

“The Expansive Mercy of God and How to Miss It”

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Series: *Minor Prophets*

Bible Text: Jonah 4:1-4

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If you have a Bible, you can be turning to the Old Testament Book of Jonah. And we're looking at chapter four today, chapter four, verses one through four. If you don't have a Bible, you can follow along in the Worship Guide, it should be printed for you. We are continuing this series through the Minor Prophets, one representative passage for each of the prophets. And today we're in the most well-known, probably, I would assume, of all the Minor Prophets. He has his own Veggie Tales movie, after all. The others don't. And we know probably about the storm and we know about the whale or the fish, however you want to say it. We know those things. But all the children's Bibles leave out chapter four because nobody really knows what to do with the way the book ends. And I would argue that the way the book ends is the point of the whole book.

So that's what we're going to look at. Let's read chapter four, one through four, and remember that this is God's Word and it's for us.

1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

2 And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

3 Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

4 And the Lord said, “Do you do well to be angry?”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Would you pray with me?

Father, please help us now as we look at your Word. We want to think true thoughts. We want to feel the way we should feel. We want to see our wills aligned with your own. So by your Spirit's power and presence, would you take your Word now and apply it and speak to us? We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

There's a former CPC member, they have since moved to a different state, they've transferred their membership to another PCA church, and he was the first South Carolina fan to darken the doors of Christ Presbyterian Church. And how dare he?

Being a Clemson fan and alumnus, I had an honest moment where I thought, how's this going to work? How much does he care about football? Because some of us care about it too much. And we feel it too much. Is he going to gloat every time we lose a game in any sport? How's it going to go? And it turns out he was great. Great guy, gracious in victory, humble in defeat, and in a touch of providential kindness to me, the church where he transferred his membership, the senior pastor is a Clemson alumnus. So, jokes on him. We have since added a few more South Carolina fans. And you know who you are. And I say to you, y'all are the kindest, best Carolina fans I've ever met. And I mean that, mostly.

We have rivalries in a church. And we might rib each other on game week. And there might be a time where a joke goes a little too far, you know, on a certain game week. And we have to apologize. And that's pretty easily dealt with. But for the most part, Clemson and South Carolina fans can exist in the same church. Georgia and Georgia Tech fans, they can exist in the same church. We can kind of, it's fun, you know, and it's fine.

But then there are some rivalries that might exist in the church that aren't fun and may or may not be fine. So what happens when the super patriotic American finds himself in fellowship with a Muslim background Iranian who has professed faith in Jesus? That might get weird. Or a patriotic American southern Christian finds himself coming to the Lord's table with somebody who has ties to a group that used to do really terrible evil things. There might be some trust issues. There might be some hesitations. And there certainly would be a lot of questions. What if someone from the other political party put faith in Jesus and now comes to our church? Maybe more on the nose. It'd be really hard to be in the same church with the person who caused you the most hurt in your life, but genuinely repented and professed faith in Jesus. But now you see them every single week. Or to be in a place where the people group that you naturally dislike, and let's just get that out on the table. Everybody has people groups that they naturally dislike. Okay. You have it. I have it. And they start coming to Christ in droves and they're showing up at your church. How are you going to feel about that?

Some rivalries, some enemies, might feel like a bridge too far. Can God really save that person? Can he save those people and that person who hurt me? Here's the real question. Should he save them?

That's the question that Jonah asks. And it's the question that he has the answer to and he doesn't like it. Last week in Obadiah, we saw that God will crush his and our enemies. And my guess is, I mean, I walked out of the room last week feeling like, that is so encouraging. I'm so happy that God will meet out justice against all who oppose us. It's great news.

And Jonah looks at a very different angle. Jonah shows us that sometimes God converts your enemies, and that can put you in a bind. We can't miss the expansive mercy of God. That's the point here. *Don't miss the expansive mercy of God.*

So, we're going to talk about the expansive mercy of God and how we might miss it so that hopefully we don't.

So first, the expansive mercy of God.

You know the story of Jonah to this point, most likely, but to recap, God called Jonah, go preach to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, cry out against them because they're evil. And instead of obeying God, Jonah turned tail and ran the other direction and boarded a ship trying to outrun God, and God came after him. God willfully hurled a storm into the sea. And the sailors realized that, oh, you're running from your God? This is not okay. And Jonah says, we ought to just throw me overboard, which they seem to oblige. And as they throw him overboard, the storm stops and God appoints a fish to swallow Jonah. And in the belly of the whale, three days and three nights and strangely still alive, Jonah comes to his senses, prays a humble prayer of faith and commitment in chapter two. And then the Lord causes the fish to spit him back up on the beach.

