¹ The title of the series is used by permission of Dr. Dennis Magary, Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Language at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Most of the material in this sermon comes from and/or is influenced directly by Dr. Magary's Hebrew exegesis class which I took at TEDS during the summer of 2009 and from sermons Dr. Magary gave in July 2003.

3:10 *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.*

4:1 *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry*

What angered Jonah so much? God angered Jonah. God didn't destroy Nineveh. Instead God extended grace to the Ninevites and this makes Jonah really mad. But there is more. This phrase "*displeased Jonah exceedingly*" is a loaded phrase.

A literal translation would read something like this: *But it was evil to Jonah – a great evil and it burned him up.*

We've seen the word *evil* before in this book. It's not always translated *evil* but the Hebrew word *ra'ah* which here is translated *evil* shows up ten times. As we trace this word throughout the book of Jonah it really sheds light on its occurrence in this chapter. Let's look at all the occurrences in Jonah:

In chapter 1...**1:1** *...the word of the LORD came to Jonah, and he was commanded to...***1:2** *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."* Here the word describes evils deeds; the sin of the Ninevites.

Jonah then boards a ship to flee from God. But God hurled a wind to the sea which resulted in a great storm. In 1:7-8 the sailors on the boat viewed the storm as an *evil* – they actually use the word 2 times when they ask on whose account the *evil* came upon them. Their use of the word *evil* describes God's wrath or God's consequence for evil deeds; God's judgment for their sin.

The sailors hurled Jonah to the sea and he spent the next 3 days in the belly of a fish (chapter 2). Then he was vomited onto dry ground. Next he reluctantly went to Nineveh and gave a message which resulted in the Ninevites repenting from their *evil* (3:8). We know their repentance is genuine because God himself recognized that the Ninevites had indeed turned from their *evil* (3:10). In verses 8 and 10 the word (*ra'ah*) describes evil deeds or sin.

God responded to the Ninevites turning from their *evil* by turning from his wrath or turning from his *evil* (3:10b). The text explicitly says God *relented of the disaster that he had said he would do* to the Ninevites. The Ninevites turned from their *evil* and God turned from his disaster.² All references so far to *evil* have referred to sin or judgment on sin. And so far all of the *evil* in the book has been repented of or relented of.

That brings us to today's text in chapter 4. In chapter 4 we see the word *ra'ah* show up 3 times. Let's look at the first 2 occurrences, in verse 1.

4:1 *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry*

The literal translation: *But it was evil to Jonah – a great evil...*

² It's very interesting that the same Hebrew word is used to describe the Ninevites repentance as is used to describe God's relenting (turn). And the same Hebrew word is used to describe the Ninevites sin as is used to describe God's wrath (*evil*).

This is the only time the word *evil* is modified with the adjective *great* in the whole book: *it was a great evil to him*.

But remember what we learned in chapter 2 about the word *great*? The greatest thing about this story is God's great work of salvation: The sailors and the Ninevites turn from their evil and God turns from his wrath – they repent of their sin and God relents of his disaster. Jonah sees the greatest thing in this story (salvation) as the greatest evil. When God turns from his anger Jonah's anger becomes great. The grace of God is what Jonah hates! This is seen even more clearly when we look at verse 2.

4:2 *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.”*

We see here the prequel to the story. Why did Jonah run from God in chapter 1? Because he knew God would relent from destroying the Ninevites. He's admitting to what we've suspected all along – Jonah doesn't want the love of God to go to undeserving, sinful pagans. This is the real climax of the battle of the wills: the character of God is put squarely up against the character of Jonah. The chief topic in this battle is revealed: the grace of God! Jonah is angry because God has turned from his anger.

The second half of this verse gives a bold statement about God; this statement was actually given to the Israelite people by God himself after they were led out of Egypt.³

4:2b *You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*

This statement is referred to by the Psalmists,⁴ by Joel,⁵ and by Nehemiah.⁶ And wherever this statement is cited it is used in celebration for who God is.⁷ When others quote this they are showing their adoration to God. But when Jonah quotes this he is using it as an indictment against God.

When Jonah was in the belly of the fish he celebrated the steadfast love of God (2:8-9). But when that steadfast love of God is extended to those outside of Israel, Jonah hates the steadfast love of God. As a matter of fact that is exactly what he hates about God's love – it is extended to outsiders, to those who don't deserve it. Jonah knew this would happen, and so he ran.

