

God Makes A Way Jonah 1-4

At a time in the not-so-distant past, most of you remember when you weren't required to wear a seat belt and car seats for children were optional. Sometimes that proved to be a challenge when you wanted Jr. to sit and stay sitting. Perhaps you have heard the story of a little boy who found himself in the car with his mother. As little boys often do, and some little girls as well, he found himself getting a bit restless in the back seat. The mother told her son to sit down. After repeated requests by the mother and the same number of refusals by the child, she felt the need to stop the car and exercise appropriate disciplinary measures. Once they were finally on the road again, the little boy mumbled from the back seat "I may be sitting down on the outside, but I am standing up on the inside."

That seems to be the attitude Jonah exhibits in the book that bears his name.

In **James 4:6-7** we read: **"But He gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Submit yourselves therefore to God."**

With your Bibles opened to Jonah. We are going to look at this book from God's perspective and consider the following three things:

God's commission to us is compelling
God's control of us is convincing
God's compassion on us is certain

There are those who do not consider this to be an historical book but rather an allegory or even a parable in which there are lessons to learn from a fictional character and event. But let me leave with you that this in fact is historical, as Jesus uses it to refer to His own death, burial, and resurrection.

The overarching theme of the book is God's loving concern for all people. Nineveh represents all Gentiles, who are an enemy of Israel. Jonah on the other hand, represents Israel and its jealousy of being God's favored people who are unwilling to share His compassion with others, even though they

were to be the light of God to the surrounding nations. Through this book, God's purpose is to have Israel discover His concern for all creation and that no one is beyond His mercy. Secondly, He wants Israel to understand the role they have in making His great compassion known to the surrounding nations. (**Isaiah 49:6**)

Like the little boy in the story, Jonah is unwilling to submit to the authority of God, exhibiting a pride that leads to complaining and rebellion. And even though he eventually goes to Nineveh, he still demonstrates an attitude of defiance by wanting and waiting for God to destroy Israel's enemy. His outward demeanor was much different than his inward devotion. He may have obeyed God on the outside, but he wasn't happy about it on the inside and tells God how he feels. It really demonstrates a hard heart that is callous to God's word and will.

Do we sometimes act just like Jonah? We may do what's right on the outside, but our inner attitude is quite the opposite. Let's see how God responds by first looking at God's commission on us is compelling.

I. GOD'S COMMISSION ON US IS COMPELLING – 1:1-3

The book opens with the word "now". It's like opening a book up in the middle and beginning to read wondering what happened before this part of the story. We don't really know anything that happened before this. The first thing to understand about God's commission is that it's personal.

A. God's Commission Is Personal – v. 1

God's Word is very clear that every believer has been commissioned by God to serve Him in some way. We see this in **Matthew 28:18-20** where all believers are to go make disciples. This commission is not given to just a select a group of people like the pastor or those with the gift of evangelism. We all have a commission given by the Lord. In this case, a commission is not something you can accept or reject based on whether it's to your liking or waiting till something better comes along.

Jonah is a prophet and the main character of this story, living in the northern kingdom of Israel. He is a contemporary of Amos and Hosea. Ironically, his name means dove, which is a symbol of peace. He is the son of Amittai, which also ironically, means faithful and truthful. What we learn from Jonah is that he did not want peace for Nineveh, nor was He faithful in the commission given by God.

God assigned a task for Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to this great city by calling out against it. The reason he was to preach against them was because of their wickedness. We have no idea what it was other than it must have been blatant and widespread. When Jonah did finally go and preach to them, his message was only one of judgment for their wickedness. He didn't tell them what they were to do because of their wickedness.

A quick Google search and you discover that Nineveh is roughly 500 miles from northern Israel, a mere 12-hour drive with light traffic. It's in what is now northern Iraq.

As I said a moment ago, all of us has been commissioned by the Lord for some task that He wants us to do, it's a personal call designed especially for us.

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Every believer has a commission by God on his life. That commission includes growing in Christ and then serving Him in some way by doing what He has prepared for us to do. We are given the Holy Spirit who then gives each of us a spiritual gift that is used to fulfill the commission given us by God. We learn from **I Corinthians 12** that the Holy Spirit distributes those gifts to believers according as He sees fit for the benefit of the body. An example of this is the Apostle Paul who said in **I Corinthians 9:16** that he was compelled to preach. His commission or call was something he received from God the moment of His conversion. His commission became his motivation for everything he did to serve the Lord.

