

Love's Reach

Jonah 4:1-11

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Good morning. Please turn in your Bible, or open your favorite app, or following along on the screens. Today we'll be looking at Jonah 4, as Wayne introduced. And Wayne, you didn't even know it, but you touched on my greatest fear: overpromising and underdelivering. So we will trust the Lord will bless our time this morning from his Word. As Wayne did mention, we'll be looking at chapter 4, versus 1 through 11. Now Jonah, even if you're trying to find it—go to Psalms and flip quickly through the prophets and slow down when you get to Amos, because you'll skip over Obadiah and Jonah. So get to Amos, and then just flip individual pages, and you'll find Jonah.

The Bible, even as we sung earlier, the Bible is always telling the story of the living God. And it tells that story by describing his character and demonstrating his actions in history with his people. And so as we look at Jonah this morning, we will see how God's love encapsulates both who he is and what he accomplishes. So let's read God's Word and then pray together. Jonah 4:1-11.

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." 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?" [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Jonah is a great book. It's a short book. Sometimes those are the good ones, right? Because you can finish it in one sitting. But it poses interesting themes to consider, and invites us to ask important questions. So I'll start with just a couple. Have you ever wondered if you are outside the reach of God's love? Perhaps you have thought things or said things or done things that you thought were so evil that you would not want any other person to know. Have you ever wondered if others are outside the love of God? Perhaps others have thought things or said things or done things that you think are so evil that you would not want to associate with any person like that. Is anyone outside the reach of God's love?

Today's passage is truly a beautiful book. It's short. It's simple. It's intricately woven together. And it packs a lot of things that we can consider. But unfortunately, we can't consider them all. And so we're going to look at God's loving reach, and specifically in two ways. We're going to look at how God's love reaches far and God's love reaches deep. Before going forward, let's pray to the Lord for his love to reach us.

God, we pray in your grace and in your mercy, in your providential and sovereign love, that you are working and demonstrating and showing you love. We pray that you would be our teacher today, that we would be reminded of your character and be likewise reminded and rejoice in all that you accomplish in us and in the world. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So first looking at God's love reaching far. The Book of Jonah tells the account of one prophet from Israel. We're in the northern kingdom. Remember at the juncture following Solomon, the united kingdom that David was given broke apart into the northern and southern kingdoms. Jonah is living roughly in the 8th century B.C., during the time of King Jeroboam the Second. This is most likely prior to the destruction of the northern kingdom. And that becomes important in the context, because he goes to Nineveh, which is eventually the great capital of the great empire of the Assyrians, who were responsible for destroying the northern kingdom.

The book itself has wonderful symmetry. Chapter 1 involves a non-Israelite, a group of pagan sailors, and a mighty ship going away from where Jonah is and going to Nineveh. That parallels with chapter 3, which involves non-Israelite, pagan citizens within the great city of Nineveh. Chapter 2 focuses upon Jonah's circumstances in this great fish, while chapter 4 highlights Jonah's attitude regarding the circumstances of Nineveh. So 1 and 3, 2 and 4, is a great way of reading the whole book. Chapter 4, verse 1, says, "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry." What is "it" referring to? The short answer: God demonstrated his love by showing Nineveh mercy. But briefly, let's recount some of the plot points of the book.

As a prophet of the Lord, Jonah was given a particular task. And we see that in chapter 1, verse 2, where it says, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." Now, this book is unique compared to the other prophetic books in that it focuses less on the prophet's message and more on particular events in the life of the messenger. It's a narrative. It's a prophetic narrative versus more of a prophetic message to one of the kingdoms or the surrounding nations.

