

May 28 Lesson 13

Pervasive Love

Devotional Reading: [Psalm 86:8-13](#)

Background Scripture: [Jonah 4](#)

JONAH 4

¹ But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”



⁴ But the LORD replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

⁵ Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶ Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind,

and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

"It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

¹⁰ But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

KEY VERSE

Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?—[Jonah 4:11](#)

LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. The Fighting Deacon
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- A. Reaction and Reminder ([vv. 1, 2](#))
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Ready and Acting

- B. Worm and Wind ([vv. 7, 8](#))

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- A. Running Ahead of God
- B. Prayer
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Introduction

A. The Fighting Deacon

He said that in his younger days he was known as “the fighting deacon.” This reputation was acquired by the fact that on two occasions in meetings of the church board he had “slugged” (his word) someone who disagreed with him. He no longer had such a violent temper, but he was almost proud of what he had done.

But anger can be a very toxic emotion. Mark Twain wrote that “anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.” Some have rationalized their outbursts of anger by saying that they lose their tempers quickly and then calm down almost immediately. Billy Sunday, a famous preacher of the past, once encountered a lady who said, “I blow up, and then it’s all over.” Sunday replied, “So does a shotgun, and look at the damage it leaves behind.”

The Bible has much to say about anger ([Proverbs 29:22](#); [Ephesians 4:31](#); [Colossians 3:8](#); [James 1:19, 20](#); etc.). The words *anger* or *angry* occur several times in [Jonah 4](#), the text for our lesson. Jonah had a problem with anger. As the Lord worked through him to bring the people of Nineveh to repentance, God also worked with Jonah to help him overcome this problem. Anger is not sinful in and of itself (note Jesus’ anger in [Mark 3:5](#)). But irrational anger needs corrective action, and that’s what God provides Jonah in today’s lesson.

B. Lesson Background

Since the background material noted in the three previous lessons applies here as well, that information need not be repeated. Much of that material is very weighty, so we shall close this series with some “lighter side” distinctive facts that help to make the book of Jonah memorable.

1. Jonah is the only prophet recorded to have traveled on the Mediterranean Sea.
2. Jonah is the only prophet recorded to have outright refused to undertake a mission from God. Other prophets revealed doubt from time to time (example: [1 Kings 19:3, 14](#)), but Jonah stands alone in his flagrant rebellion.
3. When Nicodemus attempted to defend Jesus during a discussion, he was rebuked with the observation that “a prophet does not come out of Galilee” ([John 7:52](#)). This overlooked the fact that Jonah was from Gath Hopher ([2 Kings 14:25](#)), which was less than three miles northwest of Nazareth.
4. The book of Jonah, being primarily a narrative about the man, records just one predictive prophecy—a prophecy of only five words in Hebrew ([Jonah 3:4](#), last week’s lesson).
5. The book of Jonah is the only prophetic book with miracles by God that involved the prophet personally—from the storm and the fish to the worm and the wind.

The traditional view of authorship for the book of Jonah is that Jonah himself wrote it. As he came to the end of it, he must have been greatly embarrassed about the prejudice and anger he had displayed so blatantly. Our lesson begins just after the point where God saw the repentance of the Ninevites and decided not to destroy the city ([Jonah 3:10](#), last week's lesson).

I. Jonah's Pettiness

([Jonah 4:1-4](#))

A. Reaction and Reminder ([vv. 1, 2](#))

¹ But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.

The compassionate decision of God in [Jonah 3:10](#) is not what the prophet wants to hear! He is angry that his preaching results in the city's being spared God's destructive wrath. This is not the way a preacher would normally react when his message brings repentance by the thousands! The Lesson Background of [lesson 11](#) explains the possible basis of Jonah's anger.

As a bit of speculation, Jonah may wonder whether God will treat the people of his own nation (the northern kingdom of Israel) likewise, should they repent when under threat of similar judgment. Historically, however, the people of Israel do not repent, in spite of the preaching of prophets (see [2 Kings 17:13, 14, 23](#)). The sparing of Nineveh will not be repeated for Samaria a few decades later. But neither will it be repeated for Nineveh itself, as the prophet Nahum and historical records make clear.

We may also wonder exactly when Jonah is informed of God's decision to spare Nineveh. Is it before the 40-day period of [Jonah 3:4](#) is up, thereby implying that Jonah is angry and indignant for the remainder of that period? Or do it and the other events of [Jonah 4](#) happen at the end of the 40-day period? Scholars disagree, but the last phrase of [Jonah 4:5](#) may indicate that the 40 days are not yet completed.

² He prayed to the LORD, "Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Jonah turns his anger into prayer, but his motivation is not to become compliant with what God has done. Instead, he seems to be trying to make God feel guilty for sending him on the mission trip to Nineveh.

HOW TO SAY IT

Assyria Uh-*sear*-ee-uh.

Assyrian Uh-*sear*-e-un.