And honestly, that would have been just a great story that would bring the house down for all of us. That would have been enough. But then Jonah actually obeys and goes to Nineveh and he preaches. Here's his sermon.

Forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

That's it. It's all we have. Maybe he said more. Maybe that's it. And from the king down to the peasant, every single person repented. And they even put sackcloth on their animals to show that even the animals are repenting in the city of Nineveh. And the verses just before ours say this.

When God saw what they the Ninevites did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster he said he would do to them. And he did not do it.

Huge revival, super effective, very short sermon, whole city of Israel hating, God haters repenting and turning. This ought to be making headlines and cause for festival and great joy.

Chapter four, verse one, *but it was evil to Jonah, a great evil.*

And literally it says his nose was hot. He's really, really angry. What's evil? Previous verse.

that the Ninevites turned from their evil way.

That they turned from evil was evil in Jonah's eyes, and he's incredibly angry.

Some context will help us. The Assyrians are bad, bad people. They are bloodthirsty. They're known for their brutality. Through the years, they had assaulted and harassed Israel. They had caused lots of trouble for them. In the future, it would be the Assyrians that God would appoint and call to go and carry off the Northern Kingdom into exile. He would be an instrument of wrath against them. But in spite of all of the opposition and their nastiness, God sent a prophet to cry out against them and under duress. But eventually Jonah went and the whole city repented.

And God turned from his anger because it is in his nature to be merciful when people repent of their evil.

It's who he is. And Jonah knows it. To his credit, he prays. Look at verse two. He prays and lays out the exact nature of his complaint.

Is this not what I said when I was yet in my country? This is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish.

This is why I ran away. I knew you would do this. I knew you would be merciful to our enemies. I knew that I would go and preach and they would repent and you would be merciful and they wouldn't be wiped off the face of the earth. And I hate that.

This is God's prophet. He knew this is how God operates. He even quotes back God's character to him. Look at the next lines.

I knew you to be gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, relenting from disaster.

He's quoting directly the attributes of God from Exodus 34. Moses had asked God, show me your glory. And God proclaimed his character to him. The glory of God is in his attributes. But for Jonah, God's attributes are the problem. God is more gracious than Jonah wants him to be. And God is more merciful than Jonah thinks he should be. And he's slower to anger and more abounding in steadfast love, is this covenantal love idea. And Jonah wishes he wouldn't be that way. And he relents from disaster and Jonah thinks he ought to bring disaster, destroy these people.

Interestingly, Jonah didn't quote the rest of the passage. Just after talking about his grace and mercy and he forgives sin and transgression and iniquity, it says, but who will by no means clear the guilty.

He's gracious and merciful and just.

Jonah forgot about that. He's mad that God is gracious. More on Jonah in a moment.

But there's something for us here about the mercy of God that without sacrificing his justice, he is the one that's going to lengths to see that this city repents. It's his idea. It's God's idea to send a prophet to them in the first place. They weren't asking for it. Jonah wasn't asking to go do it. Jonah wasn't praying, Lord, please, please send me to the Ninevites. I'd just love to see them change. And the Ninevites aren't sitting around saying, you know what we really need is a prophet. We need somebody to come and tell us the truth. No, God decides to send a prophet, chases the rogue prophet down, hurls a storm so that he's thrown overboard, appoints a fish to swallow him. And don't miss the miracle there. People don't stay alive in the belly of giant fish. They get digested. And he's not digested. And Jesus assumes that this is a true story when he talks about Jonah. It's not a metaphor or a myth. And it's God who calls Jonah to come to his senses and go preach a short sermon of judgment.

God is committed to the repentance of the Ninevite long before the Ninevites ever think that they have a God that actually they should repent to.

This is how mercy operates.

To quote the New Testament. *"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

We weren't asking for it. We weren't looking for it. We didn't think that we needed mercy. We weren't even sure there was a God that should show us mercy, and we certainly didn't think that we were sinful and needed mercy.

His commitment predates any repentance or faith on our part and even overcomes the resistance of his own prophets.

Without losing his justice, it is God's nature to be merciful.