And contrasting with other prophets, we see the main character, the prophet Jonah, hearing the call and going in the opposite direction. Jonah got on a ship going to Tarshish, which is somewhere off to the west from where he was. The sailors on the ship were most likely Phoenicians, master ship-builders, well-skilled sailors. But while they were on that ship going to Tarshish, the text says that the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and these mighty sailors were afraid. They began to throw cargo overboard. And they wondered who among them was at fault for bringing this evil upon them. And it came to Jonah to explain himself. And he told them who he was and what he was doing and that the storm was on account of him fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

At this point, Jonah kind of suggested that they throw him overboard. This might fix the problem. Maybe it will make me feel better. Maybe it will help you guys out. At first, the sailors continued their attempt to salvage the ship and save the crew. They continued to row towards the shore. And eventually, though, they did throw him over. But there is this tension of showing that the sailors were actually very concerned about all on the ship who were going to perish. And yet they still complied with Jonah, and as they prayed to the Lord. What we see at the end of chapter 1 is coming to a smooth conclusion of this first episode. And we see what's next. The Lord appoints a great fish to swallow up Jonah.

And in chapter 2, while he's in the fish, Jonah is waiting, and he's praying. Verses 2 through 9 from chapter 2 is a psalm-like prayer that Jonah prays. Ultimately, he's recounting his circumstances, but he's

rejoicing in the salvation that belongs to the Lord. This, too, has a smooth ending with the Lord telling the fish to spit him out. Chapter 3 moves forward where Jonah was summoned a second time to his particular task that he did not heed the first time. But this time, the Lord repeats much of the same wording. Chapter 3, verse 2, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” So then we hear Jonah’s eight-word sermon. Who would like to have an eight-word sermon? Maybe if it was a different message. “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Now, perhaps he said more than that, but that’s what the book captures at the core of his message.

And what did the Ninevites do? They believed. And the text gives emphasis that they believed quickly. They responded very fast to the words of the prophet. We see them fasting and putting on sackcloth as a demonstration of their repentance. This news of what the people were doing as they were being stirred by the message of Jonah—the King of Nineveh, he too joined with them. By believing the Word of God, he instructed everyone in that great city to call out mightily to God and for everyone to turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Notice how the text highlights how immediate their belief sprung into action at the words of the prophet, even before the commands of their king.

And take note from chapter 3 verse 9 that the king calls his people to such repentance upon incomplete knowledge. We see them believing the words of Jonah’s message. However, they do not know who the Lord is. To be fair, they probably knew that the Lord was the Deity, was the God of Israel. But similar to the sailors in chapter 1, the Ninevites desire to not perish, so they seek to appease such a great and powerful God who might relent from his anger. It’s genuine, but it’s at the call of the message without fully understanding the one who is calling them. But Jonah, on the other hand, had a more complete understanding of who this particular God was. He knew the one true and living God, the Lord, the transcendent divine Being who revealed himself intimately and personally. He even, there in verse 2, he even uses the covenantal framework of God’s character that we see throughout all of the Old Testament, but particularly in Exodus 34 when the Lord invites Moses to come up again with a second group of tablets, and he declares to Moses who he is and how he is forever faithful to his covenant.

God’s love existed in Israel despite their folly. God’s love followed Jonah on the waters to Tarshish. And God’s love remained with Jonah in the belly of that great fish, despite his disobedience. God’s love was then demonstrated by extending his gracious mercy to the people of Nineveh. Nothing can contain God’s love. Nothing can prevent it. And nothing will get in the way of his reach from touching what is his. God’s love reaches far. The question before us today is: do you believe this? That’s the beauty of this prophetic narrative. We the reader, we the listener, get to respond. And we’re asked these questions. Do we see the Lord’s character demonstrating his grace and mercy?

However close or however far you feel from God, he is with you. He promises so in his Word. And if the God of creation is the God of salvation which belongs to him, then rest in his loving embrace that reaches toward you and around you. His love is extended. It is to be believed at his Word. And though there is no evil that can disqualify you from his reach, his love is the only thing that can empower you to put that evil down and to turn from it and turn toward the Living God. It is a turning away from our unrighteousness, as Jonah’s text says, the evil. But our unrighteousness, turning from those things, and finding satisfaction in Christ’s righteousness. Salvation belongs to our God.

