

CHAPTER 4

We read, with a great deal of pleasure, in the close of the foregoing chapter, concerning the repentance of Nineveh; but in this chapter we read, with a great deal of uneasiness, concerning the sin of Jonah; and, as there is joy in heaven and earth for the conversion of sinners, so there is grief for the follies and infirmities of saints. In all the book of God we scarcely find a “servant of the Lord” (and such a one we are sure Jonah was, for the scripture calls him so) so very much out of temper as he is here, so very peevish and provoking to God himself. In the first chapter we had him fleeing from the face of God; but here we have him, in effect, flying in the face of God; and, which is more grieving to us, there we had an account of his repentance and return to God; but here, though no doubt he did repent, yet, as in Solomon's case, no account is left us of his recovering himself; but, while we read with wonder of his perverseness, we read with no less wonder of God's tenderness towards him, by which it appeared that he had not cast him off. Here is,

- I.** Jonah's repining at God's mercy to Nineveh, and the fret he was in about it (v. 1-3).
- II.** The gentle reproof God gave him for it (v. 4).
- III.** Jonah's discontent at the withering of the gourd, and his justifying himself in that discontent (v. 5-9).
- IV.** God's improving it for his conviction, that he ought not to be angry at the sparing of Nineveh (v. 10-11). Man's badness and God's goodness serve here for a foil to each other, that the former may appear the more exceedingly sinful and the latter the more exceedingly gracious.

◀▶ JONAH 4:1-4

THE PROPHET'S DISCONTENT

See here,

I. How unjustly Jonah quarrelled with God for his mercy to Nineveh, upon their repentance. This gives us occasion to suspect that Jonah had only delivered the message of wrath against the Ninevites, and had not at all assisted or encouraged them in their repentance, as one would think he should have done; for when they did repent, and found mercy,

1. Jonah grudged them the mercy they found (v. 1): *It displeased Jonah exceedingly; and (would you think it?) he was very angry,* was in a great heat about it. It was very wrong,

(1.) That he had so little government of himself as to be displeased and very angry; he had *no rule over his own spirit*, and therefore, as a city broken down, lay exposed to temptations and snares.

(2.) That he had so little reverence of God as to be displeased and angry at what he did, as David was when the Lord had made a breach upon Uzza; whatever pleases God should please us, and, though we cannot account for it, yet we must acquiesce in it.

(3.) That he had so little affection for men as to be displeased and very angry at the conversion of the Ninevites and their reception into the divine favour. This was the sin of the scribes and Pharisees, who murmured at our Saviour because he entertained publicans and sinners; but *is our eye evil because his is good?* But why was Jonah so uneasy at it, that the Ninevites repented and were spared? It cannot be expected that we should give any good reason for a thing so very absurd and unreasonable; no, nor any thing that has the face or colour of a reason; but we may conjecture what the provocation was. Hot spirits are usually high spirits. *Only by pride comes contention* both with God and man. It was a point of honour that Jonah stood upon and that made him angry.

[1.] He was jealous for the honour of his country; the repentance and reformation of Nineveh shamed the obstinacy of Israel that repented not, but *hated to be reformed;* and the favour God had shown to these Gentiles, upon their repentance, was an ill omen to the Jewish nation, as if they should be (as at length they were) rejected and cast out of the church and the Gentiles substituted in their room. When it was intimated to St. Peter himself that he should make no difference between Jews and Gentiles he startled at the thing, and said, *Not so, Lord;* no marvel then that Jonah looked upon it with regret that Nineveh should become a favourite. Jonah herein had *a zeal for God* as the God of Israel in a particular manner, *but*

not according to knowledge. Note, Many are displeased with God under pretence of concern for his glory.

[2.] He was jealous for his own honour, fearing lest, if Nineveh was not destroyed within forty days, he should be accounted a false prophet, and stigmatized accordingly; whereas he needed not be under any discontent about that, for in the threatening of ruin it was implied that, for the preventing of it, they should repent, and, if they did, it should be prevented. And no one will complain of being deceived by him that is better than his word; and he would rather gain honour among them, by being instrumental to save them, than fall under any disgrace. But melancholy men (and such a one Jonah seems to have been) are apt to make themselves uneasy by fancying evils to themselves that are not, nor are ever likely to be. Most of our frets, as well as our frights, are owing to the power of imagination; and those are to be pitied as perfect bond-slaves that are under the power of such a tyrant.

2. He quarreled with God about it. When his heart was hot within him, he *spoke unadvisedly with his lips*; and here he tells us what he said (v. 2, 3): He *prayed unto the Lord*, but it is a very awkward prayer, not like that which he prayed in the fish's belly; for affliction teaches us to pray submissively, which Jonah now forgot to do. Being in discontent, he applied to the duty of prayer, as he used to do in his troubles, but his corruptions got head of his graces, and, when he should have been praying for benefit by the mercy of God himself, he was complaining of the benefit others had by that mercy. Nothing could be spoken more unbecomingly.

(1.) He now begins to justify himself in fleeing *from the presence of the Lord*, when he was first ordered to go to Nineveh, for which he had before, with good reason, condemned himself: "*Lord,*" said he, "*was not this my saying when I was in my own country? Did I not foresee that if I went to preach to Nineveh they would repent, and thou wouldst forgive them, and then thy word would be reflected upon and reproached as yea and nay?*" What a strange sort of man was Jonah, to dread the success of his ministry! Many have been tempted to withdraw from their work because they had despaired of doing good by it, but Jonah declined preaching because he was afraid of doing good by it; and still he persists in the same corrupt notion, for, it seems, the whale's belly itself could not cure him of it. It was his saying when he was *in his own country*, but it was a bad saying; yet here he stands to it, and, very unlike the other

prophets, *desires the woeful day* which he had foretold and grieves because it does not come. Even Christ's disciples *know not what manner of spirit they are of*; those did not who wished for fire from heaven upon the city that did not receive them, much less did Jonah, who wished for fire from heaven upon the city that did receive him, ^{<416>}Luke 9:55. Jonah thinks he has reason to complain of that, when it is done, which he was before afraid of; so hard is it to get a root of bitterness plucked out of the mind, when once it is fastened there. And why did Jonah expect that God would spare Nineveh? *Because I knew that thou was a gracious God, indulgent and easily pleased, that thou wast slow to anger and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.* All this is very true; and Jonah could not but know it by God's proclamation of his name and the experiences of all ages; but it is strange and very unaccountable that that which all the saints had made the matter of their joy and praise Jonah should make the matter of reflection upon God, as if that were an imperfection of the divine nature which is indeed the greatest glory of it — that *God is gracious and merciful.* The servant that said, *I knew thee to be a hard man*, said that which was false, and yet, had it been true, it was not the proper matter of a complaint; but Jonah, though he says what is true, yet, speaking it by way of reproach, speaks very absurdly. Those have a spirit of contention and contradiction indeed that can find in their hearts to quarrel with the goodness of God, and his sparing pardoning mercy, to which we all owe it that we are out of hell. This is making that to be to us *a savour of death unto death* which ought to be *a savour of life unto life.*

(2.) In a passion, he wishes for death (v. 3), a strange expression of his causeless passion! “*Now, O Lord! take, I beseech thee, my life from me.* If Nineveh must live, let me die, rather than see thy word and mine disproved, rather than see the glory of Israel transferred to the Gentiles,” as if there were not grace enough in God both for Jews and Gentiles, or as if his countrymen were the further off from mercy for the Ninevites being taken into favour. When the prophet Elijah had laboured in vain, he wished he might die, and it was his infirmity, ^{<119>}1 Kings 19:4. But Jonah labours to good purpose, saves a great city from ruin, and yet wishes he may die, as if, having done much good, he were afraid of living to do more; he *sees of the travail of his soul, and is dissatisfied.* What a perverse spirit is mingled with every word he says! When Jonah was brought alive out of the whale's belly, he thought life a very valuable mercy, and was thankful to that God who brought up *his life from corruption*, (^{<316>}Jonah

2:6), and a great blessing his life had been to Nineveh; yet now, for that very reason, it became a burden to himself and he begs to be eased of it, pleading, *It is better for me to die than to live*. Such a word as this may be the language of grace, as it was in Paul, who desired to depart and be with Christ, *which is far better*; but here it was the language of folly, and passion, and strong corruption; and so much the worse,

[1.] Jonah being now in the midst of his usefulness, and therefore fit to live. He was one whose ministry God wonderfully owned and prospered. The conversion of Nineveh might give him hopes of being instrumental to convert the whole kingdom of Assyria; it was therefore very absurd for him to wish he might die when he had a prospect of living to so good a purpose and could be so ill spared.

[2.] Jonah being now so much out of temper and therefore unfit to die. How durst he think of dying, and going to appear before God's judgment-seat, when he was actually quarrelling with him? Was this a frame of spirit proper for a man to go out of the world in? But those who passionately desire death commonly have least reason to do it, as being very much unprepared for it. Our business is to get ready to die by doing the work of life, and then to refer ourselves to God to take away our life when and how he pleases.

II. See how justly God reprov'd Jonah for this heat that he was in (v. 4): The Lord said, *Doest thou well to be angry? Is doing well a displeasure to thee?* so some read it. What! dost thou repent of thy good deeds? God might justly have rejected him for this impious heat which he was in, might justly have taken him at his word, and have struck him dead when he wished to die; but he vouchsafes to reason with him for his conviction and to bring him to a better temper, as the father of the prodigal reasoned with his elder son, when, as Jonah here, he murmured at the remission and reception of his brother. *Doest thou well to be angry?* See how mildly the great God speaks to this foolish man, to teach us to restore those that have fallen with a *spirit of meekness*, and with *soft answers to turn away wrath*. God appeals to himself and to his own conscience: "*Doest thou well? Thou knowest thou does not.*" We should often put this question to ourselves, Is it well to say thus, to do thus? Can I justify it? Must I not unsay it and undo it again by repentance, or be undone forever? Ask,

1. Do I well to be angry? When passion is up, let it meet with this check, “Do I well to be so soon angry, so often angry, so long angry, to put myself into such a heat, and to give others such ill language in my anger? Is this well, that I suffer these headstrong passions to get dominion over me?”

2. “Do I well to be angry at the mercy of God to repenting sinners?” That was Jonah's crime. Do we do well to be angry at that which is so much for the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom among men — to be angry at that which angels rejoice in and for which abundant thanksgivings will be rendered to God? We do ill to be angry at that grace which we ourselves need and are undone without; if room were not left for repentance, and hope given of pardon upon repentance, what would become of us? Let the conversion of sinners, which is the joy of heaven, be our joy, and never our grief.

⌘ JONAH 4:5-11

THE WITHERING OF THE PROPHET'S GOURD

Jonah persists here in his discontent; for the *beginning of strife* both with God and man *is as the letting forth of waters*, the breach grows wider and wider, and, when passion gets head, bad is made worse; it should therefore be silenced and suppressed at first. We have here,

I. Jonah's sullen expectation of the fate of Nineveh. We may suppose that the Ninevites, giving credit to the message he brought, were ready to give entertainment to the messenger that brought it, and to show him respect, that they would have made him welcome to the best of their houses and tables. But Jonah was out of humour, would not accept their kindness, nor behave towards them with common civility, which one might have feared would have prejudiced them against him and his word; but when there is not only the *treasure* put into *earthen vessels*, but the trust lodged with men *subject to like passions as we are*, and yet the point gained, it must be owned that the *excellency of the power* appears so much the more to be of God *and not of man*. Jonah retires, *goes out of the city*, sits alone, and keeps silence, because he sees the Ninevites repent and reform, v. 5. Perhaps he told those about him that he went out of the city for fear of perishing in the ruins of it; but he went to *see what would become of the*

city, as Abraham went up to see what would become of Sodom, ~~CH27~~ Genesis 19:27. The forty days were now expiring, or had expired, and Jonah hoped that, if Nineveh was not overthrown, yet some judgement or other would come upon it, sufficient to save his credit; however, it was with great uneasiness that he waited the issue. He would not sojourn in a house, expecting it would fall upon his head, but he *made himself a booth* of the boughs of trees, and sat in that, though there he would lie exposed to wind and weather. Note, It is common for those that have fretful uneasy spirits industriously to create inconveniences themselves, that, resolving to complain, they may still have something to complain of.