The great irony here is the prophet who “knows” what will happen to the Ninevites doesn't know what is happening in his own life. The prophet who doesn't want the love of God extended to those who don't deserve it is continually showing *himself* sinful and undeserving. He doesn't

³ Exodus 34:6; also cited by Moses in Numbers 14:18

⁴ Psalm 86:15; 103; 111; 112; 145

⁵ Joel 2:13

⁶ Nehemiah 9

⁷ Also cited in 2 Chronicles 30:9

understand the love of God at all – because he doesn't understand his sin; the love of God is amazing because he loves us in spite of sin. This makes Jonah so angry that he doesn't want to go on living. He just wants God to leave him alone...forever. And so he prays...

4:3 *Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

Instead of singing the hymn "Take my life and let *it* be (consecrated Lord to Thee)" Jonah says, "Take my life! ... and *let me be!*" "Kill me now – for that's the only way I can get away from you God!"

The Ninevites prayed to God in hopes that they would *avoid* death. Jonah is praying *for* death. The Ninevites repent so that they won't perish; Jonah would rather perish than repent.

Jonah says with words that which he has already said with his life;⁸ Jonah would rather die than live within the will of God.⁹ But God doesn't grant Jonah's request. Let's look at his response.

4:4 *And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"*

God is essentially saying, "Is it right to be angry that the grace of God has been extended to the Ninevites?" God is not chastising Jonah here so much as he's trying to get through to Jonah. God understands what Jonah didn't – the Ninevites aren't the only ones in this story that need forgiven. Jonah doesn't like outsiders, but Jonah's attitude toward outsiders is pushing him further *outside* of a relationship with God. And so God extends grace to Jonah; God reaches out to him. Jonah doesn't deserve forgiveness any more than the Ninevites; he has done nothing but challenge God's will for 3 chapters. But God reaches out to him anyway.

But how does Jonah respond to the grace of God?

4:5 *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 doesn't even answer God's question. Instead he stomps off – Jonah's not getting better, he's getting worse. Jonah's actions make this clear, especially if we compare Jonah's actions to the king of Nineveh again. Jonah went out of the city and sat; do you remember that the king of Nineveh also sat (3:6)?

- The king of Nineveh sets aside comfort – he sits in ashes
- Jonah seeks comfort when he sits.

⁸ Note all of the allusions to death in chapter 1 by the use of "go down" (a euphemism for death in the Hebrew language). Cf. sermon 1 in this series for specifics.

⁹ What is Jonah doing here? Jonah is identifying himself with others who have prayed a similar prayer, namely Elijah and Moses. Elijah prays for death because he of a lack of success (1Kgs 19:4). Jonah wants death because he is more successful than he wants to be. Cf. Ex 32:32. Here Moses wants to die *for* the people! Also note that it is in this same scene that Moses receives the creed (Ex 34:6). Cf. Ps 63:3. The Psalmist celebrates God's steadfast love as *better than life*. Jonah thinks death is *better than life* because of God's steadfast love.

- The king sits – hoping the city wouldn't be destroyed (he desires grace).
- Jonah sits – hoping the city will be destroyed (he desires wrath).
- The king sits in submission to God.
- Jonah sits in defiance of God.

Jonah is rejecting the grace of God extended to the Ninevites and he's rejecting the grace of God extended to him. And so he misses out on the greatest part of the story: the great work of God in restoring lost men and women to himself. This is worth celebrating! But instead Jonah decides to have a pity party.

What will God do next? Let's look at verses 6-9 where we will see the second characteristic of those who are responding continuously to the grace of God: They...

Seek opportunities to show compassion instead of pursuing comfort. (6-9)

4:6 *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.*

Here we find the 3rd occurrence of our word evil (*ra'ah*) in chapter 4; this time it is translated as *discomfort*. "The LORD God appointed a plant...to save him from his **discomfort**." The purpose of the plant is to save Jonah. But what is God trying to save Jonah from? Is it his physical discomfort (his circumstances)? Or is God trying to save Jonah from the burning anger that is driving him further and further away from God?

