

## “A Scandalous Success: Jonah and the Journey Outward” (Part 7)

Jonah 4:1-4; Psalm 130:1-8; Exodus 34:1-9

Have you ever been really upset when everyone expected you to be happy? Everyone wonders: What’s going on inside of you?

Last week we saw how the beginning of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 3 are parallel, but opposite. Chapter 1: God calls, Jonah runs away. Chapter 3: God calls again, Jonah obeys.

This week, we see that chapter 2 and 4 are also parallel, but opposite. We’ve got Jonah talking to God. But the same Jonah who repented and praised God for his mercy in chapter 2—is scolding God for that same mercy in chapter 4.

Wouldn’t it have been perfect to end the book at the end of chapter 3? Jonah would be known as a miracle prophet. The wicked city responded to his preaching! We’d be calling him Saint Jonah.

But Saint Jonah has suddenly gotten really sour. What’s he so sour about?

Two things: Nineveh has repented, and God has relented.

Nineveh has repented.

Back in chapter 1, the pagan sailors repented. But Jonah didn’t really get to see most of it. While they were offering sacrifices and making vows to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly before the true God, Jonah was sinking in the sea and being swallowed by a fish. But in chapter 3 and 4, Jonah has a front-row seat to the Nineveh miracle of repentance.

Bizarrely, Jonah hates his own success. If I went into Stadelhoferplatz and started preaching, and a crowd gathered and repented and I started baptizing them in the fountain by the hundreds, and they all became members of IPC, I wouldn’t turn to the Lord and say “please kill me now. I hate my job and my life.”

But Jonah is furious. Literally the Hebrew says (1) “It was evil to Jonah a great evil, and it burned to him.” It is bad news that Nineveh turned from their sin and violence; that they laid down in the dust, from king to peasant to cattle, and begged God for mercy. Seeing these wicked people do something so right, so appropriate, ruined his perfect picture of Nineveh as the perfect enemy.

You know how this works, right? Maybe you’ve gotten caught up in partisan politics. When someone on the other side actually does something good or humane or sensible, it’s frustrating. It ruins your perfectly awful picture of them.

Or your colleague or your boss or your classmate or your competitor, who has opposed you, says or does something kind, true, good, or beautiful. It’s irritating!

I’ve been making my family watch the best hit movies from when I was young. This dynamic is what drove Meg Ryan mad in the romantic comedy *You’ve Got Mail*. Tom Hanks was an Assyrian big-box book retailer. His company was threatening the very existence of Meg Ryan’s tiny neighborhood bookshop. One day she is home with a cold. He buys her flowers and makes her noodle soup. It tears to shreds the simple, ugly picture she had drawn of him.

Being against people who do bad things would be so much easier if they always and only said and did bad things!

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Now imagine your enemy is not your boss or your competitor, but Jonah’s enemy: a terrorist state, a militaristic empire who constantly threatens your tiny little country; a corrupt city full of oppression and violent crime. Then suddenly, this hated place and people respond with a radical repentance! Your picture of them as the ideal enemy—the enemy that helps you feel justified in hating them—suddenly becomes devoutly religious, non-violent, and just. This experience is either going to overthrow your hatred, or it’s going to overthrow you.

In our case, it overthrows Jonah. “Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Jonah preached. But now it’s Jonah who is once again overthrown. Not thrown over the side of a boat to sink into the depths of the sea. But thrown into the deepest depths of depression, anger, anxiety, rage.

Is there someone in your life that you despise so much, that it makes you angry when they do something right? Is there a people group you’d never be able to praise for doing something good, true, and beautiful? Is it right that you are angry? Would you rather that you be overthrown than allow your hatred of this person or these people to be overthrown? If you or if we depend on the pure badness of someone else in order to feel good about ourselves, then we are nothing but Jonah on his worst day. And our hatred must be overthrown, or we will be, like Jonah, overthrown.

God has relented.

But Jonah is not just bitterly angry that the Ninevites have repented. He’s even more angry that God has relented.

My old pastor Sinclair Ferguson loved to say this: “God is gracious in his sovereignty, and sovereign in his grace.”

I think it’s precisely this that has Jonah overthrown with anger once again. He hates the Ninevites and is mad that they’ve repented. But he ultimately knows that his God is completely in charge of all the nations and owns the cattle on a thousand hills—including the repentant cows on the hills of Assyria.

