

# Jonah 4:1-4

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*Jonah becomes angry because the LORD spares the Ninevites. He asks the LORD to take his life. The LORD responds to Jonah with a question to urge him to evaluate his anger.*

When *Jonah* warned the Ninevites about God's judgment, they fasted, wore sackcloth to express their sorrow, and turned from their evil ways. When God saw their genuine response, He forgave them and spared them from the judgment He declared He would bring on them (Jonah 3:10). But God's mercy on the Ninevites caused no delight in the prophet's heart. Rather, *it greatly displeased Jonah*. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, Israel's enemy. Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25), whose reign ended about twenty five years prior to Assyria conquering Israel and exiling its people.

The statement *It greatly displeased Jonah* literally reads, "It displeased Jonah with great displeasure." Interestingly, the noun translated as *displeasure* is "ra'ah" in Hebrew, which often refers to evil behavior (Jonah 3:8). Here, it describes *Jonah's* evaluation of God's compassion toward Nineveh. The prophet believed that God's decision to spare the Ninevites was unjust, so *it displeased* him. Perhaps from Jonah's perspective sparing Nineveh pronounced doom upon Israel.

Jonah's judgment of God's action on behalf of the Ninevites caused him to be resentful, so *he became angry* (literally "he became hot").

The word *angry* refers to the emotional condition of *Jonah*. Someone becomes *angry* when he has heard something that does not meet his expectations. More often than not, anger is a spontaneous reaction to a threat of some kind directed at the person or a group to which the person belongs. Here in our passage, there was no threat directed at *Jonah*. He *was angry* simply because he did not expect God to spare the people of Nineveh. He wanted to see Nineveh be destroyed.

Although Jonah obeyed God's message and went to Nineveh to warn the people about their wicked behavior, he believed they deserved God's justice, not His mercy. Now that God responded with compassion, *Jonah* responded with anger and *displeasure*.

Since *Jonah* was *displeased* with the LORD's decision to show mercy to the Ninevites, *he prayed to the LORD*. The term for *LORD* is "Yahweh" in Hebrew. It is the covenant name of God, which He revealed to Moses when He stated, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). The name specifies God's presence with His covenant people (Psalm 34:18). Jonah was aware of God's presence, so he petitioned Him.

This is the second instance in which the text explicitly tells us that *Jonah prayed*. On the first occasion, the prophet *prayed* to thank *the LORD* for sparing him from drowning by allowing a

great fish to swallow him (1:17; 2:1). Here, the prophet *prayed* to express his dissatisfaction when *the LORD* spared the Ninevites from judgment.

In *Jonah's* prayer, *he said, Please, LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country?* Jonah's question required a "Yes" answer. At this point, the text discloses why the prophet refused to go to Nineveh when God first commissioned him. When *Jonah* was *in his country*, the "word of the LORD came to him" (Jonah 1:1). God asked him to go to Nineveh and preach against it because the Ninevites persisted in their wickedness (Jonah 1:2). However, *Jonah* reasoned that God would forgive Nineveh if the people repented, so he refused to go there.

Jonah desired for Nineveh to be destroyed. He likely saw the destruction of Nineveh as a means of saving Israel. As he declared, *Therefore, in order to forestall this, I fled to Tarshish.*

The verb translated as *forestall* is "qadam" in Hebrew. It means "to go before" or "to anticipate something (Psalm 119:148). By using the verb to describe his action, *Jonah* disclosed his purpose in fleeing to *Tarshish*: It was to prevent God's wonderful grace to Nineveh when God first commissioned him to go there.

The place named *Tarshish* was probably in southern Spain. It was a port in the western Mediterranean known for its trade in exports and the farthest known geographical point to the west.(Jonah 1:3). It was, therefore, the farthest destination Jonah could sail in the opposite direction of Nineveh. So, by fleeing to *Tarshish*, *Jonah* demonstrated that his desire was for God to bring judgment upon the Ninevites for their wicked deeds.

Jonah then explained the motive behind his flight to *Tarshish* to escape his mission: *For I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness.* While Jonah was disobedient, he had the right view about God. Perhaps he had learned about the goodness of God from the book of Exodus (Exodus 34:6–7). He knew exactly that God would relent from sending the announced judgment if Nineveh repented. That is exactly why he did not want to go there.