The text literally says the plant was appointed to save him from his evil.¹⁰ With the use of the word evil, the text is implying something more than physical discomfort. It points the reader back to Jonah's anger and displeasure concerning God's work in Nineveh in verse 1.¹¹ God is trying to rescue Jonah from his sin.

But does Jonah view the plant as God's attempt to rescue him from his sin? Look again at the last part of verse 6.

3:6b *[Jonah] was exceedingly glad because of the plant.*

Jonah views the plant as salvation from circumstances, not sin. This is actually the only event in the story that makes Jonah happy. Jonah's own comfort is what makes Jonah happy. The compassion God extended to the Ninevites doesn't do it. The grace that God is trying to extend to Jonah doesn't do it. Things of eternal significance are not what make Jonah happy. This temporary shade from the sun is the only thing that makes Jonah happy.

¹⁰ See ESV footnote

¹¹ Cf. Matthew 5:21-26: According to Judy Dabler, Dan Doriani thinks the command in Matthew 5 is the call for believers to engage in a rescue mission. We should say, "I am concerned about you. Your anger reveals the appalling condition of your heart!" That which God requires of us in Matthew, he himself does in Jonah.

And how does Jonah respond when his comfort is taken away.¹²

4:7-8 *But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed¹³ 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.”*

Jonah feels the same way about the plant being destroyed as he does about Nineveh not being destroyed.¹⁴ When Jonah’s comfort is destroyed Jonah wants to die. Jonah is angry about the grace *given* to the Ninevites. Now Jonah is angry about the grace *taken* from him.

Jonah has never looked so ridiculous! And God doesn’t hesitate to graciously point this out.

4:9 *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.”*

God is challenging Jonah again, but at the same time we have to remember that God is still trying to reach out to Jonah. Jonah has a distorted view of what is good. Jonah thinks his comfort is good. God is trying to get him to see that his grace is amazing. God will drive this point home in the next two verses, but before we go there I want to ask the question I’ve been asking throughout this series: What about us?

Do we have a distorted view of what is good? Which do we love more, the grace of God or comfort? I’ve heard it said that you can tell what is important to people based off of where they spend their time and their money (look at their datebook and their checkbook). I mentioned three weeks ago that in America it is estimated that only 25% of those in church are spending any time serving in ministry. But everybody I talk with is always telling me how busy they are. So where are we spending our time? Are we busy with the right things? Are we spending our time spreading the grace of God or pursuing our own comfort?

What about money? We are the wealthiest people in the world (top 2 %?). We are so comfortable compared to most people in the world. What are we spending this wealth on? I’ve heard statistics on Christians’ giving habits that are discouraging, but when it comes to statistics I don’t know what to believe.¹⁵ I think this church on the whole has been blessed by faithful giving, especially in such tough economic times. And I’m not here to point the finger. But I want to challenge us to examine ourselves honestly. Let us ask, “Am I using my resources of time and money for the glory of God and the expansion of his kingdom or am I spending my resources on myself?” I think many of us have a lot of room to grow.

¹² Our idols become clear when they are taken away – we have extreme emotional responses when our idols are taken away.

¹³ See comments on 1:17 in the second sermon in this series for the significance of the word “appointed.”

¹⁴ This whole episode shows that God both destroys and delivers. We want to know the God of deliverance and avoid destruction in our own lives. But do we desire the same in other people’s lives?

¹⁵ John Piper has said that the wealthiest 15% of Christians give 1.5% of their income, whereas the poorest 15% of Christians give 3.5% of their income. So if that is true then those most comfortable are doing the least to spread the love of God financially. From *Let the Nations Be Glad*.

See if this poem by Thomas Carlisle strikes a nerve with you.

*And Jonah stalked
To his shaded seat
And waited for God
To come around
To his way of thinking*

*And God is still waiting for a host of Jonahs
In their comfortable houses
To come around
To his way of loving¹⁶*

Let's look now at the third characteristic of those who are responding continuously to the grace of God: They will...

See others the way God sees them. (10-11)

4:10-11 *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?"*

Hopefully we have seen how ridiculous Jonah's response has been in this chapter. But Jonah has not yet seen it and so God spells it out for Jonah here – God is trying to get Jonah to see things the way that he sees them.

First: God shows Jonah how ridiculous it is to have pity on a *plant* which is destroyed and to not have pity on a *city* that could have been destroyed. God calls Nineveh a great city. This verse makes it obvious that Nineveh is great in size for there are 120,000 people that live there (and many cattle), but there is more.