Before the foundation of the world, we were called and God designed for us good works as His workmanship to bring glory to Him by bringing the fruit He desires.

The commission that God has given us usually begins with some burden for a particular need that relates in some way to God's kingdom work. You might have a burden to be involved as the voice of God in politics, much like the new House Speaker Mike Johnson.

You might have a call to be involved in the pro-life movement giving the unborn a voice. It might be to serve the Lord as a pastor, missionary or other work of service in the church as a teacher.

Pastor Jim and Liz felt that call and commission when they began serving with CEF obeying the Lord and serving in Michigan, Austria, and at the headquarters in Missouri. But the commission didn't end with their retirement. They continue to find ways to fulfill that commission through active involvement in the community where they live.

We discover that commission by how closely we walk with the Lord, learning to obey Him and giving ourselves to acts of service that burden us. When we learn to distinguish His voice over the din of other competing demands and interests, we discover what His call is for our life.

The commission of God always leaves us with two choices as we next consider that God's commission is not only personal, it's planned.

B. God's Commission Is Planned – vv. 2-3

Each of the Old Testament prophets had a specific area of ministry to which they were sent. Each had a work to do and a word to teach. Jonah was told to go to Nineveh. We read that it was a great city, an impressive city. It was the capital of Assyria along a trade route that brought much wealth. In **chapter 4**, God tells Jonah that there were 120,000 children who didn't know their right from their left, meaning they were very young. Scholars estimate the population to be around 600,000 people. It took about three days to walk around. It was first built by

Nimrod, the great-grandson of Noah. So its storied history goes back a long ways. But we also learn that while it was great in size, it was also great in sin and yet God had a plan for Jonah to travel there to deliver a message.

We have two options when it comes to God's commission.

1. **We can obey**
2. **We can object**

We can relinquish our will and do God's will, or we can rebel against God's will in order to do ours. We may object to God's commission for a variety of reasons.

It may be inconvenient.

It may take too much time.

It may require us to give something up that we want to do.

It may require a skill that we don't feel we have.

But remember that when God asks us to do something He will also equip us for that task.

We may object because we want someone else to do it. God called Moses to go back to Egypt and deliver Israel from bondage. Moses came up with all kinds of excuses why he didn't want to do it and finally told God to find someone else.

One additional reason we don't want to do what God asks is flat out disobedience or rebellion.

Jonah simply didn't want to obey God, and we learn from the book the two main reasons why. The first is the wickedness of the Ninevites. The second reason for Jonah's disobedience according to **4:1-2** is that Jonah didn't like God's compassion on the wicked when they deserved His wrath.

Alexander MacLaren says that Jonah **"refused because he feared success."** Jonah was saying he didn't want to go because they were evil people and he didn't want to preach a message that might bring repentance so that God would forgive them. They didn't deserve God's compassion.

Have we ever refused to go somewhere or share the gospel with someone because we thought they were too wicked or we didn't think they wanted to hear the gospel? Do we refuse to obey God's prompting because we think someone deserves God's

judgment instead of His mercy and compassion? I think that's how the Pharisee felt about the tax collector who had gone into the Temple to pray.

Jonah opted to run away from God. **How many of you know that's not really possible?** **Psalm 139** tells us that there isn't anywhere we can go to escape God. No matter where we go or how far we go, God is already there. But Jonah thought he could be the exception and ran in the opposite direction. He hopped a boat in Joppa on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea and headed for Tarshish some 2500 miles away on the coast of what is now Spain.

Everything seemed to be in Jonah's favor. He had the money for the fare, and a boat going in the direction he was headed. He even seemed to be at peace since we find him sleeping below deck.

When God calls us to a task there are only two options: we can obey or object. And just as there are only two options there are only two outcomes.

1. **If we obey, we receive God's commendation** – that well done good and faithful servant.
2. **If we object, we receive God's correction**

What we learn from Jonah and is true in our own times of rebellion, is something Warren Wiesrbe wrote that *"the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart."* Jonah's problem was a problem of the heart. That's where rebellion begins. When we aren't walking with the Lord as we should, when we'd rather do what we want than what God wants us to do, our response is rebellion.

Take heed to what Spurgeon wrote: *"God never allows His children to sin successfully."*

Essentially that means that when we disobey, we'll never get away with it. When we buck God's will He brings correction. Warren Wiesrbe adds that *"For us to rebel against God's will, as Jonah did, is to invite the chastening hand of God."*

Tony Evans said something that we need to pay close attention to: *"If you're a Christian and rebelling against God, He's coming after you."*

We can never escape the Hound of Heaven. When God has a call on your life, He'll keep after you and in this next section we see how God pursued Jonah. Here we see God's control of you.

