

## Jonah 4:5-8

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*While Jonah sits under his shelter outside of Nineveh, God appoints a plant to provide extra shade for him, making him very happy. But when God assigns a worm to destroy the plant and a scorching east wind to cause the sun to beat down on Jonah's head, he grows faint and wishes to die.*

Jonah was displeased and angry because the LORD forgave and spared the Ninevites. His attitude prompted the LORD to ask him if it was appropriate for him to be angry, and offer him an opportunity to choose a perspective that was true (Jonah 4:4). After hearing the LORD's question, *Jonah went out from the city* without providing God with an answer. And having walked out of *the city*, the prophet found a suitable spot *east of it*, so he *sat there*.

While the prophet *sat east of the city, he made a shelter for himself*. The word used here for *shelter* is "sukkah" in the Hebrew language. It denotes a temporary shelter or hut constructed of branches and sticks, providing shade during the day and protection from the dew and winds during the night (Genesis 33:17; Amos 9:11). In the ancient world, this type of *shelter* was often used to provide *shade* for soldiers on the battlefield (2 Samuel 11:11; 1 Kings 20:12, 16).

Jonah *made the shelter and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city*. Having preached the message that *Nineveh* would be "overthrown" within forty days, the prophet hoped that God would destroy the city (Jonah 3:4). So, he stayed far enough away from it to be safe. But God had already relented concerning the calamity. He would no longer inflict punishment on them.

As the prophet *sat* outside of *Nineveh* to see what would happen to it, the LORD intervened in his life. This time the narrator used a composite name to refer to God. The term used is *LORD God*, which is "Yahweh-Elohim in Hebrew. The term for *LORD* 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). On the other hand, "Elohim" signifies strength and creative power (Genesis 1:1; 17:7).

The switch from "LORD" (vv. 1-4) to "LORD God" is significant because it eases the transition from Yahweh's relationship with *Jonah* to His ability to create or make things happen. Thus, the narrator stated that the *LORD God appointed a plant*.

The word *appointed* is from the Hebrew verb "mānâ," which means to command or to commission. It occurs four times in the book of Jonah, each time with God as the subject (1:17; 4:7, 8). The verb expresses the power of command of a higher authority, as reflected in the book of Daniel, where it describes the power of the Babylonian kings (Daniel 1:5, 10; 2:24, 49; 3:12). Here in Jonah, the verb demonstrates that God alone has the power to do whatever He pleases. Therefore, He commissioned *a plant, and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head*. The purpose was to *deliver him from his discomfort*.

The noun translated as *discomfort* is “ra‘ah” in Hebrew, the same term used earlier to describe Nineveh’s behavior (1:2; 3:8) as well as Jonah’s “displeasure” with God’s decision to show mercy to the city (4:1). In our passage, the term has a dual meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the prophet’s physical *discomfort*. In this sense, the plant served as a shade to protect *Jonah* from the sun, delivering him from his physical misery. On the other hand, the term *discomfort* refers to the prophet’s attitude, expressed by his “displeasure” (Jonah 4:1). In this sense, it describes Jonah’s spiritual *discomfort*. Although the *plant* could not deliver the prophet from his spiritual *discomfort*, it served as an object lesson. God will use *the plant* to teach *Jonah* the truth about his internal problem. And not knowing God’s plan, *Jonah was extremely happy about the plant*.

Jonah’s happiness *about the plant* was short-lived. Once again, *God* used a creature as an object lesson. This time, He *appointed a worm when dawn came the next day*. The term for *worm* seems to refer to a caterpillar. This creature is consistent in its ability to stir up a sentiment of disgust because it always appears in contexts of disease and decay (Deuteronomy 28:39). Here also, *God appointed the worm* to harm Jonah’s plant. *The worm attacked the plant, and it withered*. God’s actions were quick. He commanded *the worm* to attack Jonah’s *plant*, and the *plant* dried up before the sun had risen.

God taught *Jonah* another lesson: *When the sun came up, God appointed a scorching east wind*. The *east wind* refers to the deadly “sirocco,” a hot *wind* blowing in across the land from the eastern Arabian Desert. That *wind* is so powerful that it can potentially destroy human endeavors (Ezekiel 27:26; Psalm 48:7) and blight vegetation (Ezekiel 17:10).

When *God appointed the east wind, the sun beat down on Jonah’s head*. The verb *beat* or *beat down* appears in several contexts in the Bible, one of which is harvesting. For example, people would *beat* olives for oil (Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 24:2) or wheat for grain kernels (Judges 6:11; Ruth 2:17). Ancient people would also *beat* olive trees to shake loose the olives (Isaiah 17:6; 24:13). Here in *Jonah*, God used the verb in conjunction with the forces of nature to make things hot for *Jonah*. He caused *the sun* to *beat down* upon *the head of Jonah* so that he became faint. As a result, the prophet *begged with all his soul to die, saying, “Death is better to me than life.”*

The term *soul* [“nephesh” in Hebrew] denotes the invisible, spiritual part of man represented by breath (Genesis 2:7). It is the spirit of life housed within the body (Genesis 35:18). However, many times the term is a synonym for “life.” For example, Esau asked his father’s soul to bless him (Genesis 27:19). Similarly, Jacob confirmed that his “nephesh” has been preserved from death after seeing “God face to face” (Genesis 32:30). Here also in *Jonah*, the prophet used the term as a synonym for his life. He wished he were physically dead.

Jonah petitioned the *LORD* to kill him because he could not agree with the *LORD*’s mercy for the Ninevites (Jonah 4:3). And now, he desired to die. He *begged with all his soul to die*. Jonah seemed unconcerned about dying when he asked to be cast from the ship, perhaps because he thought that this would prevent God from being able to spare Nineveh through Jonah’s message. This time Jonah’s wish came because of his physical suffering, not his anger at God’s decision to spare the Ninevites.

It is instructive to see here that Jonah, a true prophet of God, has the same basic problems common to humanity. He knows God is true, but has difficulty trusting that God knows best. Jonah clearly has his own idea of what is best, and does not seem to have trust that God might know better. Jonah also has difficulty choosing a true perspective. Because of lack of choosing proper trust and perspective, Jonah predictably makes poor choices. But God continues to work with Jonah. God chastises him, because that is what He does to those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:5-6).

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>5</sup> Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. <sup>6</sup> So the Lord God appointed a plant, and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. <sup>7</sup> But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. <sup>8</sup> When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with *all* his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."**