Can you see that? Can you see that the plan all along really has been to bring about the conversion of the nations? All the way back from Genesis all the way to the end. Good Israelites, bad Israelites, pagans, natives of countries then unknown, whole empires and civilizations in the future. God's plan is to show his character and his nature and cause them to repent. Jonah knew it, but he didn't like it.

And what about you? What do you think God is like?

I'm not asking how you would answer the question about God's attributes on a theological exam.

I'm asking when you wake up in the middle of the night and your anxieties are going crazy, what do you think God is like?

Or when you're going through a period of grief and suffering, what do you think he's like?

Or when everything's really going great, what do you think he's like?

Some of us, I think, err on the side of justice. And your knee-jerk thought of who God is, is that he is barely able to hold himself back from landing the hammer of justice on people the second they disobey him. And it's just amazing that anybody makes it through without getting smitten, smited, however you want to say it. Which is to say, do you struggle to believe that God could actually love somebody like you or your kids or your neighbors or friends? If that's you, consider his grace to you. Look at his mercy to a bunch of Ninevites and marvel, and let your view be adjusted.

My guess though is that in our culture and day, that's not most people. In our day, it's very different. Most people think of God, if they think of God, as a sweet, gentle, but feeble grandfather. And he's kind of sitting in heaven and he's fretting over the state of the world. And he's kind of dreaming of older and better times too, you know, back when things went his way. And he's kind, but he's getting old and a little soft. And maybe the bad guys just kind of get away with some stuff and, oh, missed that one. He's nice, but he can't fix anything. And he can't right any wrongs.

And that's not it. We know that the God who is all justice, it's hard to worship that God because we're afraid he's going to get us. The God who can't do anything is not worthy of our worship because he won't. He can't. He's powerless. The biblical picture is so very different.

Perfect justice, perfect mercy, worthy of adoration, worthy of worship.

And that's the real question. Not just what do you think he's like, but as he reveals himself in his word, do you like what he is actually like?

Can you revere and adore and worship and bow before and believe that he loves you and that he also is just and he handles his enemies.

Can you rejoice in his character?

Can you look at his mercy to people who were not like you and rejoice that he's merciful to them too?

If you're here and you're a Christian, you've got to understand that you're the fulfillment of that Abrahamic promise that goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 12 that in Abraham's great seed, singular, Jesus. All the families of the earth will be blessed.

You live in 21st century America. Most of you come from some barbarian tribe from somewhere, right? Either European, African, Asian, it really doesn't matter. We're all coming from the barbarian tribes. If a couple of you come from royalty, just keep going back far enough and you'll find the barbarians. They're all there.

Over 2000 years, God has caused the message of Jesus Christ to show up in each successive culture, each successive language, and he sends the Spirit so that when people hear it, it lands with power and people and whole civilizations are changed.

We are among the least obvious recipients of the mercy of God.

We are more like Ninevites than Israelites. Marvel at the expansiveness of the mercy of God toward barbarian people like us. Because if you don't, you might miss the mercy of God altogether. And that's what is painfully obvious as we look at this passage.

So let's talk next about how to miss the mercy of God.

We've talked about the anger of Jonah as he calls the repentance of the Ninevites evil, but a key to understanding his frame of mind seems to be in verse two, when he says this;

is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?

In my country. Jonah lived in a town in the northern kingdom of Israel, and he prophesied during the reign of a guy named Jeroboam II. And Israel in the reign of Jeroboam II was super wealthy, and the reach of their kingdom was the biggest it got. So they are people with money. They are people with power. They have some sense of national identity and pride, maybe different from ours today, but still certainly intact. Jonah's perspective seemed to be that God is for us. He's for my country. And in a sense, it's true. I mean, this is Israel, right? The northern kingdom, though in rebellion, was still Israel. And though they were breaking the covenant, they were still part of the covenant people. And yet one wonders if Jonah's love for "my country" had gone a little too far. See, he just can't fathom that God would extend his covenant mercy to anyone else, especially these people, these rotten people. He's the God of Israel, after all.

There's a way to miss the mercy of God. It's to believe that he's only for your people, and he's only for your tribe, and he's really only for people that are just like you, and whatever your socioeconomic level is and your intellectual class.

You know that's the most normal impulse in the world, is to believe that God is for us and against them, whoever us and them are. Everybody in the world does that. It's a natural impulse. It doesn't mean it's a good impulse, but it's natural. Jonah misses the mercy of God because he thinks that God is only for us.

Another way to miss it is to assume that you know better than him.

