

Jonah: *What Your Anger Reveals*
Jonah 3:10-4:4

Good morning, Church! It's good to be back from a few weeks of vacation, and I'm eager to return to our journey through the book of Jonah. However, before we launch in, I must pause to both acknowledge and celebrate the outstanding work of our pastors in our recent series on Discipleship. I was profoundly impacted, challenged, encouraged, and inspired by all four of the sermons in that series, and I hope you were as well.

Let me briefly comment on what I heard and the conviction God gave me. If we are disciples of Jesus, we will be making disciples of Jesus, and it really is as simple as asking a person, "Would you like to read the Bible with me?" So, I've adopted a goal for this coming year, and it's very simple: "Invest in a few." As God leads me, I am clearing some hours out of my weekly schedule to invest in a few people for the sake of raising up disciples who will become disciple makers. So don't be surprised if I ask some of you if you would like to read the Bible with me when I see you in the hallway! And, by the way, feel free to decline. If you're not ready, I get it, and to be honest, I have little interest in trying to convince you or anybody else that this work is important. Instead, I'm looking to invest my life and my time into a few people who are open to learning and growing in their understanding of the Bible and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. I'm particularly interested in investing in a few people who may not yet believe in Jesus but are open to learning more about the claims of Christianity. If that description fits you this morning, find me after the service or shoot me an email this week (jwest@colonialkc.org).

I am convinced that if every faithful follower of Jesus at Colonial invested an hour a week reading the Bible with at least one other person outside of our church, we would increasingly become a church that is faithfully fulfilling the Great Commission. So, here's my challenge: I challenge every sincere believer at Colonial to ask one other person this simple question in the next week: "Would you like to read the Bible with me?" You will complete the challenge if you ask the question, regardless of how the other person answers you.

If you ask another person if they would like to read the Bible with you and the person says yes, send me an email (jwest@colonialkc.org). If you ask and someone says no, send me an email! I would like to hear your stories of trusting God enough to even ask the question. Remember, always pray first, but then trust God to ask the question. I look forward to hearing from you (show email in the whole last paragraph).

Alright, let's return now to our journey through the book of Jonah. If you are visiting with us or you have recently begun attending in the last month, we are slowly making our way through the book of Jonah. Now, when I say slowly, I'm not kidding. There are 48 verses in the entire book of Jonah, and this morning I will preach my 21st message in this series! There is far more to this story of Jonah than meets the eye, so I invite you to visit our website to watch, listen to, or read the former messages in this series as time allows. You can also find the series on YouTube, Spotify, Amazon Music, and other various platforms.

This morning we are beginning the last chapter of this famous story. You will recall that following his miraculous delivery from the belly of the great fish, Jonah recently arrived in Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, Israel's most ruthless enemy, and he declared the imminent

judgment of God. Amazingly, the Ninevites believe God and they sincerely repent, and God chooses to turn away from His anger. God spares Nineveh the destruction He had predicted through Jonah. We're going to pick up the action there beginning with Jonah 3:10. Please stand for the reading of God's Word:

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. 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?"

My message is entitled, "What Your Anger Reveals," and it will fall under three subheadings: 1) Subtle Idolatry; 2) The Critique of God's Character; and 3) Redemptive Conflict.

I. Subtle Idolatry

So...having preached the most effective message in the history of preaching...a one-line proclamation of God's imminent justice that leads an entire city of over 120,000 lost souls to repent in sackcloth and ashes...Jonah the prophet/missionary is not elated. He is not grateful; he is not happy; and he is not impressed. He's not even tempted to write a book based on his most impactful sermon series ever. In fact, when the Ninevites repent, and God turns away from His anger and decides to spare the great city, Jonah is "exceedingly displeased." Jonah is **ANGRY**. The Hebrew terms here suggest that Jonah's anger is burning hot...he is intensely ticked off.

Now, we've known all along that Jonah had issues with going to Nineveh. Right from the beginning of the narrative we learn that Jonah is willing to blatantly disobey God and even run in the opposite direction when God calls His prophet to cry out against the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. And, to be fair, Jonah may have had good reason to avoid Nineveh. Remember that the Assyrians were a ruthless people...perhaps the most bloodthirsty, ruthless civilization the world has ever seen. They were the archenemies of Israel, so we entertained the possibility that Jonah may have disobeyed God out of fear for his life.