II. GOD'S CONTROL OF US IS CONVINCING – 1:4-3:10

How many of you know that God has a way of getting our attention when we disobey Him?

He has no lack of ways to get us to sit up and pay attention.

With Balaam He used a donkey.

With Samson He used blindness.

For you it may be a job loss, an accident, an illness, or an injury.

God can use circumstances, trouble, challenges and any number of things to get our attention to bring you back into alignment with His will and call on your life. **How will you respond?** Because how you respond will determine how much benefit you'll get from it.

We can despise God's discipline and maybe even hate God all the more for it.

We can be discouraged by God's discipline and wonder why it's happening to us and become disheartened by it.

We can resist God's discipline and continue to try and run away from God.

Or we can submit to it.

Notice all the things God used that were under His control, things He used to get Jonah's attention.

He used a storm.

He used a bunch of pagan sailors.

He used a great fish prepared just for the occasion.

He used a scorching wind.

He used a vine.

He used a worm.

Hebrews 12:6 tells us that whom God loves, He disciplines. His discipline isn't just because He's mean or vindictive. His discipline is intended to bring us back into a right relationship with Him. His discipline is intended to get us back in line with His will, His calling for your life.

So when God wants you to get where He wants you

to go, He'll use whatever means necessary to get you there. **But did you notice that the storm didn't get his attention?**

H. A. Ironside states the obvious when he observes "It is amazing how slow one can be to own how ill he is doing when he has become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

Jonah felt no twinge of guilt for his rebellion as evidenced by his sleeping during the severe storm raging outside. His conscience didn't seem to bother him in the least. But the storm was so severe that these seasoned sailors were afraid and began calling out to their gods for deliverance. But their gods nor their sin, whatever they may have been, didn't have anything to do with this storm. It was the Creator God who sent the storm. When their efforts failed, the captain went down into the belly of the ship to get one more person to call out to his God. Desperate for deliverance and answers they discovered that Jonah was the reason for the storm and they became even more fearful when they heard he was running away from his God.

Jonah told them that if they wanted to be spared, they should throw him overboard but instead of heeding his advice they tried all the harder to battle the storm. Eventually they listened to him and prayed that God wouldn't hold them responsible for the death of this passenger.

Let me add that this is a good picture of salvation. We try all kinds of things in our own effort to earn salvation but nothing works, so we try harder, but we are still in the storm. Only when we do what God tells us to do to be saved will we experience the peace we can experience in Christ.

The sailors tossed him overboard and immediately the storm stopped. It reminds me of a different storm where Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat when a storm whips up. The disciples do all they can to get back to shore and finally wake Jesus. They ask if He didn't care that they were perishing. What an absurd question to ask Jesus. Of course, He cared. He then spoke and the storm stopped. **Where was their faith? Where was Jonah's faith?**

Didn't Jonah care that they were perishing? They tossed him overboard and the storm ended. But that wasn't the end for Jonah. We aren't told if it was immediate or if he was treading water for a while before the great fish came along and saw him bobbing up and down in the water and decided to swallow him up.

As we learn from Jesus, Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days. **How many of you know that when you are where God wants you to be, He'll keep you, even when it's a storm, even when it's in the belly of a fish?**

Now I don't know much about the digestive system other than once it goes in, the stomach begins to do its thing by breaking down the food so that it can be digested and distributed as nourishment for the rest of the body. For arguments sake, let's assume the fish was a whale, I'm not saying it was, but just hold on for a moment. Whales are big. They require a lot of food on a regular basis. They swim along, open their big mouths and swallow up lots of water and whatever is in the water they take in. The food gets swallowed along with whatever else is there. Maybe Jonah had a sense of what was happening and prepared for the worst. He was covered in seaweed and shrimp. But for those three days God kept him alive even though there were times as we read in **chapter 2** that he felt like the end was near.

Now I've never been in that kind of a situation and quite frankly I hope to never find myself swallowed whole by a big fish. It doesn't really matter what kind of fish it was because God's Word says it was a fish prepared just for the job.