God’s love, which reaches far, also reaches deep. The first three chapters dealt with dramatic tension, but they provide clean resolution as we go along through the book. Chapter 4, however, zooms in and it focuses the drama upon Jonah himself. And at the end of the chapter, we see this question that just hangs for us to grapple with, to wrestle with. Now, the text tells us that Jonah is angry. What could he possibly be angry about, right? He survived a storm upon the seas. He was spared from a fish’s digestive system. If at any time in a person’s life they could say, “Now, if I get out of this one, I’m going to devote my life to something important, to a cause greater than myself, and I will never take anything for granted,”

right? Those moments. No atheists in foxholes kind of movement, where you're pleading for salvation from your circumstance.

Jonah also had the privilege of watching his large audience be persuaded at his message. He might as well have been wearing a t-shirt that said, "If I only reach one, it'll be worth it. #winning." Rather, the text says that he was displeased that God relented of the disaster against Nineveh. Now, the original language can be translated here, "and it was exceedingly evil to Jonah." And this wordplay of "evil" is found all throughout the Book of Jonah. The word itself can both mean disaster and calamity, but it also can be wickedness or badness. And throughout the book, Jonah is using that word and playing and flexing it to be ambiguous at times. And context helps us to know which one is being mentioned. The word is used to describe the evil of the Ninevites, the storm, Jonah's displeasure, the disaster that could have been upon the Ninevites had they not turned from their evil ways. It also refers to Jonah's discomfort in the heat.

Jonah himself explains in his prayer, verse 2, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." Do not lose the irony of what this text is describing. Despite the knowledge of God's character, Jonah is angry at God for being slow to anger. And in essence, Jonah is calling this great work of God an evil. But the Lord—he never leaves us where we are. He reaches toward Jonah in the midst of his temper tantrum, and he asks, "Do you do well to be angry?" Again, a play on and a riffing off of the contrast with evil. "Do you do good to be angry?" Here, the word "anger" is burning. It's being kindled with a fire. And the Lord's question of Jonah is similar to the time he asked Cain about his anger. And when Scripture has God asking a question to a person, that is a great invitation to say, "What's going on here? What is the Lord asking?" And it's wise to listen.

Now, anger is an interesting emotion in that it is like shooting light through a prism. Anger can be split into various wavelengths of emotion, so to speak. And it can vary between people and among occasions. Anger can be irritability, arguing, bitterness, even violence. Anger can be passive. It can be aggressive. It can be self-righteous. It can even be absent in the sense of the Bible has a category for righteous indignation. So the question is, is our anger righteous or unrighteous, is often the question. David Powlison in his book, *Good and Angry*, writes this. He says:

At its core anger is very simple. It expresses, "I'm against that." It is an active stance you take to oppose something that you assess as wrong. You notice something, size it up, and say, "That matters ... and it's wrong." You encounter something in the world that crosses the line. Anger expresses the energy of your reaction to something you find offensive and wish to eliminate.

When God's love reaches deep, we must listen to what he is teaching us. And we will do well to embrace his love which diffuses our anger. Such self-examination in light of the grace and mercy of God cultivates a true humility. Because this is the other irony that's happening in the Book of Jonah. Those outside the covenant of the Lord are sometimes quicker to repent and eager to reform their conduct than Jonah, who is within the covenant. Likewise, those inside the covenant can be petty, and we can act like lions with splinters in our paws, failing to experience the riches that the covenant brings, and failing to extend those riches to others not yet in the covenant.

