

**Jonah 4:1-11 (1984 NIV)**  
***Jonah: Fruitful or Fretful Messenger?***

**Introduction**

Happy endings do not always make people happy.

In the Book of Jonah, we read that ...

- God calls Jonah.
- Jonah runs away.
- Jonah goes to sleep on board a ship.
- God sends a storm.
- The sailors throw Jonah overboard.
- The storm ends.
- The sailors worship God.
- God sends a great fish to swallow up Jonah.
- Jonah spends 3 days and 3 nights in the great fish.
- The great fish throws out Jonah onto the land.
- Eventually Jonah goes to Nineveh.
- He preaches a sermon of God's judgment.
- The whole city repents.
- God holds back His judgment.
- One great revival in biblical history is recorded.

What a happy ending! You would think Jonah would be happy. But no! Instead, Jonah "became angry". But I hear you protesting, "I am not like Jonah. I always rejoice in happy endings."

I believe our text today serves as a mirror to us. It will show us that we are like Jonah more than we want to admit.

**I. Verses 1- 5**

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.

Jonah's attitude has been quite clear from the beginning—"I'm fine, Lord, as long as you send these Ninevites straight to hell." When God showed great grace to these people, it was a great evil to Jonah. That's how he felt.

Now, we understand why Jonah was so reluctant to go to Nineveh in the first place. He said in v. 2, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."

In essence, what Jonah was saying is this—"God, you are gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love, and relenting from sending calamity. But be so only to me and the people of Israel. As for these wicked Ninevites, don't show them any mercy. Strike them all dead!"

But Jonah was not just angry with the Ninevites. He was also angry with God. He was angry with God because God acted in a way consistent with His character—God showed grace toward the Ninevites. You see the irony here—while the Ninevites (the sinning pagans) repented, Jonah (the serving prophet) remained stubborn to the will of God.

Therefore, in one sense, Jonah was very sound in this theology. He knew that God was gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love, and relenting from sending calamity. In another sense, he was poor in his theology because his theology is all sound but no substance. He restricted the grace of God only to himself and the people of Israel. God must only love him and the people of Israel, and no one else—just like a spoilt child!

He was blind to the fact that when God rescued him from the belly of the great fish in spite of his disobedience, he became a recipient of God's grace. And he in turn was to bring God's grace to the Ninevites.

But Jonah was fine with mercy when he received it, but he couldn't handle it when God showed mercy to Nineveh. So Jonah said, "I wish I was dead."

I've a suspicion that Jonah didn't proclaim all that God had for him to say. God told him to say to the Ninevites—"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned IF you do not turn from your evil ways." But in his prejudice, Jonah proclaimed perhaps only half that message like this—"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!" Period! And he said it so loud and clear.

We can imagine how embarrassed Jonah must be when nothing happened to Nineveh. No wonder we see him in v. 5 sitting at the eastern part of the city, waiting and hoping for something disastrous to happen to Nineveh. Instead of proclaiming the grace of God, Jonah allowed his own prejudice to hinder him in his mission.

My dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, we are like Jonah when our heart is too small to accept God's big love for others.

However, we can correct this by putting aside personal prejudice, and reach out with God's love to others very different from us.

The Ninevites in our lives may not be the wicked Assyrians in OT times. But they may be people of another ethnicity, nationality, social class, etc. They are people we keep a safe distance from because they are not like us, or not one of us.

So, while we participate in missionary efforts overseas, let's not forget that unbelieving neighbour who lives next door, or that unbelieving colleague at the next desk, or that unbelieving maid who works and lives in our home, or those needy folks in our community waiting for help to come to them.

What I mean is this—for many years I have been going to Myanmar regularly to minister among the people there, BUT if I am not a channel and witness of God's grace to some Myanmar nationals who are my next door neighbours, then all my missionary zeal to minister among the people in Myanmar is not very credible.

Jonah became angry. Why? It's because his heart was too small to accept God's big love for Nineveh.

There's a second way we can think and act like Jonah.

## II. Verses 6-11

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?"

Jonah now went out east of the city. He's still hoping that God would send down fire and brimstones to destroy the city. When that happened, he would want a front-row seat to watch it.

Three things happened here and all of them caused by God:

- God provided a leafy plant/vine (v. 6).
- God provided a worm (v. 7).
- God provided a scorching east wind (v. 8).

In Jonah's view, the vine was good because it gave him shade. On the contrary, the worm was bad in Jonah's view because it chewed up the vine and took away his shade. The east wind was very bad in Jonah's view because it brought very hot air and caused him great discomfort.