This is the third time God refers to the city as *great*. In 1:2 God calls the city great. In 3:2 God calls the city great. And here in 4:11 God calls the city great. Nobody in this story calls the city great except for God. What God means by *great* is the city is important to Him. Nineveh matters to God, but Nineveh doesn't matter to Jonah; the plant matters to Jonah.¹⁷

God is trying to show Jonah that it is ridiculous to love the grace of God when it applies to your temporal comfort and not love the grace of God when it applies to people's eternal souls. God has compassion on Nineveh and Jonah has pity on his loss of comfort. Jonah doesn't care about what God cares about; Jonah doesn't see things the way God sees them.

Second: God tries to show Jonah how desperately the Ninevites need grace. Remember Jonah has said multiple times that he "knows" something. But God says the Ninevites don't *know* their

¹⁶ Taken from "The Biblical Foundation for the Worldwide Mission Mandate" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*.

¹⁷ See sermon from last week 3:3, the footnote in particular.

right hand from their left. Some have interpreted this as meaning there were many children in the city who didn't yet know right from wrong. I don't doubt that's the case, but that's probably not the point the writer is trying to make.

The knowledge of Jonah, which is constantly referenced, is being contrasted with the knowledge of the Ninevites. Because Jonah was a Jew he knew of the steadfast love of God, at least in his head. The Ninevites had never heard of the love of God – they knew nothing; they were lost. And there are many in the world today who have never heard! Do we care?

The ironic thing is the Ninevites have responded to God with what little they know about God. But Jonah who knows much about God is still sitting outside of the city and is moving further away from God with each passing moment.

But in addition to trying to get Jonah to see why he loves the Ninevites, God is also trying to get his very own prophet to see how much he loves him.

Turn in your Bibles to Luke 15. This last scene in Jonah reminds me of three parables. I think these parables will help us understand what is going on in Jonah more clearly. In Luke 15 Jesus tells three parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son. But before we look at those parables it's important that we know the context of the parables.

Luke 15:1-2 *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."*

There are three groups of people here that become three characters in the next three parables: Jesus, the Pharisees, and the "sinners."¹⁸

The lost sheep (verses 3-7): In the story of the lost sheep the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to look for the one lost sheep. When the lost sheep is found the shepherd rejoices greatly. In this story the shepherd is Jesus, the 99 sheep are the Pharisees, who are the insiders, and the one lost sheep represents the "sinners," who are outsiders. They could easily represent the Ninevites too.

The lost coin (verses 8-10): In the story of the lost coin the woman has 10 coins. She loses one coin and searches diligently for it. When the lost coin is found the woman rejoices greatly. The woman represents Jesus, but what about the coin? The coin was still inside the house. Could it be that the lost coin represents the Pharisees? It is technically inside the house, but it is still lost. The Pharisees were insiders religiously, but they were lost in their sin.

The lost son (verses 11-32): In the story of the lost son a father's younger son runs away while the older son stays at home. The younger son returns home after wasting his father's wealth in sinful living. But before the younger son made it all the way home the father ran out to meet his son and extended grace and forgiveness to his lost son. He then threw a party in celebration of his restoration. The Father represents Jesus and the younger son represents the "sinners;" he was obviously lost. His blatant sin could be paralleled with the great sin of the Ninevites.

¹⁸ See Appendix A

What about the older son? When the older son found out about this he was *angry* and refused to go into the celebration – he stayed outside. He represents the Pharisees, but there is more. Listen to the older son’s perspective on the situation as he talks with his father. Does he sound like Jonah?

15:28-30 *But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, “Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”*

Now listen to the Father’s reply to the older son. Does he sound like God talking with Jonah?

15:31-32 *And he said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”*

Do you see the parallels? The younger son was obviously lost and needed the grace of his father. The sheep was obviously lost. And the Ninevites were obviously lost. But the older son who stayed inside of the father’s house, and the lost coin which stayed inside the house, and Jonah who was still a prophet of God, were lost too! And they too needed to be found.

The father runs to the younger son, the father goes out to the older son. God seeks out the Ninevites in Assyria, and God seeks out Jonah outside of the city. God pursues the lost whether they know they are lost or not.