Galilee *Gal*-uh-lee.

Gath Hephher Gath *Hee*-fer.

Jonah *Jo-nuh*.
Mediterranean *Med-uh-tuh-ray-nee-un*.
Nazareth *Naz-uh-reth*.
Nicodemus *Nick-uh-dee-mus*.
Nineveh *Nin-uh-vuh*.
Ninevites *Nin-uh-vites*.
Tarshish *Tar-shish*.

Jonah's prayer includes an eloquent description of the great attributes of God. In that regard, the prayer mirrors [Exodus 34:6](#) as Jonah affirms that God is *gracious and compassionate ... slow to anger and abounding in love*. These were Jonah's conclusions before *fleeing to Tarshish* ([Jonah 1:3](#)). Able to list God's outstanding characteristics, Jonah wants to be the one to decide to whom they will and will not apply. He had wanted to be saved when he was in the fish ([Jonah 2:2](#)), but he does not want the Ninevites to be saved from the doom prophesied for them. He wants God to do things Jonah's way, not God's way.

A certain parallel can be seen in churches where people enjoy Christianity's benefits but are unwilling to support missionaries adequately. The sad result is to deny people in other lands and cultures the blessing of everlasting life through Jesus. After realizing how much the Lord has forgiven us, we should want others to know that there is a God who is willing to forgive them as well.

B. Request and Question ([vv. 3, 4](#))

³ "Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Jonah's frustration with the flow of events overwhelms him—so much so that he expresses his preference for death over life. This contrasts with his attitude when he was inside the fish, for there he wanted to live and see God's temple again ([Jonah 2:2, 4, lesson 11](#)).

Jonah has been spared from death himself, but now he is despondent and disappointed that the people of Nineveh have been spared from prophesied destruction. His inconsistent reasoning serves as a marvelous set-up for the memorable lesson God is about to teach him.

⁴ But the LORD replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

As with Job, *the Lord* responds with a question (compare [Job 38:2](#)). The fact that God's interrogation begins with the issue of anger implies that an adjustment is necessary in that regard, as Jonah is led to look at himself in a mirror. There are indeed legitimate reasons for being angry. Do any of these form the basis for Jonah's own anger?

We note that the Lord does not ask his question because he needs information—the Lord already knows everything. The question is designed to get Jonah to think. The fact that we see no

response from him may indicate that he is compelled to do just that. On the other hand, a lack of response may indicate that Jonah is so aggravated that he cannot process the question.

II. Jonah's Protection

([Jonah 4:5-8](#))

A. Hut and Plant ([vv. 5, 6](#))

⁵ Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.

The previous verses reveal the emotional responses of Jonah. In this verse, physical actions take the spotlight.

If circumstances work against a person's desires in some way, he or she may not take it well! Physically, these reactions may cover the spectrum from becoming very active (from fear, as in [1 Kings 19:3](#); from anger, as in [Acts 7:57, 58](#); etc.) to becoming completely inactive ([1 Kings 19:4, 5](#); [21:4](#)). Jonah ends up in the latter as he seems to adopt an attitude of denial. Surely God did not mean it when he said he wouldn't destroy Nineveh, did he? So Jonah takes the actions described here, a disposition we might call "watchful waiting."

Jonah's initial approach toward Nineveh would have been from the west. After crossing the Tigris River, he entered Nineveh to preach as he continued in an easterly direction. Today, some of the gates of ancient Nineveh have been restored in order to reflect the glory of the city's past. Archaeology and terrain suggest that Jonah likely makes his exit through a gate at the southeastern part of a wall after he finishes his preaching tour *at a place east of the city*.

After he is out of the city, he probably finds a mound or high point that gives him a better view. There he builds a crude hut for shade where he can wait to see what will happen to the city. His food and water sources are not given. This waiting reflects disbelief of the Lord's decision.

This sequence may confirm that the 40-day period ([Jonah 3:4](#)) is not over, for Jonah does not want to be in the city when time is up—just in case. Most people who want to pout seem to prefer solitude.

⁶ Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant.

Five events or special objects are mentioned in the book of Jonah as being prepared by God: a wind ([Jonah 1:4](#)), a fish ([1:17](#)), a leafy plant ([4:6](#)), a worm ([4:7](#)), and an east wind ([4:8](#)). We are now at the third of these five as *the Lord God* temporarily supplements Jonah's protection from the sun by means of a rapidly growing plant. One possibility is that this is a castor-oil plant. It grows rapidly to a height of about eight feet, and it has very large leaves (see also [v. 10](#), below).

The double layer of shade for Jonah is better. He is *very happy about* this additional blessing, which appears so suddenly and adds to his comfort. Jonah is certainly concerned for himself! But

love for perceived enemies is still lacking. The teaching about loving your enemies is given by Jesus in [Matthew 5:44](#); but Jonah has no excuse, even though he lives over 700 years before Jesus. By Jonah's day, the enemy-love principle has already been stated in [Exodus 23:4, 5](#) and [Proverbs 25:21](#).