Note the extremes in his mood and attitude. Under the comfort of shade and shelter, he was very happy. But under the discomfort of sun and hot wind, he wanted to die. Note also how he moaned over the dying of the vine while hoping and wanting to see the mass destruction of a whole city of human lives. He moaned because he was more concerned about the loss of personal comfort than about the destruction of human lives. The vine made him very comfortable (v. 6), but somehow did nothing to make him compassionate. Yes, God in His grace does bless us with a comfortable life. But no, He does not bless to merely make us comfortable in life. More than this, God wants us to be compassionate so that we can reach others with a touch of His love.

I believe that's the picture the text wants us to see concerning human nature and God's character. For the sake of personal comfort, man values a vine (a thing) more than a whole city of people (human lives). On the contrary, in spite of the wickedness of man, God sees great value in human beings who are created in His image. While Jonah displayed his displeasure at the loss of mere physical comfort, God poured out His tender compassion toward "more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left ..." (v. 11).

Who are these people who cannot tell their right hand from their left? I believe they are the general population in Nineveh who are so spiritually lost, without a moral compass to guide them in the right way to live. Even for such people, God is concerned about their spiritual well-being.

There is a Jonah in us when we value physical comfort of things more than the spiritual well-being of life, i.e. our own spiritual well-being as well as that of others. Yes, we ought to thank God for His blessings of physical comfort, BUT without being obsessively concerned about them. As God blesses us and increases our resources as a person or as a church, let's thank Him as well as invest in heavenly treasures by doing the work of sharing His Gospel and grace to the lost and needy.

At no point from beginning to end did Jonah seem willing to obey out of joy in God and with compassion for the lost. Even in the belly of the fish, when he prayed that great prayer in Chapter 2, it's as if God had so cornered him such that he was forced to turn to God because he had no choice.

Put in another way, the Jonah attitude cautions us that it is possible to obey God, BUT with a bad attitude. And so we are reminded that God is never

satisfied with mere outward obedience. He wants us to obey from the heart gladly and not grudgingly. When God sends a vine, a worm, and a scorching wind in our lives, what will be revealed about us in terms of our relationships with God and others?

Jonah's story ends not with a declaration but with a question in v. 11: "Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

The answer of course is "yes!" Yes, God is concerned about that great city, and therefore, Jonah should be concerned too.

By ending with a question and not a declaration, the book leaves the issue hanging in the air. Why? Because it is a question not only for Jonah, but also for each of us to personally answer today:

- "If God is concerned about Nineveh. Should I (John Yuen) not be concerned about that great city too?"
- "Do I (John Yuen) have God's heart for the Ninevites of today?"

Actually, Jonah has an even deeper problem. On the surface, his problem seems to be that he has no heart for the people of Nineveh. But his deeper problem is even more serious—He has no room for a God who loves people like the Ninevites.

It's interesting to note that God's bigger problem is not with the pagans in the Book of Jonah. The moment they heard the message, they believed it (e.g. the sailors in Chap 1 and the Ninevites in Chap 3). In fact, in the Book of Jonah, the pagans were quicker to obey than the prophet of God himself. So, it seems that God's bigger problem here is not so much with the sinful pagans. His bigger problem is more with His chosen prophet. Ironic but sadly true!

God has prepared unbelieving people to hear and respond to the Gospel, BUT are God's people ready and willing to share and show the Gospel to them?

Yes, we're a lot more like Jonah than we would like to admit. We are like Jonah when comfort for ourselves blinds us to God's compassion for others.

However, we can correct this by intentionally moving out of our own comfort, and touch others with God's compassion.

Jonah became angry with God because his heart was too small for God's big love even for sinners; and he viewed his own comfort as more important than God's compassion for the lost and even the needy. This leads me to lay out three lessons that are related to the Gospel message and our mission.

### III. Three lessons

#### 1. God wants to bring Nineveh to Himself.

Where is Nineveh today? Nineveh is not always about China, Myanmar, Thailand, Philippines, etc. We don't have to always go to far-away lands to minister cross-culturally. Our country has so much diversity that we already have cultures in different forms and expressions for us to cross and connect. So Nineveh for us today can be as near as that neighbour next door who makes too much noise, or whose kids get into trouble all the time. Nineveh can be that boss next room who is like the "devil personified".

You see, Nineveh is not just a place. Nineveh is a symbol for the lost and difficult people in this world. Wherever you find people, there you find Nineveh in all its fallen manifestations. But the message is clear—God still loves Nineveh today and wants to bring it to Himself.