II. God's gracious provision for his shelter and refreshment when he thus foolishly afflicted himself and was still adding yet more and more to his own affliction, v. 6. Jonah was sitting in his booth, fretting at the cold of the night and the heat of the day, which were both grievous to him, and God might have said, It is his own choice, his own doing, a house of his own building, let him make the best of it; but he looked on him with compassion, as the tender mother does on the froward child, and relieved him against the grievances which he by his own wilfulness created to himself. He *prepared a gourd*, a plant with broad leaves, and full of them, that suddenly grew up, and covered his hut or booth, so as to keep off much of the injury of the cold and heat. It was *a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief*, that, being refreshed in body, he might the better guard against the uneasiness of his mind, which outward crosses and troubles are often the occasion and increase of. See how tender God is of his people in their afflictions, yea, though they are foolish and froward, nor is he *extreme to mark what they do amiss*. God had before *prepared a great fish* to secure Jonah from the injuries of the water, and here a great gourd to secure him from the injuries of the air; for he is the protector of his people against evils of every kind, has the command of plants as well as animals, and can soon prepare them, to make them serve his purposes, can make their growth sudden, which, in a course of nature, is slow and gradual. A gourd, one would think, was but a slender fortification at the best, yet Jonah *was exceedingly glad of the gourd*; for,

1. It was really at that time a great comfort to him. A thing in itself small and inconsiderable, yet, coming seasonably, may be to us a very valuable blessing. A gourd in the right place may do us more service than a cedar. The least creatures may be great plagues (as flies and lice were to Pharaoh)

or great comforts (as the gourd to Jonah), according as God is pleased to make them.

2. He being now much under the power of imagination took a greater complacency in it than there was cause for. He was exceedingly glad of it, was proud of it, and triumphed in it. Note, Persons of strong passions, as they are apt to be cast down with a trifle that crosses them, so they are apt to be lifted up with a trifle that pleases them. A small toy will serve sometimes to pacify a cross child, as the gourd did Jonah. But wisdom and grace would teach us both to *weep* for our troubles *as though we wept not*, and to *rejoice* in our comforts *as though we rejoiced not*. Creature-comforts we ought to enjoy and be thankful for, but we need not be exceedingly glad of them; it is God only that must be our *exceeding joy*,
Psalm 43:4.

III. The sudden loss of this provision which God had made for his refreshment, and the return of his trouble, v. 7, 8. God that had provided comfort for him provided also an affliction for him in that very thing which was his comfort; the affliction did not come by chance, but by divine direction and appointment.

1. God *prepared a worm* to destroy the gourd. He that gave took away, and Jonah ought to have *blessed his name* in both; but because, when he took the comfort of the gourd, he did not give God the praise of it, God deprived him of the benefit of it, and justly. See what all our creature-comforts are, and what we may expect them to be; they are gourds, have their root in the earth, are but a thin and slender defence compared with the *rock of ages*; they are withering things; they perish in the using, and we are soon deprived of the comfort of them. The gourd withered the next day after it sprang up; our comforts *come forth like flowers and are soon cut down*. When we please ourselves most with them, and promise ourselves most from them, we are disappointed. A little thing withers them; a small worm at the root destroys a large gourd. Something unseen and undiscerned does it. Our gourds wither, and we know not what to attribute it to. And perhaps those wither first that we have been more exceedingly glad of; that proves least safe that is most dear. God did not send an angel to pluck up Jonah's gourd, but sent a worm to smite it; there it grew still, but it stood him in no stead. Perhaps our creature-comforts are continued to us, but they are embittered; the creature is continued, but

the comfort is gone; and the remains, or ruins of it rather, do but upbraid us with our folly in being exceedingly glad of it.

