



## Jonah - Chapter Four

### Summary of Chapter Four

Despite the grace and mercy that God had shown to him in not punishing him for being disobedient at the outset and then saving him from the sea and the fish, Jonah now shows his anger that God has shown that same grace and mercy to the Ninevites when they repented. He even tries to blame his own disobedience on the knowledge that God would relent from punishing these pagans. So in his temper tantrum he leaves the city and sits down to observe what would happen next.

God graciously provides a plant to shelter Jonah from the sun but the next day he provides a worm to make the plant wither and sends a sultry east wind to burn Jonah. At this point Jonah wants to die just as the bush dies because he has lost his shade and it has made him uncomfortable. God then reproves Jonah for his lack of compassion for the people and animals of Nineveh, yet he wants to die because his shady bush has died.

### IV. Jonah 4:1-8 - Jonah's Anger

The sixth episode parallels the third in Jonah 1:17-2:10, and focuses on Jonah's self-centeredness and hypocrisy. Both episodes have the same structure: (1) Jonah 'prayed to the Lord' (1:17-2:1a and 4:1-2a); (2) Jonah's prayer (2:1b-9 and 4:2b-3); and (3) 'the Lord spoke/said' (2:10 and 4:4).

<sup>1</sup> But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.

### Jonah 4:1

But this was very displeasing to Jonah. In the previous episode (Jonah 3:10) the pagans got rid of their 'evil' and God got rid of the 'calamity' he had threatened, both Hebrew *ra'ah*. The pagans are in harmony with God, but Jonah is not, as he alone is now characterised by 'displeasure' or 'evil'; again, both Hebrew *ra'ah*.

He became angry. There is a time for righteous anger, such as the time Jesus cleared the temple and: <<His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’>> (John 2:17). However, in Jonah’s case there was a clear absence of grace or humility, much like the elder brother who was jealous of his father’s treatment of the prodigal son: <<Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him>> (Luke 15:28).

<sup>2</sup> He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.

#### Jonah 4:2

This is Jonah’s second prayer; the repetition of prayed to the Lord from Jonah 2:1 invites the reader to compare the two.

A gracious God; ready to relent from punishing. These same words occur in: <<Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing>> (Joel 2:13b) as the basis for hope. This is similar to other Scriptures that characterise God, for example: <<The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation’>> (Exodus 34:6-7), <<But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them>> (Nehemiah 9:17b), and: <<The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love>> (Psalm 145:8). Ironically, this standard confession of the compassionate character of God is the root of Jonah’s anger.

Steadfast love, when extended to Jonah, filled him with thanksgiving: <<But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!>> (Jonah 2:9), but when extended to the Ninevites, it filled him with anger.

<sup>3</sup> And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’

### Jonah 4:3

My life translates Hebrew *napshi* ('my soul'), and to live translates Hebrew *khayyay* ('my life'). These two expressions occur in Jonah's first prayer, where he is grateful that his life was brought up from the pit: <<*I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me for ever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God*>> (Jonah 2:6b), and his fainting 'life/soul' was revived: <<*As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple*>> (Jonah 2:7). Ironically, when God extends the same mercy to the Ninevites, Jonah wishes his life and soul to be taken.

<sup>4</sup> And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' <sup>5</sup> Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

### Jonah 4:4-5

Jonah went out of the city; waiting to see what would become of the city. Apparently, Jonah hopes that God still will not relent but will destroy the city after all.

Jonah made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade. Jonah is hot – both emotionally, i.e. angry, and physically. A booth is a temporary structure which can either be a tent or more often made from materials gathered locally. There was an annual Festival of Booths or Tabernacles, which was to commemorate the way the Israelites had lived during the wilderness years: <<*Speak to the people of Israel, saying: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and lasting seven days, there shall be the festival of booths to the Lord*>> (Leviticus 23:34), and: <<*You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths*>> (Leviticus 23:42). It was one of the mandatory festivals and Jesus attended them, even though to do so put his life at risk: <<*After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near. So his brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing*>> (John 7:1-3).

<sup>6</sup> The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush.

### Jonah 4:6

The Lord God appointed a bush. This is the second use of the verb appoint or provide: <<*But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah*

*was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights*>> (Jonah 1:17). The kind of bush appointed is not known; the term, Hebrew *qiqayon*, occurs nowhere else in the Bible, but a castor oil plant or a gourd plant, both of which have large leaves, are the most common suggestions.

Discomfort or evil, is again Hebrew *ra'ah*; as commented on at Jonah 1:2, refers both to Jonah's outer discomfort and to his inner evil.

Jonah was very happy. The grammar of this phrase is identical to that at the beginning of 4:1 <<*But this was very displeasing to Jonah*>>, and underscores the contrast between Jonah's anger at the salvation of the Ninevites and his joy at his own salvation.

<sup>7</sup> But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup> When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

#### Jonah 4:7-8

God appointed a worm that attacked the bush; God prepared a sultry east wind. These are the third and fourth uses of the verb appoint, also translated as prepared. The east wind is a drying wind from the desert.

It is better for me to die than to live. This was a sad and selfish reflection of Jonah's understanding of what God had done for him and through him. His words are very similar to Elijah, although in his case he was being pursued by the wicked queen Jezebel, who would no doubt have tortured him to death: <<*But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors*>> (1 Kings 19:4). How different Jonah's understanding of his calling by God when compared to the apostle Paul when he was incarcerated in a Roman prison: <<*It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain*>> (Philippians 1:20-21), and: <<*As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing*>> (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

## V. Jonah 4:9-11 - Jonah Is Reproved

The seventh and final episode has no parallel and thus stands out as the climax of the story. In many ways it starts with Jonah walking out of the city (v.5).

<sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?’ And he said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’

### Jonah 4:9

Is it right for you to be angry about the bush? As God had questioned the justice of Jonah’s anger over the salvation of the Ninevites (v.4), he now questions the justice of Jonah’s anger over the destruction of the plant.

<sup>10</sup> Then the Lord said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

### Jonah 4:10-11

You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. Finally Jonah expresses concern over something perishing (refer also to the comment made on Jonah 3:9), but ironically it is a plant, not the hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, an idiom for being morally and spiritually unaware that probably refers to the entire population of Nineveh. Jonah’s compassion for the plant explains the rather odd expression that translates the final words in the Hebrew text and also many animals.

The ironic question raised by these words is: “If Jonah will not allow God to have compassion on Nineveh for the sake of the hundred and twenty thousand people whom God created and cares for, will Jonah not allow God to have compassion on Nineveh for the sake of the animals since, after all, Jonah was willing to have compassion on a plant?” The question is left unanswered so that the readers of the book may answer it for themselves.