You have heard it said that you need the right tool for the job. In other words, if the job calls for a hammer, don't use the end of a screwdriver. All kinds of bad things can happen if you use the wrong tool. **How many of you have used your teeth to get something unstuck only to find that you cracked or chipped the tooth in the process?**

This big fish was the right tool for the job God had to get Jonah to begin to think about where he was at, what he needed to do, and how he was going to

get there.

Warren Wiersbe writes *"The will of God will never lead you, where the grace of God can't keep you. and the power of God can't use you."*

God's commission of Jonah to go to Nineveh never changed. He isn't going to change His mind just because we don't like it. Jonah had a heartfelt prayer in **chapter 2** and the big fish vomited him up on shore. God will get you where He wants you to go, by whatever means necessary. Once Jonah was back on land, he still had the 500 miles to get to Nineveh.

Like Jonah, some of us don't get right with God until circumstances are so adverse that they swallow us whole, but God knows what it takes to teach us to repent and pray. (Tony Evans)

Jonah didn't pray until he was in the belly of fish when everything from his perspective seemed hopeless. It was in that situation that he was driven to pray. Tony Evans reminds us that *"the pit is not a bad place to be if it gets you back to God."*

When we allow God to control us, we will endeavor to do His will. So we can either continue to try and buck Him at every turn or we can let go of our will and follow His. Jonah had quite a walk to contemplate his relationship with God. When he arrived in Nineveh, he journeyed a day into the city before he began what seems to be the shortest sermon with the greatest revival.

"Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

God's will wasn't just for Jonah to be obedient, but for a people to repent and turn to Him. God's will for Jonah was for him to preach so that these Gentiles would receive His grace and mercy. That's His desire for all people.

II Peter 3:9 "God isn't willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

Ezekiel 33:11 "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways."

God's message through Jonah was so convincing that a citywide revival broke out where they called for a fast and repented so that God did not bring on them the calamity that He had planned for their wickedness. What a great lesson for us to keep in mind that no one is beyond the reach of God's love, mercy, grace, and compassion. All who believe will be saved. And with that we come to our final point.

III. GOD'S COMPASSION ON US IS CERTAIN

– 4:1-11

Be thankful for God's compassion and why He spared the Ninevites.

Lamentations 3:21-23 “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.”

If it weren't for God's compassion, we would be consumed by His judgment for our sin. Here's the thing about God's compassion.

If you have never sought His gift of salvation, His compassion is available to you.

If you have run away from God, His compassion is available to you.

If you are involved in some secret sin, His compassion is for you.

But Jonah was angry at God because of His compassion. He was angry that God withheld His judgment on people he thought deserved God's wrath. When we're serious about repenting for our sin, God's compassion is always available to forgive. He will always withhold judgment when we sincerely and wholeheartedly humble ourselves in repentance. God challenged Jonah's thinking by asking the prophet what right he had to be upset about a vine that withered away and died, a vine he didn't even create. **Why was he upset about a vine and yet not upset that hundreds of thousands were going to die eternally separated from God if they didn't repent? How concerned are we for the lost?**

Jonah didn't want God to show compassion even on those too young to have any sense of moral right and wrong. But God wanted to show compassion.

In this book we see four important truths about God's compassion and how certain it is.

1. **God's compassion shows His patience.** He was patient with Jonah and he was patient with the Ninevites so that they might repent.
2. **God's compassion shows His pardon.** He was willing to forgive Jonah for his disobedience and willing to forgive the Ninevites for their wickedness when they repented.
3. **God's compassion shows His power.** A great revival happened throughout the whole city because of God's message through Jonah.
4. **God's compassion shows His pity.** He looks on all those who have yet to repent, concerned about their eternal well-being.

Why did Jonah not want to go to Nineveh?

He felt they were wicked and deserved God's wrath. He knew God to be gracious, merciful, slow to anger (patient) and abounding in love.

We can be certain that God's compassion shows His unchanging love.

We can be certain that God's compassion shows His unchanging mercy.

We can be certain that God's compassion shows His unchanging grace.

We can be certain that God's compassion shows His unchanging forgiveness.

It was a lesson Jonah needed to learn. Just as God has shown us compassion, we need to let God have that same compassion on others and we need to show that same compassion to them.

This past week while waiting to be helped in a store, I stood observing another customer and instantly made some wrong judgments. It wasn't long before the Lord tapped me on the shoulder and reminded me that His compassion was just as available to that person as it was to me.

Do we reflect and are we instruments of God's compassion?

No matter how far we are away from God, His compassion is there for us. We can't outrun Him.