#### 2. God wants His people to be in Nineveh.

What will God have to do to get His people to obey Him and go to Nineveh? For Jonah that meant spending three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish. No, God won't force His people to go to Nineveh. But yes, God may make His people feel so uneasy until they obey and decide to go.

Sometimes we see only the evil and think, "God must hate this city." Yes, God hates the sin in this city. But no, God loves even the sinning and lost people in this city. And He wants His people to be in this city. Are His people ready and willing to go?

#### 3. Nineveh is ready and waiting for you.

For all its cruelty and sinfulness, Nineveh was ready to turn to God. The people weren't consciously aware of their need for God's grace and forgiveness. They were not intentionally looking for God. But God who sees all things knew that this city was ready to turn to Him. And He is looking for a person(s) who would be willing to go there and deliver His message. You see, the problem is not so much about people of Nineveh not willing to hear, but more about Jonah, the prophet of God who was unwilling to go.

Often, Nineveh is even more personal than just a literal far-away place because it is ...

- That environment only you can have access.
- That person only you can reach.
- That opportunity only you can have.

You have a Ninevite in your life right now.

- It is that person whom you work with.

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- It is that group you hang around with.
- It is that neighbour living next door.
- It is that family member you love, but whose behaviour may have often provoked you to the point of anger.

Yes, Nineveh is that part of God's call/will that you are unwilling or afraid to face.

- You're unwilling or afraid to go, but God wants you there.
- You're unwilling or afraid to speak up, but there are people who need to hear what you have to say.
- You're unwilling or afraid to make a move, but God says, "Trust me and go."

## Conclusion

A local newspaper (The New Paper, 7 Mar 2016) once carried a report on a young man by the name of Brendan Lau.<sup>1</sup> What fascinated me about him was not so much he's the top student in his "A" level cohort at Millennia Institute (5As & 1B in 2015 "A" level exam), but he's deaf as he lost his hearing at the age of 1. And this meant that he had to work doubly hard in school.

However, he chose to study literature as one of his subjects. This was a big challenge to his hearing disability. He shared of his early struggle with literature studies:

We had to learn how to read and interpret the mood in poems in order to figure out underlying messages. We had to pay attention to the sounds made when each word was pronounced, and spot a pattern. Initially, I was confounded by this, but with practice, I was able to overcome this issue.

And Brendan was able to do so well in literature studies that he could even help other students in the subject as well. Not only that, a classmate (who communicated with him in sign language) gave him perhaps the best compliment with this praise, "... Brendan is an exceptionally good listener ... He understands the things you want to say ... and he gives the best advice." Here's a deaf person being a good listener—ironical but true!

Here is someone who is willing to step out of his comfort zone, work to overcome his disadvantage, and do well for himself so that he can help others as well.

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<sup>1</sup><https://tnp.straitstimes.com/news/singapore/deaf-millennia-institute-student-did-not-let-disability-defeat-him>

You may be in a position of advantage or disadvantage. But you can be so comfortable in that position that it becomes your comfort zone; that you are not willing to step out of it and do greater things for God.

Jonah is an example of someone who was not willing to step out of his prejudice and comfort to reach out to Nineveh with God's gracious compassion. Even though he did what God had told him, he was unhappy and even suffered from suicidal thoughts. He obeyed God, but he obeyed with such a bad attitude that there was no joy in Him. Honestly, the Book of Jonah does not portray him as a prophet who loves sinners as God would love them. Rather, he is portrayed more as a fretful rather than a fruitful messenger of God's love, mercy, grace, and compassion.

Where is the Gospel in our story today? The Gospel is all over the story. Today, the Gospel in the Book of Jonah reads like this—"For God so loved Nineveh that He gave His only Son that whoever in Nineveh believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

God loves Nineveh. God wants to use you in your Nineveh. But maybe you are hesitating because, like Jonah, you are waiting for God to come around to your way of thinking. The truth is that God is graciously waiting for you to come around to His way of loving.

Will you ask God to help you love people as He would love them, and use you reach out to the lost and needy with His compassion?

Let's pray:

Father, expand our vision to see the world as you see it. Please make us less like Jonah and more like Jesus. Grant us a fresh concern for those we meet. Renew in us a compassion for those who by nature would be repulsive to us. Lord, replace our anger, fear and hesitation with your love. May the Holy Spirit fill us with your compassion. Give us hearts to gladly share and show the Gospel grace and forgiveness to the lost and needy around us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen!