

Jonah 4

The Lesson of the Plant

1. Introduction

The first verses of Jonah 4 are a direct continuation of what has immediately proceeded. God repents of the evil he said he would do to Nineveh. Jonah finds this enough reason to be furiously angry. Why? Is his anger justifiable? Verses 1-4 consider this and the section ends with the question "Have you any right to be angry?"

Why does Jonah give no answer? And how is this question handled further? That becomes clear from the events surrounding the plant (vv. 5-9). The same question comes back at the end of this section: are you justifiably angry? By then, Jonah knows how to answer it, but in so doing he finds himself speechless before God as far as Nineveh is concerned. How and when must we place these events?

Finally, in verses 10 and 11, the Lord explains a thing or two. He does so with a penetrating question. This question is the climax of the chapter and also immediately the answer to the theme introduced in verses 1-4.

The Bible book closes with a word from the Lord which is just as powerful and as abrupt as the one he spoke at the beginning.

2. Text notes

Verses 1-4

It is shocking to realize how angry Jonah becomes (v.1). God had spared Nineveh. Jonah finds this a source of immeasurable irritation. Yet what sort of prophet is it that grows angry when his proclamation has a positive effect?

The otherwise silent Jonah explodes (v.2). He prays, but all humility has disappeared from his words. He rails against the Lord. His lamentation sounds arrogant: "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home?" A better translation is: "Did I not think..."

His prayer is a strange combination of reproach, self-pity and self-righteousness. But it also resembles a confession. Jonah reproaches the Lord about the sort of thing for which you would normally praise him. That is poignant!

God is *gracious*: Here that word means: He responds to those who humbly call upon him for help. The Lord demonstrates his love to them.

Compassionate: With great love, God stretches out his care to those whose life is in danger. He sees the weak and those who need his protection.

Slow to anger: The Lord delays his righteous anger as long as possible, so that he does not (yet) punish the guilty.

Abounding in love: The attention and love of God for his people is inexhaustible. Great is his willingness and readiness to show his love. But God's steadfast love is not limited only to his people. It is so great that it extends to all creatures and encompasses all his works (cf. Psalm 145:8,9; Matthew 5:45).

With these words, (gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love) God's people have often praised the virtues of the Lord (e.g. Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; Psalm 103:8; Joel 2:13). Words that God first said to us (Exodus 34:6) become an accusation against the Lord in Jonah's mouth. These attributes of God made Jonah bitter because they lead God to "relent from sending calamity." Further, it is better translated as "always inclined to be sorry for proclaimed evil." The evil here is the judgment that was proclaimed to Nineveh. The emphasis lies here.

Why does Jonah become so angry? Many commentators are of the opinion that Jonah does not want God's mercy for the heathens. He wants to see God's mercy limited only to the people of God.

It may be questioned whether this explanation is correct. Can you put something in the text that is not clearly stated there? Jonah is angry with the Lord, not so much because he is irritated by the Ninevites, but because the Lord changed his mind. He finds that boundlessly irritating. The Lord was not consistent in what he declared he would do. God forced him to prophesy, even bringing him from the jaws of death. God was very serious about it. Yet he changes his standpoint, which is what Jonah was afraid of. This was something he had not wanted to experience, especially in Nineveh. Nineveh: the ultimate in godlessness, in the land of the Assyrians. A people that was at that moment a latent threat for all the people of the old Middle East, including Israel. And now that God has been merciful to Nineveh, he wants to die. Jonah cannot agree with God on this matter. What remains of the Lord's honour in this way? If the Lord speaks, must he not uphold what he has said? (cf. Ezekiel 12:25) Above all, Jonah's name as prophet is under threat (cf. Deuteronomy 18:22). Jonah has problems accepting God as God, accepting this is how he is. The Lord's dealings with people flow forth from his virtues. God's perfection becomes a problem for Jonah. The glorious confession of God's virtues changes in Jonah's mouth to an accusation against him!

"That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish." This is better translated, "That is why I went to Tarshish the first time." With this comment, Jonah shows himself in a poor light. He says he fears the Lord (1:9 RSV) but in the meantime he does all he can to resist. Because of his dissatisfaction with God's mercy, Jonah falls prey to deep doubt. He wants to die (v.3). Not that he would take his own life. He asks God to take it from him.