The Hebrew term for *gracious* is "hanan." It describes God as bestowing unmerited favor and forgiveness upon someone. For instance, when *Jonah* was about to die by drowning, God graciously "appointed a great fish to swallow" him (Jonah 1:17). Then, God commanded the fish to vomit him up onto dry land after three days (Jonah 2:10). God was not obligated to rescue His disobedient prophet (Jonah 1:3). But He did so because He is *gracious*.

Not only is God *gracious*, but He is also *compassionate*; He is full of compassion. The word translated as *compassionate* is "rakham" in Hebrew. It refers to a deep love of one toward another. The term is used in Isaiah 49:15 for a mother's love toward her nursing baby. A mother who gives birth to her child will always love him/her regardless of what happens. Similarly, God is *compassionate* toward all people because He is the sole Creator. Even in the case of the pagan Ninevites, He gave them a chance to repent because He is the Lord of all nations.

God is also *slow to anger*. This idiomatic expression means "long of nose." In the Ancient Near East, someone with a short temper was said to have a short nose. But someone who was long-

suffering and patient was said to have a long nose. The LORD is patient, “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9b). That is why He sent *Jonah* to the pagan Ninevites, giving them a window of opportunity to repent.

God is not only *slow to anger*, but He is also abundant in *lovingkindness*. The word for *lovingkindness* is “hesed” in Hebrew. It can be translated as “steadfast love” or “loyalty.” The prophet stated that God’s *lovingkindness* is *abundant*, which means God is full of unfailing love. Because of the abundance of His love, He can still forgive sinners and spare them from calamities. In short, God is someone *who relents concerning calamity* when people repent. God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11).

To *relent* is to abandon a severe intention or a cruel treatment. It often describes how God alters His announced judgments when people repent, although He is not obligated to do so (Joel 2:13; Jonah 3:10; Jeremiah 18:8). The word *calamity* refers to misfortunes God brings upon an individual or a nation. For instance, when the Israelites fashioned the molten calf and worshiped it as their god, the LORD was about to destroy them (Exodus 32). But when Moses interceded on behalf of the Israelites, the LORD relented from inflicting the announced calamity (Exodus 32:14).

Jonah was aware of God’s goodness. He confessed that the LORD is *gracious, compassionate*, and patient. Yet, he did not appreciate those qualities when the LORD applied them toward the Ninevites, Israel’s enemy. As Creator, God knows that all sinners need His grace. Therefore, He is always ready to forgive people when they repent. And since God forgave the Ninevites, Jonah responded with anger. He wanted to see Israel’s enemy destroyed.

Jonah’s anger was so severe that he said to God, *Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life*. The prophet requested that the *LORD* kill him because he could not handle the LORD’s mercy to the Ninevites. Such a request demonstrates Jonah’s level of anger. He opted for death rather than life. This seems to be similar to his basic attitude while in the storm. He seemed to have reasoned that if he was thrown overboard and died, that would thwart God’s plan to send him to rescue Nineveh.

The *LORD* responded to Jonah’s request with a question: *Do you have good reason to be angry?* The expected answer is “No.” The *LORD* already knew that *Jonah* had no right *to be angry*. But He asked the question to challenge the prophet to evaluate his attitude. As humans, we are given stewardship to control three things: Who or what we trust, what we do, and the perspective or attitude we choose. This question would cause *Jonah* to slow down and think about his anger, and evaluate whether his perspective was true. God is inviting *Jonah* to see things from His perspective and see the Ninevites as humans in need of forgiveness, not merely as enemies. Then perhaps he could better understand God’s patience and compassion toward the Ninevites. However, we will not be told *Jonah*’s response, although we can infer he responded positively by the fact of the writing of this book. Perhaps the book ends with a dangling question in order to invite each of us to examine our own attitude toward those whom we perceive as enemies.

## **Biblical Text**

**<sup>1</sup>But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. <sup>2</sup>He prayed to the LORD and said, “Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. <sup>3</sup>Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.” <sup>4</sup>The LORD said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?”**