We don't know why Jonah disobeyed God in the first part of this story; but now, here at the beginning of chapter 4, as Jonah fumes outside the city, Jonah's issues are finally revealed. The text reads: 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."

We learn now of an earlier conversation between Jonah and God. Apparently, Jonah refused to go to Nineveh because he didn't trust God to dole out the justice that Nineveh deserved. He didn't trust God to place Israel's interests over those of Israel's enemies, and now God has totally confirmed Jonah's suspicions. God has shown mercy upon Israel's enemy, and that creates an unresolvable tension for Jonah. Why?

OT scholar Jacques Ellul writes:

Jonah knew that God loved Israel and extended His mercy to His chosen people; he felt, in the very marrow of his bones, that this special love of God should not be extended to Gentiles, above all to evil Gentiles such as the inhabitants of Nineveh.¹

Jonah's worldview assumed that God favored Israel over all other nations, and that the enemy of Israel was the enemy of God. And yet...given God's nature and character, Jonah had a bad feeling about going to Nineveh. He was concerned about God's tendency to show mercy to those who don't deserve mercy, and now God has gone and forgiven the worst human beings on the planet.

Rosemary Nixon writes:

Jonah knew God would [relent]; he knew this was what God was like—but to experience it was more than Jonah could handle. He endured more than an intolerable threat to his worldview: when God showed compassion on Nineveh, he suffered its actual collapse.

Church, God will never fit into our little boxes. God's goodness, mercy, and justice are greater than our minds and hearts can comprehend. Most of us believe in some version of God who thinks like us, values what we value, and judges like we judge. Sadly, many people sitting in churches would be just as angry as Jonah to see God's mercy extended to those people they believe are beyond mercy.

Think about it. If God were to forgive Hitler, or Stalin, or Mao, or traffickers of children, or serial murderers...would you be angry at God? I believe it was C. S. Lewis who once suggested that the people most likely to be judged harshly are those who enter into heaven, look around and complain, "What are THOSE people doing here?"

That's Jonah's attitude right here in chapter 4. Jonah has a justice issue with God. He thinks it is unjust that the ruthless Ninevites should be forgiven after all that they have done, particularly given all their atrocities against God's chosen people.

But deeper than Jonah's justice issue is his idolatry issue. Can you see it? Jonah's first and primary allegiance is to his race and his nation. When God does not honor Jonah's primary allegiance to race and nation, Jonah becomes angry...so angry that he does not even want to go on living. Do you know what that feels like? Have you ever been so angry, so disillusioned, that you were ready to check out? In his book entitled *The Prodigal Prophet*, Timothy Keller notes that our anger with God reveals our idolatrous commitment to Another. He writes:

When Jonah says, in effect, "Without that—I have no desire to go on," he means he has lost something that had replaced God as the main joy, reason, and love of his life. He had a relationship with God, but there was something else he valued more. His explosive anger shows that he is willing to discard his relationship with God if he does not get this thing. When you say, "I won't serve you, God, if you don't give me X", then X is your true bottom line, your highest love, your real god, the thing you trust and rest in. Here is Jonah saying to God, who should be the only real source of his meaning in life, "I have no source of meaning."²

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 74.

² Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet* (New York, NY: Viking, 2018), pp. 101-102.

Let me ask you a question: what really makes you angry at God? What makes you so angry and disillusioned that you are tempted to check out? What makes you so angry that you give God ultimatums like Jonah did? “God, either you do this, or I’m out of here. If you won’t fix this...if you won’t change this situation...if you won’t heal this person...if you won’t amend what’s so clearly wrong here, I’m done. I’m walking away. I’m ending our relationship. I’m ending my life.”

Our anger reveals our functional god...the thing we trust the most...the thing we need the most...the thing to which we give the highest value. Church, pay very close attention to what makes you angry, and pay particular attention to what makes you angry at God.

Sinclair Ferguson makes an astute observation when he writes, “How we *react* is often a better thermometer of our heart than how we act.”³ If our reactions are frequently that of heat and anger, we would do well to consider what it is that we think we have lost. Did you lose face? Did you lose control? Did you lose respect? What is it that means so much to you that you are burning hot with anger?

Now, let me transition from preaching to meddling. Jonah represents a well-intended man of God who has made his love of race and country into an idol, such that when God does not place his country’s national interests before His unmerited grace to perceived enemies, Jonah is angry at God.

May I remind you that we are on the eve of a national election, and I know you all have very strong feelings about the political landscape of our country. But as we move into this season, I want you to keep Jonah in mind. Remember that, as Christians, we are subjects of the Kingdom of God. Our first and primary allegiance is to our King, not our country. We must be very careful that we do not allow our national interests and security to become our highest value, or we will end up in the same place that Jonah is now. Again, Keller says it well:

When Christian believers care more for their own interests and security than for the good and salvation of other races and ethnicities, they are sinning like Jonah. If they value the economic and military flourishing of their country over the good of the human race and the furtherance of God’s work in the world, they are sinning like Jonah. Their identity is more rooted in their race and nationality than in being saved sinners and children of God. Jonah’s rightful love for his country and people had become inordinate, too great, rivaling God. If love for your country’s interests leads you to exploit people, or, in this case, to root for an entire class of people to be spiritually lost, then you love your nation more than God. That is idolatry, by any definition.⁴

Church, an idol is formed in our hearts whenever we allow a good thing to become an ultimate thing. Those idols can be subtle, but they will be revealed by our anger. Once we have given our allegiance to another, once we’ve allowed anything else in our lives to become more important than God, the next step is predictable: we will critique the character of God.

³ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Man Overboard! The Story of Jonah* (Edinburg, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974 reprint), p. 88.

⁴ Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet*, pp. 103-104.

II. The Critique of God's Character

Jonah is angry, and he justifies his anger by critiquing the character of God. He states, “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.”

Now, I know at first blush Jonah's critique of God's character doesn't sound all that bad. After all, we know that God is actually gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love because that's exactly what we read in Exodus 34:6: The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...

Note, however, that when Jonah quotes Exodus 34:6, he chooses to omit vs. 7 which states, “who will by no means clear the guilty...”

Jonah leaves out the part about God's just dealings with the guilty. Instead, he critiques God's character as the One who is “relenting from disaster.” Do you see what he's saying?

OT scholar Kevin Youngblood captures the point well:

Jonah's complaint finally exposes the root issue underlying his conflict with YHWH. At its heart, this conflict was about Jonah's perception of an *imbalance* in the divine character. Divine justice was eclipsed by an indiscriminate mercy. From Jonah's point of view, the clemency God showed Nineveh jeopardized YHWH's covenant with Israel, which created a conflict of interest between His promises to Israel and the breadth of His mercy. Jonah was distressed to discover that the divine attributes listed in Exodus 34 which elsewhere express YHWH's disposition toward Israel also express YHWH's disposition toward Assyria.⁵

We can almost hear Jonah saying, “I KNEW you were going to do that God! You are such a softie. You always cave whenever anyone says they're sorry, but these people aren't sorry! They're not going to change! They don't care about you! They won't stop worshipping idols! Are you serious? A little fasting and sackcloth and you give these idol worshippers a pass? Don't you see what this means? These people you just saved are going to wipe out your 'chosen people,' my people... and my people are going to blame ME for YOUR mercy towards our enemies. I would be better off dead than to face my countrymen now.”

Does Jonah sound familiar to you? Like so many of us, Jonah is convinced that he is a better judge of who should be punished and who should be forgiven than God is. Jonah is convinced that God has a character flaw. God can't be trusted to do what He says He's going to do. God can't be trusted to bring the hammer when justice requires punishment against an evil nation. Is Jonah correct? Does God have a character flaw? Of course not. About a hundred years after Jonah, God speaks through His prophet Jeremiah saying (18:7-10):

⁷If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to

⁵ Kevin Youngblood, *Exegetical Commentary on the OT-Jonah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), p.160-161.

it. ⁹And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

God's nature is consistent and fair with all nations, including Israel. Nations that will turn from their evil have hope for God's mercy; whereas nations that persist in their evil can expect God's judgment. God does not hold up a different standard from one country to the next. Ironically, Jonah knew this was God's commitment before he took one step to Nineveh. He just didn't like it! Jonah didn't want Nineveh to turn from their evil. He wanted God to destroy that great city of sin. Jonah knew that the only way Nineveh would ever repent is if someone confronted them in the name of the One True God; and *that* is why Jonah ran away from God's call in chapter 1. He wanted nothing to do with saving the enemy of God. He wanted them to be destroyed.