In the Lord's answer Jonah experiences God's patience, the patience that he abhorred as far as Nineveh was concerned. The Lord ignores Jonah's wish. He asks another question instead. In so doing the Lord puts a finger precisely on the weak spot, "Have you any right to be angry?" (v.4).

Why do we read nothing in the way of an answer from Jonah? Some commentators suggest that the answer has been lost; it would have sounded the same as in verse 9. Others say this question was not originally here. By mistake the question in verse

9 also found its way into verse 4. Others defend that Jonah's answer can be detected in verse 5. Jonah keeps waiting in his shelter. Maybe Nineveh will fall back into her old sins. Then God will punish her after all.

However, the most plausible explanation is that Jonah gave no answer at all. He had to keep silent in response to that question. Why? Verses 5-9 show why.

Verses 5-9

Verse 5 now recounts what had already taken place 4:1-4 (and 3:10). After Jonah had pronounced judgment, he left the city. He sought a place from where he could watch what would happen.

He “made himself a shelter.” It is not likely that this is a good translation. Imagine that Jonah had made a hut. Why is he then so happy about the plant (v.6)? Does he not already have shade? And why in verse 8 is Jonah so terribly bothered by the sun? After the plant had withered could he not have found shade in the booth? That was what it was made for. This booth should be visualized as a shelter made from branches and leaves.

People have sought the answer in all sorts of suppositions. The booth had been blown down by the east wind (v.8), or it was too hot to sit under it, or the leaves withered quickly with the result that too little shade remained. Others have said that 5b does not belong in the passage.

But a slightly different translation is preferable: “Jonah wanted to build a booth for himself and wanted to sit in the shade, until he saw what would happen to the city.” This translation is totally sound linguistically.

Jonah had wanted to build a shelter. But the Lord anticipates him. He gives him other protection against the fierce eastern sun: the plant. Chronologically, not only verse 5, but also verses 6-9 precede 4:1-4 (and 3:10). These verses add detail to what is said in verse 5 and form a unity with it. The events surrounding the plant as well as verse 5 precede chronologically the sparing of Nineveh by the Lord. Even before the 40 days are up, Jonah has had his frustrating experience with the plant. It is a lesson in advance for Jonah from the Lord to prepare him for Nineveh's salvation in order to make him understand it. If we take verses 5-9 together, the grounds for criticism against this text also disappear – namely, that verses 5-9 are (somewhat carelessly) put together on the basis of different traditions. On the contrary, this section, like the rest of the book, appears to have been composed very carefully.

The plant of verse 6 probably had the botanical name *ricinus communis*. It is a very fast growing plant that can still be found in tropical areas. It can reach a height of 12 metres. In one year it can grow between 3 and 5 metres high. The leaves can become 20 centimeters wide. They are hand shaped and spread out along the stalk. No wonder that Jonah is so very glad. The leaves give much shade and also offer some way to keep cool.

In some translations the plant is referred to as a miracle tree. This is not because it was unique, but rather because it was a miracle that God let it grow at that place and at that time. The translation of verse 6, “to ease his discomfort” is questionable. It is

not the *growth* of the plant or the easing of his discomfort that was meant to teach Jonah. When God lets the plant die, the opposite effect is achieved. But the Lord wants to teach him a lesson by letting the plant wither in order that Jonah will forgo his anger concerning Nineveh.

At the time of the events of verse 6, which took place before 4:1 (and 3:10), Jonah was not yet angry. On linguistic grounds, the Hebrew word translated “discomfort” is better rendered as “anger”. Therefore, a better translation would be that the vine grew: to protect Jonah against the evil that could harm him.

The relief from the plant is short lived (v.7). God continues to work on Jonah. Sitting comfortably, he waits for Nineveh's demise. But the Lord sends a worm, which attacks the plant in such a way that it withers. Moreover, God sends a terribly hot wind (v.8), the infamous sirocco, a dry, hard wind from the Syrian-Arabic desert that sometimes blows into Palestine (cf. Jeremiah 4:11; Hosea 13:15). It scorches everything with its unbearable heat. When it comes prior to harvest it can cause severe damage (cf. Genesis 41:6). The plants wither within a few days (cf. Ezekiel 17:10; 19:12; see also Psalm 103:16). Its heat paralyzes both humans and animals. This wind would have blown into Nineveh from the south-south west.

Jonah has no protection anymore and collapses with exhaustion. He wants nothing better than to die. His anger plays the largest part in this. That is evident from the question from the Lord in verse 9 “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?” To which Jonah answers “I do ... I am angry enough to die.” That is “Yes certainly, I'm furious!”

