

Incomprehensible Compassion

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Ever feel like things just aren't going your way? There's friction at work, conflict at home, you're rubbed the wrong way? How do you cope? In this final chapter Jonah a kind of case study in how to deal and not deal with disappointment: *Jonah Prays, Jonah Pouts, God Pities.*

Jonah Prays

When Jonah faces something he doesn't like, he runs *from God*. He buys a fare, boards a ship, tries to sleep off his conviction, surrenders himself to the seas, and then facing death he self-eulogizes. He's clearly miserable. So when God miraculously delivers him, we expect him to burst into song, but instead Jonah reluctantly plods on. Things get better for him. He's *instrumental* in a city-wide revival. His preaching results an epic act of divine deliverance, and God relents from destroying an entire city. Not bad for a day's work. But Jonah is *exceedingly displeased!* What's going on inside of Jonah? He is *exceedingly* displeased. When emotions exceed their normal boundaries it can be warning somethings off. The word displeased, in Hebrew, is actually the word for evil. Literally, "*it was evil to Jonah.*" So this is no difference of opinion; it is a *fundamental clash of perspectives*. God thinks sparing the city is good; Jonah thinks it's *evil*. You can't get any more opposite. So Jonah prays, "*O Lord, is this not what I said when I was yet in my country?*" He's referring to a conversation he had with God expressing his fear the Ninevites would repent. So rather than submit to God, *this is not how we do things in my country.* Why is Jonah all worked up? Well, the Ninevites were Assyrians, the savage archenemy of Israel, a rising world power known for their brutal torture tactics. They go onto to conquer Israel and exact tribute from them as a feudal state. So who can blame him for feeling some displeasure when God decides to pardon his enemies? *We all want justice when we feel wronged.* But Jonah's emotions escalate; he takes it a step further, "*and he was angry.*" Five times we're told he is **angry**. If it was just a difference of opinion, Jonah would have moved on, but it's a sticking point. Displeasure flares into anger. Now this doesn't happen overnight. Discontent brews before it erupts. I got angry this week. Over weeks my kids kept disobeying, not cooperating to get out the door for school, refusing to be disciplined in areas, so I let it rip. Displeasure brewed into anger. You may think I'm not an angry person, but you don't have to yell or throw things to be angry; Jonah didn't. *Anger can be cold, pretending like you didn't hear someone. It can be pouty, a sour mood that makes all life wilt in its path. It can be cunning, looking to get someone back, cut them off or cut them down.* We're all guilty of anger. The question is how do we get rid of it? Get to the source. What Jonah's?

Jonah Pouts

He moves from angry to *pouty*. To deal with disappointment he says, "*In that case O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live*" (3). Now, do you *really* think Jonah wants God to strike him dead? If he's serious, why go out of the city, build a booth, watch? Why would he ask if he's not serious about it? *Because he thinks if I put my life on the line, surely God will change his mind about Nineveh.* He turns the table. I used to be a master at this in marital conflict. I'd hurt my wife, she would withdraw, and instead of seeking to reconcile, I would say, It hurts me that you would withdraw. It's telling your kids

your anger is their fault for stressing you out. It's hitting an impasse at work and saying, fine just fire me. Go ahead, file for divorce. Jonah uses a manipulative threat to get his own way. He doesn't want to die; he wants the city to die. It's why he's out there in his booth, feet kicked up in the shade, waiting to see if his manipulation worked. "[Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there](#)" (5). He's returned to his *coping mechanisms*. When Jonah faces something he doesn't like, he distracts himself. He takes a trip, buys a ticket to the show, or just gets out of town. But his distractions move him away from his **missionfield**. What are your distractions? We were discussing our struggles in sharing the good news. Some said they get too busy, and when you're super busy, your mind doesn't drift to people. People wear you out, so you want to get out of town, to get a rest from your busyness, *away from people*. After slowing down for three months this summer, getting off my phone, I've noticed that in down time, driving/waiting for a table my thoughts drift to people not to apps, and I end up praying for them or giving them a call instead of looking at my phone. Distractions drive us from our mission. Jonah's sin doesn't just create distance between him and the city; it creates distance between him and **God**. He's in so deep he doesn't have a clue what he's doing to himself. His anger, his manipulation have blinded him. Notice he assumes an unquestioned posture *while a whole city is on its knees*. The sheer numbers should tell him he's wrong. But instead, his anger turns to pity. Now we're getting to the source. Three times he asks God to take his life. He buying his own lies. After everything I've done for you, God. I left my home, I faced my enemies, almost *died* on mission. Then, I share your message with Assyria and you relent! What will everyone back home think? Traitor. Ministry failure. And the one thing I ask you not to do and you do it anyway, God. I deserve better. Source. One writer calls this "magisterial self-pity." It's King David, staying back home when the men are at war. He's worked hard. Eked it out in the desert for 14 years before becoming king. His wife is critical. And he looks over at Bathsheba and thinks, don't I deserve a little R&R. After all I've done, what's a little porn, a little overspending? I deserve it. I serve my church, CG, I deserve to binge watch 20 shows. *Magisterial self-pity*. Anger's ugly cousin. Where does it put Jonah? East. East is always *away from the presence of God*. Adam and Eve are sent east of Eden, Cain goes east after slaying Abel, but to enter the *temple* you have to go west. Self-pity puts us out of touch with God. It says, I'm a victim; not a son/daughter. It lets circumstances define you instead of the sovereign Lord. *I deserve better not I've gotten better than I deserve*. God, you don't know justice at all. But "justice" is cover-up for angry self-pity. As I walked my anger back, I found the source. I'd collected little instances of disrespect from my kids. Saving them up, I put them in a little jar, and placed it on the shelf of my heart, where my ego whispered, You deserve respect. I unscrewed the jar and anger let out. The source wasn't difficult circumstances; it was a different *belief*. A belief that I deserve better, not just a *rational* belief, a *cherished* belief, something I held so tightly that, like Jonah, I was tempted to manipulate and pout. We all need friends who will help us walk our sin back, ask hard questions, and disrupt cherished beliefs that put us out of touch with God. *If you're not in a fight club, take one of these books, read it and start one. You may need to reset your FC to get real about disrupting cherished beliefs. If we allow doctors to stick, and prod, and cut for our health, why wouldn't we allow a friend to regularly ask uncomfortable questions to guide us to the comfort of Christ?*