B. Worm and Wind ([vv. 7, 8](#))

⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered.

“Jonah and the Worm” is the title of one preacher’s sermon on Jonah. This title is intended to pique curiosity, since sermons on Jonah are usually about “Jonah and the Whale.” The latter is based on [Matthew 12:40](#), which refers to “the whale’s belly” in the *King James Version*.

God used a great sea creature to correct Jonah’s attitude about a trip to Nineveh. Now he uses a small worm to teach his prophet a further lesson. First, the worm does what God programmed it to do: it begins eating the stalk of *the plant*. The interpretation of “leafy plant” to refer to a castor-oil plant fits well, since this plant withers very quickly if the main stalk is injured.



“What are some ways to meet this challenge in the week ahead?”

⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

With the plant now useless for shade, God increases Jonah's discomfort further by means of a *scorching east wind* (compare [Jeremiah 18:17](#)). As the sun rises, all this works together to cause Jonah to become light-headed and dizzy. He temporarily forgets his anger, but remains self-centered as he expresses his wish *to die*. He is physically and spiritually miserable while far from home, in the foreign land of an enemy. Exhaustion from a preaching tour he had not desired is now multiplied by the possibility of heat stroke.

God has to this point used a storm and a great fish to encourage Jonah to go to Nineveh. Now God uses a worm and an east wind to move Jonah to where he should be in his attitudes toward those who are different.

III. God's Pronouncements

([Jonah 4:9-11](#))

A. Question and Response ([v. 9](#))

^{9a} But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

God is not finished with his efforts to correct Jonah's thinking. Jonah is being challenged to think correctly about the mind-set a true prophet should have. The first eight words of God's question here are identical to the eight words of his initial question in [Jonah 4:4](#). The added words *about the plant* here indicate God is probing deeper as he requires Jonah to think about something specific, something that is not associated with the city of Nineveh.

^{9b} "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

Jonah's answer is petty, defensive, and almost defiant. He attempts to bolster his position by asserting once again his preference for death.

Jonah's peevishness indicates confidence that he has done nothing wrong. Further, he cannot comprehend why he has to suffer the loss of the plant. Emotional people who learn to control their emotions can do well in telling others about the love of God. Jonah has not yet reached that point; he lacks any compassion for the Ninevites.

B. Rebuke and Reason ([vv. 10, 11](#))

¹⁰ But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight."

God's second question ([v. 9a](#)) is designed to soften Jonah's attitude. But Job's response ([v. 9b](#)) indicates further work is needed. God's observations of fact challenge Jonah's thinking by reminding the prophet that he had no ownership of the plant, for he had neither planted nor

tended it. These facts should compel the prophet to realize how absurd and small his defensive statements really are. But God has a bit more yet to say.

11. “And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

The Lord’s final question demands that Jonah contrast his thoughts about the plant with God’s thoughts regarding Nineveh. Jonah should feel embarrassed, for it is obvious that the population of a large city is more important than a single, solitary plant! Jonah’s self-centeredness is now so obvious that even he should see it.

The size and greatness of Nineveh is indicated by the number 120,000. There are two main lines of interpretation regarding this number. Some propose that it is the total population of the city. A city of this acreage (see commentary on [Jonah 3:3](#) in [lesson 12](#)) can accommodate twice that number easily. Under this view, the declaration regarding the city’s residents who *cannot tell their right hand from their left* has a spiritual dimension—that spiritually the Ninevites are somehow deficient in being able to distinguish good from evil. This viewpoint runs into trouble at [Romans 1:20](#).

The other view is that the 120,000 refers to the number of children in Nineveh who are not yet old enough to tell right from left. That would boost the total population significantly when estimates of the number of older children and adults are added in. The grand total may be too much according to our analysis of [Jonah 3:3](#) in [lesson 12](#), unless the villages in the immediate vicinity are included.

The reference to *many animals* is a reminder that God is concerned for animals as well as people. The word translated *animals* refers to livestock in general ([Exodus 13:15](#); [22:19](#); etc.).

Conclusion

A. Running Ahead of God

In general, there are two mistakes we can make in our relationship with God. First, we can lag behind him, failing to move as fast as he wants us to (example: [Haggai 1:1-8](#)). The other mistake is to run ahead of him. This may involve making plans that are not his (example: [2 Samuel 7:1-13](#)) or anticipating what we think he “must” do, as in today’s lesson.

It is so easy to run ahead of God and presume that he must do such and such! That presumption resulted in anger and pouting on Jonah’s part, and it can do the same to us.

Don’t run ahead of God!

B. Prayer

O God, may your Word ever remind us of your love for humanity! Enable us to do all we can to take the gospel to all, without bias or prejudice. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

When God loves, he loves the world!