Jonah just confessed in chapter 2: “Salvation is from the LORD!” God is sovereign. But Jonah thinks that God is reckless and irresponsible with his sovereignty. He rules Assyria not just with truth, but with truth and grace. God doesn’t just speak truth to power; he also speaks mercy to power.

Jonah wants God to be more just and less merciful. But mercy and justice are not like republicans and democrats, or like yin and yang. God isn’t partly merciful, and partly just. God is merciful. God is just. That is how he revealed himself way back in the beginning of our Bibles in Ex 34—which Jonah is partially quoting here.

These words in Exodus, words confessing God’s mercy and justice, are confessed again and again in the Bible’s historical, poetic, and prophetic books: Nehemiah 9, Psalm 86, 103, 145, Joel 2, and on into the New Testament.

But God’s mercy and justice is a problem for Jonah. Look: Jonah is not completely wrong here. Jonah is wrong to want mercy for himself but not for the Ninevites. Jonah is wrong to want justice for the Ninevites but not for himself. Jonah is wrong to want to die every time God shows compassion on Jonah’s enemies. But he’s not wrong to say “Can God really be just and show mercy at the same time?” He’s not wrong to say “Is God really good all the time?”

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You know exactly how Jonah feels. Anyone who has thought about the sovereignty of a good God over a world full of wickedness knows how Jonah feels. If God is all good, doesn't he want to end evil and hold evildoers accountable? If God is all powerful, isn't he able to do this right now? Why won't he do it right now?

Remember Abraham—who has a very different conversation with God about the destruction or salvation of an ancient city, Sodom. Abraham, pleading with God, says: “would you refrain from destroying the city if we could find just 50, or 45, or 40, or 30, or 20, or 10 good and just people in this wicked place?” And the LORD says: “I would.” He's ready to be just and to hold only the guilty accountable. But the LORD doesn't find 10 just people in Sodom. He doesn't send Abraham to preach a sermon. He brings justice upon the city. In Sodom, he seems to be just but not merciful. But here in Nineveh, he seems to be merciful but not just.

This is the tension that exists throughout the entire Old Testament.

Jesus is sent.

It is only in Jesus Christ that this tension is resolved.

There's a lovely old hymn text by William Gadsby that Ellie and I wrote music for. We'll share it with you some time soon. It says:

Truth and mercy meet together;  
righteousness and peace embrace.  
Each perfection of Jehovah  
meets and shines in Jesus' face.  
Hallelujah, here the Father  
can be just and save by grace.

In Jesus Christ alone, God is just even while God is the justifier of sinners (Rom 3). Jonah wants Nineveh to be shown all the justice and for himself to be shown all the mercy. In the fullness of time, though, Jesus is shown all the justice, while we are shown all the mercy. In Jesus Christ, God upholds his perfect justice and shows mercy at the same time. For us to be made just, and for God to remain just, Jesus had to die for us. But thanks be to God: Jesus, who loved us, was glad to die for us.

Jonah sees God's grace toward Nineveh and it makes him want to die with anger. Jesus sees us dead in our sins and trespasses, and it makes him want to show grace, to die for us, that we might live.

Jonah is overthrown again. He wants to be thrown overboard again. He is throwing himself overboard in his rage. But God is still diving deep into the depths of Jonah's heart to meet him there, to swallow up his anger. To change him in the deepest places. The places where the weeds are still tangled around him, choking him as he drowns in the depths of his confusion and anger and hatred.

Jonah is ready to celebrate and write poems about God's salvation to Israel—even to Israelites like him, who've been disobedient. But Jonah doesn't want to hear anything about God's salvation through Israel. Jonah loves reading Genesis when God says to Abraham “I will bless you, and I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.” But if he could, he'd rip the next sentence right out of the Bible: the one that says “and by blessing you, I am blessing all the

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nations of the earth through you.” Jonah once again rejects God’s missionary call on his life. He once again rejects the fact that God has redeemed Israel for the sake of the nations, and not for the sake of Israel alone.

It’s self-righteousness on a personal and a religious and an ethnic and a national level. The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt concludes that “self-righteousness is the normal human condition.”

Jonah shows us that our self-righteousness runs deep. That we will never become loyal to God’s mission of justice and mercy for the nations until we realize, in the darkest depths of our hearts, that God has patiently but relentlessly pursued us with an absolutely undeserved mercy. That God has declared us just in Jesus the just one. That God is teaching us by his grace to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our sovereign and gracious God.

God will have a people for his mission of truth and grace. If we’re going to be part of that people, our inner Jonah needs overthrowing, and the reign of Jesus needs to come home in our hearts. May it be so.