2. He *prepared a wind* to make Jonah feel the want of the gourd, v. 8. It was a *vehement east wind*, which drove the heat of the rising sun violently upon the head of Jonah. This wind was not as a fan to abate the heat, but as bellows to make it more intense. Thus poor Jonah lay open to sun and wind.

IV. The further fret that this put Jonah into (v. 8): He *fainted, and wished in himself that he might die*. “If the gourd be killed, if the gourd be dead, kill me too, *let me die with the gourd*.” Foolish man, that thinks his life bound up in the life of a weed! Note, It is just that those who love to complain should never be left without something to complain of, that their folly may be manifested and corrected, and, if possible, cured. And see here how the passions that run into an extreme one way commonly run into an extreme the other way. Jonah, who was in transports of joy when the gourd flourished, is in pangs of grief when the gourd has withered. Inordinate affection lays a foundation for inordinate affliction; what we are over-fond of when we have it we are apt to over-grieve for when we lose it, and we may see our folly in both.

V. The rebuke God gave him for this; he again reasoned with him: *Dost thou well to be angry for the gourd?* v. 9. Note, The withering of a gourd is a thing which it does not become us to be angry at. When afflicting providences deprive us of our relations, possessions, and enjoyments, we must bear it patiently, must not be angry at God, must not be angry *for the gourd*. It is comparatively but a small loss, the loss of a shadow; that is the most we can make of it. It was a gourd, a withering thing; we could expect no other than that it should wither. Our being angry for the withering of it will not recover it; we ourselves shall shortly wither like it. If one gourd be withered, another gourd may spring up in the room of it; but that which should especially silence our discontent is that though our gourd be gone our God is not gone, and there is enough in him to make up all our losses.

Let us therefore own that we do ill, that we do very ill, to be angry for the gourd; and let us under such events quiet ourselves *as a child that is weaned from his mother*.

VI. His justification of his passion and discontent; and it is very strange, v. 9. He said, *I do well to be angry, even unto death*. It is bad to speak

amiss, yet if it be in haste, if what is said amiss be speedily recalled and unsaid again, it is the more excusable; but to speak amiss and stand to it is bad indeed. So Jonah did here, though God himself rebuked him, and by appealing to his conscience expected he would rebuke himself. See what brutish things ungoverned passions are, and how much it is our interest, and ought to be our endeavour, to chain up these roaring lions and ranging bears. *Sin* and *death* are two very dreadful things, yet Jonah, in his heat, makes light of them both.

1. He has so little regard for God as to fly in the face of his authority, and to say that he did well in that which God said was ill done. Passion often over-rules conscience, and forces it, when it is appealed to, to give a false judgment, as Jonah here did.

2. He has so little regard to himself as to abandon his own life, and to think it no harm to indulge his passion even to death, to kill himself with fretting. We read of *wrath that kills the foolish man*, and *envy that slays the silly one* (~~xxxv~~ Job 5:2), and foolish silly ones indeed those are that cut their own throats with their own passions, that fret themselves into consumptions and other weaknesses, and put themselves into fevers with their own intemperate heats.

VII. The improvement of it against him for his conviction that he did ill to murmur at the sparing of Nineveh. Out of his own mouth God will judge him; and we have reason to think it overcame him; for he made no reply, but, we hope, returned to his right mind and recovered his temper, though he could not keep it, and all was well. Now,

1. Let us see how God argued with him (v. 10, 11): “*Thou hast had pity on the gourd, hast spared it*” (so the word is), “*didst what thou couldst, and wouldst have done more, to keep it alive, and saidst, What a pity it is that this gourd should ever wither! and should not I then spare Nineveh?* Should not I have as much compassion upon that as thou hadst upon the gourd, and forbid the earthquake which would ruin that, as thou wouldst have forbidden the worm that smote the gourd? Consider,”