God Pities

God could have thumped Jonah out of the cosmos for his pity-party but instead he says, “**Do you do well (good) to be angry?**” He’s seeking Jonah’s *good*...so he appoints a **plant** to provide shade for Jonah. Why a plant, doesn’t he have a booth? *Better shade. Organic* and you get a breeze with the plant, no suffocating walls. This time Jonah responds with *exceeding joy!* Now he’s happy. But in the lap of comfort, he still doesn’t give a rip about the discomfort of his enemies. You see, things are only great if *Jonah* sees them as great. Great injustice, great joy, for a *great* Jonah. So why does God appoint the plant? **To save him from his discomfort**, but the discomfort runs deeper than the heat. It’s the same word for evil again, a play on words, *to save him from his evil* (compassionless). God thinks, if I give him a miraculous comfort, the house/job he’s always wanted, relief from her pain, *surely it will save him from his evil. Surely he’ll recognize it as a gift and turn to ME.* [Theresa]. But in receiving God’s gift, Jonah does not credit God. You’d think he would have caught on by now, the storm, the fish, the city, the plant...appointed by God, follow the breadcrumbs, Jonah, back to God and adopt his compassionate view of your enemies. But it’s not just a different view he needs to adopt; it’s a cherished belief he needs to repent from. So God appoints a wind and a **worm**. The worm eats up the plant. Why? Well if my blessing won’t change your heart, maybe my judgment will. *God motivates with the carrot and the pitchfork.* Maybe the worm will drive you back to me, to see your folly and repent of your angry self-pity? How does Jonah respond? **And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live”** (8). Notice Jonah doesn’t even address God. Jonah has created so much distance from God *he doesn’t even pray anymore.* The word for asked can mean to make a wish. He’s making wishes to *himself.* Caught in an inner dialog. We can’t wish our way out of sin; we have to repent our way out. Even with the discomfort of God’s heat beating down on him, Jonah *still* wants wrath to fall on Nineveh! *The I deserve belief is in* so deep Jonah will not depart from himself. His self-pity is so strong, deserving attitude so great, he’d rather die, alone. He chooses bitter isolation over reconciliation. Don’t pull a Jonah. Look up, hear God’s kind, clear words, “**Do you do well to be angry?**” God is seeking your good. There was another prophet who went outside the city, where instead of rejecting his enemies, he loved them. Instead of looking down in judgment, he suffered judgment, bearing the punishment for our magisterial self-pity, anger, manipulation, and petty distraction. Instead of running away from disappointment, he ran through it. This prophet became the sign of Jonah. Three days later, he rose from the dead and closed the eternal distance between us and God. Giving us more than we deserve instead of what we deserve. He relented from hurling disaster on us so that he could welcome his enemies in miraculous mercy and love. God appeals to Jonah one more time: **should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?** (11). Look at the numbers, Jonah, the souls in the city, the moral confusion (not knowing their right from their left). Don’t judge them; pity them as I have pitied you. And if you won’t do it for them, do it for their economy, their infrastructure, the cattle that keep the whole city going. Their not your enemy; your enemy is within. I’m not your opponent; I am slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. An unsatisfactory ending. Isn’t that like life? Unsatisfactory ends to seasons, relationships, days? Yet, Jonah lived on...long enough to embrace the *deliberate* mercy of God. How do we know? How else would we possess a story that so clearly casts God, not Jonah, as the hero?