God pursues the lost who are outside of the church and he pursues us inside the church who are running from his will!

We see the Ninevites received the grace of God. The younger son received the grace of his father. But did the older son receive the grace of God? Did Jonah receive the grace of God? Their anger reveals their need of grace, but did they receive grace?

The older son is the Pharisees, the older son is Jonah, and the older son is us!

The grace of God needs to be received by those who have never heard, but it also needs to be received continuously by those of us who have heard, but who still need of the grace and transformative power of Jesus in our daily lives.

Why did Jonah and the older son refuse to participate in what the Father was doing to save sinners? I think there is a link between a person’s willingness to receive grace in their own life and their willingness to extend God’s grace to others.

I received an email from Karen Cooper this week. She questioned that maybe instead of praying that our church would have a heart for the lost, I should be praying that they would have a heart

for Jesus. Why do we not have a heart for the lost? Why do we love our comfort more than showing others compassion? Why do we not love others like God loves them? Why do we live like Jonah? Maybe it's because we're not allowing the love of God to penetrate us deeply and to become a part of our daily existence.

Jonah didn't let the grace of God into his life because Jonah didn't see the need for grace. Jonah didn't see his sin.

At some point most of you became a Christian. You confessed that you were a sinner in need of forgiveness. You believed that Jesus' death on the cross was payment for your sins. You believed that the resurrection was your only hope of eternal life. You believed there was nothing that you can do to save yourself, but God has done it all. And you put your full trust in Jesus; you were saved!

But do you still believe it? I mean do you live like you believe it? Many of us are living our lives as though we don't even know the gospel. Many of us trusted in Jesus for salvation at some point in the past, but are trusting in our own efforts to get us through our daily lives. We're trusting in something other than Jesus for satisfaction and success. And most of us if we're honest believe we're really pretty good people. But we're not!

We are all still sinners who need the grace of God to penetrate our daily lives. It's only when we acknowledge our weakness and put our faith in the work of Jesus that we are transformed. And when we're not living and breathing the grace of God on a continual basis we forget how amazing the grace of God is. And when we forget how amazing the grace of God is in our own lives we're not as motivated to share it with others; we can't give away what we don't have ourselves.

Jerry Bridges has said that we need to "preach the gospel to ourselves daily." I've heard that he actually recites the gospel to himself in the bathroom mirror every morning. Maybe we should do the same because we need to be reminded that we're nothing without Jesus. We're lost without the cross and there is no success without the resurrection. We need to be reminded of this every day!¹⁹

There's another common feature between the story of the lost sons and Jonah. Neither of them have a conclusion. We know what happened with the younger son, but what happened with the older son? We know what happened with the Ninevites, but what happened with Jonah?

Did Jonah finally see things the way that God sees them? Did Jonah finally embrace the grace of God? Did Jonah finally celebrate the salvation of the Ninevites? We don't know. This story has no conclusion. And why does this story which may be the most well crafted book in the OT not have a conclusion?

¹⁹ See *The Discipline of Grace*, by Jerry Bridges and *A Gospel Primer*, by Milton Vincent for more on this topic.

Could it be that the writer knew exactly what he was doing? As readers we anticipate Jonah's response to God final statement.²⁰ But the writer who has been intentional with every word and phrase in this book anticipates your response.

Will you stop fighting God this morning and surrender to his loving pursuit of you? Will you stop holding on to your own way of living life and let him have control?

The story is not over, it's living itself out in this church. And we are being asked to respond. We need to acknowledge that we are sinners and fall on His mercy. Jesus is mighty to save. I want to see the transformative power of God take over this church and take over this Nineveh (Wichita). But we are in a battle.

The battle between what God wants and what you want will never die completely until you go to be with Jesus. That's why we have to continuously lean on the grace of God in our lives. Only the grace and power of Jesus will be effective to transform our lives, our church, and our community. To live within the will of God we must respond continuously to the grace of God.

²⁰ I am persuaded by Stacey Liebeck's work on this verse that argues this last sentence is not a question, but a statement. However, the reader still anticipates a response from Jonah.

Appendix A

Parables of Luke 15

	Jesus	Pharisees	Sinners
The Lost Sheep	Shepherd	99 Sheep	1 Sheep
The Lost Coin	Woman	Coin	
The Lost Son	Father	Older Son	Younger Son

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