Church, we are all so much like Jonah. We are quick to critique God's character as though He is either too harsh or too soft. We critique God because He condemns souls to Hell, or we critique God because there's so much evil and suffering in the world and He allows it to go on. We forget about God's justice that caused Jesus to suffer the cross. We forget about the way God has been so merciful to us when we did not deserve God's mercy.

Instead, we experience anger, disappointment, and disillusionment when God doesn't behave the way that we think the god formed in our own image should behave, and we critique God's character.

But what is true with Jonah is always true with us as well: our critique of God's character will inevitably reveal the corruption of our own character. Our critique of God's character will reveal the idolatrous god that we worship...the one that we have created and shaped in our own image...a god who has enough common sense to think like we think, to judge as we judge, to value what we value, and to behave as we would behave if we were god.

That's where Jonah is right now. That's why he's angry and disillusioned and ready to die. But note: Jonah is not running from God. Jonah is talking with God. And that's a good thing.

III. Redemptive Conflict

As petty and infantile as Jonah comes across here in early part of chapter 4...as blind as Jonah is to his own hypocrisy given God's unmerited mercy for Jonah when he was in the pit of Sheol...it is important to note that Jonah is no longer running from God. Jonah is honestly, sincerely talking to God...and God is listening.

As sinful human beings who only see a small part of the whole big picture, we are inevitably going to enter into conflict with God over the course of our lives. If we think about the scriptures, there are numerous people who have hard conversations with God including Moses, Abraham, Job, Peter and even the Apostle Paul.

There is biblical precedent to be angry at God and to even to argue with God. And here's what we find consistently throughout the scriptures: God is not offended by our anger, and He's not offended by our critiques.

Notice the way God responds to Jonah's temper tantrum. God simply responds, "Jonah, do you do well to be angry?" We'll dig deeper into that question next week but note the Divine tone. God is not angry at Jonah. God does not depart from Jonah. God does not rebuke or punish Jonah. Instead, God patiently engages with His pouting prophet, and we'll see that God is deeply interested in Jonah's personal and spiritual development, even as much as God was concerned about the great city of Nineveh.

Friends, God can handle your doubts, your anger, and your critiques of His character. There's not one of us who can think of God without some degree of error, and all our prayers have some element of sin attached to them! The key is to trust God enough to take our doubts, anger, and complaints to God instead of running away from God. The great Scottish preacher, Hugh Martin, captures this point beautifully:

Jonah is no enemy of God; he is a friend and child of God, notwithstanding the perplexity into which his feelings have fallen. Wretched as he is, through the predominance of his own fears, and the complaints against God to which these fears lead him, he would be more wretched still were he to restrain prayer before God, shut up his soul from Him, and determinedly and consciously depart from Him by an evil heart of unbelief. Sick at heart, and overwhelmed with despondency, he pours out his complaint unto the Lord, even though it is a complaint against the Lord Himself.⁶

He goes on with this insightful truth:

In every prayer of God's children there is some mixture of sin. The mixture here is very conspicuous and very alarming. There is, however, a secret element of grace, a secret seed of faith and submission proved to be present by the confidence in God implied in making Him the referee and counsellor. So long as all can yet be declared unto the Lord, even though it be your infirmity, there integrity still reigns. And the Lord in infinite condescension will acknowledge it.⁷

Friends, keep talking to God. Trust Him enough to be angry and to be honest. Know that God can handle your doubts, your frustrations, and even your very wrong thinking about Him! And remember Jonah. Jonah is well-intentioned but wrong, and he's a bit of blockhead right up to the end of this story. But keep this in truth mind: the only way we know about this conversation is because one day, by God's grace, Jonah gets it, and with all humility, Jonah shares this story with the world. If there's hope for Jonah, there's hope for us all, amen?

Church, what have we learned?

First, pay attention to your anger...it will reveal your subtle idols of the heart.

Second, listen to your critique of God's character and consider the possibility that it actually reveals the corruption of your own character.

Finally, I hope you will spend some time this week in honest conversations with God, and then spend time in the scriptures and allow God to speak into your questions and complaints. God loves you more than you will ever know, and He is every bit as interested in listening to you as

⁶ Hugh Martin, *Jonah* (Edinburg, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995 reprint), p. 349.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 349-350.

He was in listening to Jonah. Remember that God is gracious, slow to anger and full of steadfast love. He can be trusted.

We'll pick up with God's response to Jonah next Sunday. Let's pray.