Now, there is great discussion that we can have over his context of Israel and historical context in contrast to the Assyrian Empire. At this time, the Assyrian Empire is not yet at its max strength. Later on, that switches, and they come and they crush Israel. But there is this interplay between the people of God and the enemies of the people of God. Jonah leaves it ambiguous. We don't know Jonah's motive for being so angry. It could be of his own ethnocentrism. It could be. It could be, "Those people up there in the north—they are enemies. Why would I want anything good for them?" The text is ambiguous. It merely

states the fact of his disobedience versus the reason or the motive for his disobedience. Now, he states his reason for fleeing. But again, we don't know the motive underlying that.

But God does challenge our sensibilities of who is worthy to receive his love, right? We can be very quick to be similar to Jonah where we want the mercy, and we want God to pour out his wrath on everybody else. We see this interplay in the plant. He's having this temper tantrum, and he's going out, and he's having a time-out. And he's pouting. He's waiting to see what happens. And there's, again—wordplay is so fascinating. God causes a plant to grow and to give him shade and save him from his discomfort. There's this ambiguity of the calamity of all of this, but it's also that flex of the word that the shade is also the evil that's rising up from Jonah to the Lord. Do you remember the cause of why Jonah was called to go Nineveh? It's because the Ninevites' evil comes up against the Lord. The Lord is justified in pouring out his wrath. But the Lord is merciful in asking people to repent, to turn away. In chapter 3, that word "overthrown" is also fascinating, because it does encapsulate the destruction, but it also—embedded in it is the condition. Turning. Turning away. Turning toward the Lord.

Friends, God's love reaches far, and his love reaches deep. The essence of God's love is rooted in the nature of his character. The scope of God's love is extended to the peoples across all boundaries and barriers. And the point of God's love is demonstrated in the victory of his salvation. How far has God's love gone to find you? How deep has God's love gone to transform you? The question before any reader and listener of Jonah is to see the character of God, that he says this obscure comment. He puts in context the number of the people and much cattle. What is going on here?

One way to look at the cattle is to look at it in the context of how many people there are, and to have more cattle puts it in the context of chapter 3, to the degree of their repentance. Remember the command of the king to put on sackcloth on all persons and all beasts? The scope of repentance is wide and pervasive. But the other thing about the comment about cattle is to really—to press into Jonah, "If you would have pity on this plant, would you at least have pity on this city that has much cattle? And I who created both plants and animals and humans, the Creator of the universe, I take pity on all of my creation—from the least to the greatest. And you, Jonah, please have pity on what I have pity. Be moved by what I am moved by. Love the things that I love. Do not let your anger burn and harden your heart."

May you and I and us as a church—may we experience his love further and deeper still. And may we even further and deeper arise and go in our lives, extending his love to all that God reaches. This is the mystery of the gospel that Paul talks about in Ephesians. The mystery of the gospel is that Gentiles are welcome into the covenant, to the ends of the earth. From Jonah's perspective, Assyria is way up north—so far away, roughly 500 miles as the crow flies. What does God have to do with that? We're over here in Israel. No, God cares for all of his creation. And he extends his love to all that is his and to all that he touches.

May we be changed by that love. May we be marked by that love—to one another and to everybody we interact with. May people interact with you in ways that—not because you're perfect. Not because you perform. Not because you are a good person. But you're changed by a great God who loves deeply and has even reached out toward you and me and found us. Embrace this love of God. Swallow it. Chew on it. Eat it. Revel in it. May it be the very foundation of how you see the world when you wake up, how you see a person across your living room, your workplace, or whatever distinctions we make between ourselves. How are we loving? And right now in our context, this love is the power that actually is a witness to the world that gives him glory, but it also points the world to who this God is. May we bear witness to him in how we love and in who we love. Let us pray.

God, help us in these ways. Help us to be transformed by your love, and help us to then be people who love—not in sentimental ways, but in costly ways. In ways that are powerful. In ways that are meaningful. In ways that are transformative. And may we take that opportunity to show that this is not of our making. This is not of our ability. But this is of your very character, of who you are—a gracious God,

slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. May we know you and be changed by you and go out and participate in all that you do in the world. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.