The Lord's question brings us back again to the same question in verse 4. Verses 5-9 form the background against which verses 1-4 must be read. First Jonah is angry because of the withering of the plant. What purpose does that serve? When the Lord asks Jonah if he is right to be so angry, Jonah answers convinced, yes! (v.9) Subsequently, when God spares Nineveh, Jonah becomes angry again (vv.1-3) Now the Lord connects the two events. He does that in verse 4 by asking the same question as previously asked with regard to the plant (v.9). Now Jonah has no answer. It is also clear now why he is left with no answer to this question. He was furious because the death of the plant was so pointless. In his own eyes he was justifiably angry. How can he then be angry now God spares Nineveh? What would be the purpose of the destruction of this city? Surely that would be just as pointless? Has the population not repented? The question in verse 4 receives extra weight via verses 5-9 and in verses 10 and 11 is handed a conclusive answer.

Verses 10, 11

Now that Jonah is silent, God speaks. Is the prophet right to be angry about God's virtues (v.2)? Does the Lord really deal inconsistently? May Jonah disapprove of God's relenting of the announced disaster? Wasn't that why he reproached God? That is what these closing verses refer back to.

“You have been concerned about this vine.” Here, “concerned” means: “having difficulty parting with it”; “finding it a shame that the plant died” (cf. Genesis 45:20); “being grieved and hurt and suffering because of it.” But what had Jonah done for the *ricinus* plant? He made no effort for it. He had not grown the plant. Moreover, it

was there such a short time. In the space of one night it had grown and in the space of one night it had disappeared. It was of so little consequence Jonah could scarcely have gotten attached to it.

How very much more would the Lord feel hurt by the destruction of Nineveh, a city with more than 120,000 inhabitants? God Himself had made all those people. And don't forget the cattle, for the Lord also regards them (cf. Deuteronomy 22:6,7; 25:4; Job 39:3; Psalm 36:7; 104:10-14; 147:9; Proverbs 12:10). He is continually busy with his sustaining work. And Nineveh had repented! Therefore God did not have to bring about the judgment (Jeremiah 18:7,8). It pleases the Lord to see repentance (Ezekiel 18:23). Who is actually being inconsistent? The Lord does to Nineveh what Jonah would have liked to see happen to the plant.

"120,000 people." It is not likely that only the children (to a certain age group) are included in this count, which has been considered a possibility based on the words "who cannot tell their right hand from their left." It is likely that here we should think about people who did not know what was good for them. Right is the side of well being and prosperity, left, the side of disaster (cf. Ecclesiastes 10:2). This then refers to the normal population, the masses not included in the higher classes and thus not in command, people who lack the opportunity and the insight to decide what is or is not in their best interests. For God, it is one more reason to spare Nineveh now that she has repented.

3. Comments for today

1. Jonah will not accept God, as he reveals himself at Nineveh. He does not allow God the freedom to maneuver as he sees fit. Jonah wants to bring God down to man's level. That's why he finds himself in trouble again after he had repented of his flight to Tarshish. Repentance and penance must not remain only in outward appearance. True piety acknowledges the freedom of the Lord to act according to his holy will, according to his promises and his threats, in blessing and in cursing. This applies to the tragedies which come to pass on this earth. It applies to the evidences of God's grace where we had not expected them. It applies to the way God's people go through history. It also applies to the manner in which God guides our own lives.
2. Jonah does not accept God in the way God wants to give himself. This is why Jonah asks, "How can God do something like this? How can he be like that?" It is an old problem familiar today as well. How can God be explained to people like us? If there is no answer to be found that satisfies us, then we declare that God is dead or else we find him inaccessible and powerless. It is impossible to stand before God unless we bow before the Father of our Lord Jesus.
3. God does not let himself be ordered about by his servants. Not when they refuse to serve him (cf. Jonah 1 and 2) nor through the prejudiced opinions and expectations of his servants (see this chapter). We do not tell the Lord what he must do. God has the liberty to do as he wills and deals with us according to his faithfulness. God does not let himself be held back by what people may think of his ways. On the other hand, he does not just give up those resisting servants who have difficulty accepting his direction. He deals with these people in his sovereignty, according to his faithfulness.