(1.) “The gourd thou hadst pity on was but one; but the inhabitants of Nineveh, whom I have pity on, are numerous.” It is a great city and very populous, as appears by the number of the infants, suppose from two years old and under; there are 120,000 such in Nineveh, that have not come to so much use of understanding as to know *their right hand from their left*,

for they are yet but babes. These are taken notice of because the age of infants is commonly looked upon as the age of innocence. So many there were in Nineveh that had not been guilty of any actual transgression, and consequently had not themselves contributed to the common guilt, and yet, if Nineveh had been overthrown, they would all have been involved in the common calamity; “and *shall not I spare* Nineveh then, with an eye to them?” God has a tender regard to little children, and is ready to pity and succour them, nay, here a whole city is spared for their sakes, which may encourage parents to present their children to God by faith and prayer, that though they are not capable of doing him any service (for they cannot discern *between their right hand and their left*, between good and evil, sin and duty), yet they are capable of participating in his favours and of obtaining salvation. The great Saviour discovered a particular kindness for the children that were brought to him, when he *took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them*. Nay, God took notice of the abundance of cattle too that were in Nineveh, which he had more reason to pity and spare than Jonah had to pity and to spare the gourd, inasmuch as the animal life is more excellent than the vegetable.

(2.) The gourd which Jonah was concerned for was none of his own; it was that for which he did not labour and which he made not to grow; but the persons in Nineveh whom God had compassion on were all the *work of his own hands*, whose being he was the author of, whose lives he was the preserver of, whom he planted and made to grow; he made them, and his they were, and therefore he had much more reason to have compassion on them, for he cannot *despise the work of his own hands* (~~Job~~ Job 10:3); and thus Job there argues with him (v. 8, 9), *Thy hands have made me, and fashioned me, have made me as the clay; and wilt thou destroy me, wilt thou bring me into dust again?* And thus he here argues with himself.

(3.) The gourd which Jonah had pity on was of a sudden growth, and therefore of less value; it *came up in a night, it was the son of a night* (so the word is); but Nineveh is an ancient city, of many ages standing, and therefore cannot be so easily given up; “the persons I spare have been many years in growing up, not so soon reared as the gourd; and shall not I then have pity on those that have been so many years the care of my providence, so many years my tenants?”

(4.) The gourd which Jonah had pity on *perished in a night*; it withered, and there was an end of it. But the precious souls in Nineveh that God had

pity on are not so short-lived; they are immortal, and therefore to be carefully and tenderly considered. One soul is of more value than the whole world, and the gain of the world will not countervail the loss of it; surely then one soul is of more value than many gourds, of more value than many sparrows; so God accounts, and so should we, and therefore have a greater concern for the children of men than for any of the inferior creatures, and for our own and others' precious souls than for any of the riches and enjoyments of this world.

2. From all this we may learn,

(1.) That though God may suffer his people to fall into sin, yet he will not suffer them to lie still in it, but will take a course effectually to show them their error, and to bring them to themselves and to their right mind again. We have reason to hope that Jonah, after this, was well reconciled to the sparing of Nineveh, and was as well pleased with it as ever he had been displeased.

(2.) That God will justify himself in the methods of his grace towards repenting returning sinners as well as in the course his justice takes with those that persist in their rebellion; though there be those that murmur at the mercy of God, because they do not understand it (for his thoughts and ways therein are as far above ours as heaven above the earth), yet he will make it evident that therein he acts like himself, and will be *justified when he speaks*. See what pains he takes with Jonah to convince him that it is very fit that Nineveh should be spared. Jonah had said, *I do well to be angry*, but he could not prove it. God says and proves it, *I do well to be merciful*; and it is a great encouragement to poor sinners to hope that they shall find mercy with him, that he is so ready to justify himself in showing mercy and to triumph in those whom he makes the monuments of it, against those whose eye is evil because his is good. Such murmurers shall be made to understand this doctrine, that, how narrow soever their souls, their principles, are, and how willing soever they are to engross divine grace to themselves and those of their own way, there is one *Lord over all, that is rich in mercy to all that call upon him*, and in every nation, in Nineveh as well as in Israel, *he that fears God and works righteousness is accepted of him*; he that repents, and turns from his evil way, shall find mercy with him.