Not every complaint to God is an accusation. If you read through the Psalms, there's lots of complaining, and not all of it is an accusation against him, but some complaints are accusations. Jonah prays, great, but he prays to complain, and then he prays to accuse. Not good. That's a great way to miss out on God's grace.

Assume that your sense of justice is a little more finely tuned than his. That's what Jonah was saying. I knew you would be gracious and merciful to them. That's why I didn't want to go to them. I think you're wrong, God. I think you're a little too lenient. I think you're failing to be just. You're enabling them. They need accountability. They need discipline, and you're just letting them go. You're letting them repent.

Assume that your standards are the standards for the world, and that they ought to be God's standards.

If you've been here any length of time, you've heard this quote at least a hundred times, and you're going to hear it again. Favorite quote, favorite movie, *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou*, comes from George Clooney's character, Ulysses McGill. If you recall, he, Delmar, and Pete have broken out of the state prison, and they're on the run. Along the way, they run into a bunch of church people going down to the river to be baptized. Delmar goes and gets baptized. And later on, they're talking about the Lord has washed, washed away he says, all of my sins. And then they say, well, what about those lies that you told him? He's forgiven me of those too. And George Clooney's character, thinking about the fact that they're still escaped convicts says, "that might square you with the good Lord, but the state of Mississippi is a little more hard-nosed."

That's a good line. I like that. I think most people live that way. God will forgive you, but the state of Mississippi is a little more hard-nosed than the good Lord is.

God might forgive you, but I won't. God might forgive me, but I won't forgive myself.

You see what's happening when we let the state be the final authority or myself be the final authority. What we're saying is, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever about God, nobody cares about what he thinks. What matters is my judgment. What matters is that you meet my standard. That's Jonah. That's his heart.

This is especially the case if you've been wronged and the person who wronged you repents. The person who wrongs you doesn't always repent. That's a different discussion, different sermon. What about when the person who hurt you the most becomes a Christian and repents and they change, and they acknowledge they're wrong before you, and they acknowledge they're wrong before the Lord, and God forgives them, and you now have this burden on your shoulders, and now what am I supposed to do with them?

We might be tempted to take the place of God and hold it over the person, and in those moments, we have to figure out what does it mean for me to trust the Lord, and maybe not immediately, but figure out before him how to forgive the person who caused me the most pain.

That, many of you know this, that is one of the hardest things that exists in human existence, and unless the Spirit helps you, you might rather die than forgive somebody who has hurt you, and you would find a friend in Jonah because look at verse three. That is exactly what he wants.

Take my life from me. It is better for me to die than to live.

You hear what he's saying. If you're going to be merciful to these Ninevites, I would rather die than live in a world where they know you.

I would rather die than live in a world where I have to be kind toward them and forgive them and welcome them in.

I'd rather die. I'd rather die than call them brother and sister.

It's extreme, but I hope this one is at least clear. This is a great way to miss the mercy of God, is to rather die than to be a part of the new humanity that God is making. To rather die than to be part of the saved that includes all types of people, even people that you might hate. Hold it over God's head and ask him to take your life.

Well, how does God respond? We need to address that. He doesn't kill him, so that's one of those Garth Brooks unanswered prayers. Let the reader understand. He asks him a question.

Do you do well to be angry?

It feels like a weird thing for God to say. Literally, is it good for you to be angry? Is it right? Does God go around asking questions because he has a lack of knowledge? This is not a question for God's sake. He knows the answer. This is a question for Jonah's sake. It's just like with Adam and Eve. When they sin and they go hide themselves and the Lord comes saying, where are you? He's not saying, where are you? I can't find you. It's not a question for God's sake. It's a question for their sake. Where are you? Drawing them out. And to Jonah, who would rather die than see mercy go to his enemies. *Do you do well to be angry?* A gentle question to force self-reflection.

This is the mercy of God toward Jonah. To ask a gentle question to help him question himself. And the rest of the book records object lessons. There's a tent and there's a plant and there's a worm and we won't get into it here. But all of this is about helping Jonah see, Jonah, your compass is off. You're not seeing this rightly. You care about the wrong things.

God ends up telling him, you should care about what I care about. And what God cares about is a city of more than over 120,000 people who don't know their right hand from their left and a lot of cattle and other animals. He even cares about them. And we don't know how Jonah responded. And that's why it's not in the children's Bibles. We hope he responded. But in this moment, at the end of the book, he would rather die than see God show mercy to the nations.