4. Jonah announces the judgment over Nineveh. After that he leaves the city and searches for somewhere to sit. He takes a comfortable seat to watch what will happen. It is possible to be zealous for God's honour with an impassiveness that conflicts with his grace to sinners. Looking at Jonah's attitude toward Nineveh should make us consider our attitude to others and to our task as prophets. How do we stand up for the honour and the will of the Lord where we work or in the area where we live? How do we function, in this light, within our families? In our dealings with each other in the congregation, how do we give expression to our own responsibility as a member of the congregation or as office-bearer? Are we dutiful but unmoved? We are called to be zealous for the honour of the Lord but not to thereafter just sit back and watch to see what will happen.
5. The Lord has pity on his creatures, on 120,000 people and many cattle. This compassion is emphasized at the end of the book. Should God destroy all these people and animals? Jonah lacks compassion for them, although he is very sensitive to his own loss. God's compassion extends to all of his creation. This understanding is important for the way we must think about history, also about our current history. How much patience the Lord must have to reach the completion of his kingdom! How much he must bear. God's compassion is also relevant for the way we think about the creation. He even cares for the cattle. That commits us to deal conscientiously with the environment. Knowing that God's pity extends to all creation stimulates us to consider its future. Not only God's children will be renewed. There is a future for all of God's creation. Just as in the fall of Adam the whole creation was dragged into bondage, so in the renewing of God's children there is again a future for the earth (cf. Isaiah 11:6-9; Romans 8:18ff.; Revelation 22:1-5). May that encourage us all the more to act responsibly with the creation.

4. Summary

Chapter 4 appears to have the same construction as 3:3b-10. First, in verses 1-4 the theme is indicated (cf. 3:3b-5). Jonah reproaches the Lord's virtues. He finds God inconsistent. He does not accept the way the Lord portrays himself. Here, the central question of this Bible book is presented. The writer takes us back to the beginning again. It appears also to be Jonah's motive for his flight.

Verses 5-9 sketch the background to God's question in verse 5, exactly as chapter 3:5 is illuminated by verses 6-9. Thus it becomes clear why Jonah gives no answer to the Lord's question in verse 4.

The climax follows in verse 10 and 11 (cf. 3:10). The Lord exposes the situation. He underlines his compassion with a question, which could also be read as an exclamation. It is the third and final question he puts to Jonah. And then it is finished. We hear no more answers from Jonah. In this way these words also remain echoing as a question in our ears. A silence falls: we are made to think.

5. Tips for introduction and study

1. Try to understand Jonah's angry reaction (vv.1-4). What is the source of his reproach? Compare him with Elijah in 1 Kings 19:1-8. Note similarities and differences.

2. Compare Jonah's reaction also with that of the brother in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, and with those of the labourers in the vineyard in the parable in Matthew 20:1-16. See the contrast with Abraham, Genesis 18:16-33.
3. Try to bring the second commandment into consideration in your reflection on Jonah's rebellion against God.
4. Jonah resents God's long-suffering. Show how the Lord deals with Jonah in such a way that he too, may share richly in that long-suffering.
5. Consider if the last question from God (v.11) has implications for our view of the motives for evangelism. Should you also refer to 2 Peter 3:8,9 for this?
6. Consider if the last question from the Lord should also be an influence on the way we look at the environment.

6. Discussion aid

1. Despite all the similarities what difference is there between Jonah's reaction in chapter 4 and that of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:1-8?
2. What do you think of the following theses?
 - Apparently you can feel disgust about God's virtues because of your own wishes and expectations.
 - God is so exalted and perfect that he remains faithful to himself and does not let himself be caught up in our circumstances.
 - He who does not leave God to be God, will find himself in turmoil with God.
 - True piety recognises God's freedom to operate according to his faithfulness and plan, although that certainly is not always easy.
3. Why is there no answer to God's question in verse 4?
4. Is there actually a difference between the attitude of Jonah and that of the brother in the parable in Luke 15 and of the labourers from the parable in Matthew 20?
5. How can you have zeal for the Lord without seeing his long-suffering? Do we sometimes fall into that trap?
6. How do you go about carrying the message of God's mercy and judgment? Are you concerned for people who are in danger of being lost forever? Do you, out of compassion, draw your unbelieving neighbour's attention to the fact that they are heading for a terrible future?
7. What could be the reason that chapter 4 ends with a question (v.11)? We hear no answer from Jonah any more. Can we therefore draw conclusions about Jonah's faith?