In this moment, he's missed it.

Thankfully for us, as we read earlier, someone greater than Jonah has come. Someone has come who would rather die, but not so that the nations will be judged, but rather so that the nations will repent. Jesus is the prophet greater than Jonah. We've said that plenty here. He told people that the people of Nineveh will rise up against you at the judgment and condemn you because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And Jonah was an imperfect prophet who would rather die than see people repent, but they repented anyway. And in his own day, a better Jonah came and they wouldn't repent. And he says;

the people of Nineveh will rise up and judge you.

He used Jonah to talk about how he would accomplish this great salvation for the nations. He said;

as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, the son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. And then he would rise.

A prophet would come who would not be angry at the repentance of the nations. A prophet would come who would suffer and rise and rejoice and cause the repentance of the nations. One who would obey perfectly. One who would not need to be disciplined by God. And yet who would say, along with Jonah from chapter two;

you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas. The flood surrounded me. All your waves and billows passed over me.

And Jesus Christ died in the flood of God's justice on his own head as he hung on a Roman cross. It's the old story. It's the flood of justice so that nations can be saved. So that somebody like you can be saved.

The promise is this. *See that you need mercy. Call on the Lord Jesus, and you'll get it.* You will get the mercy of God and he will save you. And if he does that, he will make you like himself. He'll make you merciful.

If you're here and you're not yet a Christian, welcome. Glad that you're here. Whether you feel it or not, I would say from this passage, you need the mercy of God too. Everybody in this room does. I need it. If you call on Jesus, he'll meet you with his mercy. Call on him. We'd love to talk to you more about that.

If you're a Christian already, your question might be, how can I change? How can I trust God to be just with our enemies? And how can I become the kind of person who actually welcomes the people I hate? How can I be merciful like he's merciful? And I'll just say like, we can't do this on our own. It's impossible. We'll take our grudges and our disdain for others all the way to the grave if it's left up to us. But let me ask;

is there anyone you would rather die than see become a baptized member of Christ Presbyterian Church?

Who are the people that you hate and you really don't even want them to become Christians?

Where is it possible that God would come to you and say, *do you do well to be angry* that I'm showing mercy to this person?

It might not be as pointed as that for you, so I'll ask it this way.

Who have you consciously or unconsciously put a healthy distance between yourself and that person?

Who do you quietly pretend doesn't exist?

Who have you locked away in the purgatory of your own mind and heart until they prove themselves, and then you can let them out again?

It's a similar thing of saying; I would kind of rather die than deal with this person. And God would say to you;

do you do well to be angry?

How can you change? You're going to have to remember, I'm going to have to remember, I needed mercy too. In someone's eyes, I'm the Ninevite, and they're the Israelite, and I needed mercy from them. And more than that, I needed mercy from the God who made me, and he has extended it at cost to himself and his son. And then pray that that would take root in our hearts in such a way that we would change and become merciful people. That's so hard. It's impossible. I will keep hating the people that I'm naturally inclined to hate. You're going to do the same thing unless the Lord in mercy changes me, if he changes us. But we need to be asking him to do that and to let his mercy light up on our insides in ways that would cause that to happen.

Our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, relenting from disaster.

He won't clear the guilty. He's just, so you can trust him with that. You don't have to take care of it. He'll take care of it.

For us who were his, justice and mercy have met at the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus. The mercy of God is that expansive. All colors, nations, socioeconomic, intellectual levels, people you like, people you don't like, boys, girls, men, women, high, low, doesn't matter. He's calling all kinds of people to himself, and he calls us to repent and believe the gospel and to assume that if he can show mercy to me, he can and hopefully he will show mercy to all kinds of people.

If you've been welcomed by grace, ask the Lord to help you welcome others by grace as well. Let's pray.

Lord, perhaps the reason we don't put the last chapter of Jonah in the children's Bibles is that we don't really want it to be true because it shows us a rather unpleasant mirror of ourselves. You know us, you know our struggle to forgive, you know the people that we just don't like, the people we hate, the people that hurt us, the people we would rather hurt. Would you make us merciful? Would you make us merciful because you keep showing us your mercy to us? So Lord, we lift up to you this morning hearts of stone and ice and we ask you by your spirit to melt them. Change us, we pray. Only you can do it and we ask you to do that in Christ's good and precious name. Amen.

****Portion of scripture read before sermon—Matthew 12:38-41**