

GOD IS BIGGER THAN YOU THINK

Jonah 4

The late Donald Grey Barnhouse, pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church of downtown Philadelphia, was invited back to his alma mater - Princeton Theological Seminary, to speak at a chapel. In attendance that day was one of the most brilliant men Barnhouse had ever met - his OT professor named Robert Wilson. Professor As Barnhouse stood to speak, Dr. Wilson sat with his arms folded on the front row, peering stoically over the top of his glasses. The young pastor preached the best he could, but he found it difficult not to be preoccupied with what Dr. Wilson was thinking. Suddenly, midway through Barnhouse's message, Wilson shuffled his papers together, stood to his feet, and walked out. Barnhouse could barely gather the strength to finish his message. When chapel was over, he exchanged a few polite pleasantries and then went straight to the revered professor's office. With a trembling voice, asked, "Where did I fail?" Dr. Wilson stopped his reading and looked up. "Fail? Oh, you didn't fail," Wilson explained. "I always come to hear my former students speak one time. I simply want to know if they are a big-Godder or a small-Godder. I am very pleased that you are one of our few graduates who is a big-Godder. You preach a big God. I didn't need to hear anymore."

Are you a big-Godder or a little-Godder? Is your God infinite or limited? Does your God have sovereign authority over everything? Or is your God handicapped by human opinions, decisions, and activities? Is your God compassionate? Or is he an angry tyrant? Is your God the God of the Bible? These are the important questions about the nature, character, and authority of God that we are confronted with in Jonah 4. The book of Jonah has been summarized as the story of a man on a run. In chapter 1, Jonah runs from God - responding to the call of God to go to Nineveh by going in the opposite direction. In chapter 2, Jonah runs to God - praying for deliverance from the belly of the fish. In chapter 3, Jonah runs for God - proclaiming the Lord's message to the wicked city of Nineveh. And in chapter 4, Jonah runs into God - expressing his anger over the Lord's compassion to the city of Nineveh. As the book comes to a close, Jonah is no longer running from God. But he is still not walking with God. It has been well-said that the Lord made man in his own image and in his own likeness; and man keeps trying to return the favor.

Jonah 4 teaches us that God is bigger than you think about him. God is bigger than you think about yourself. God is bigger than you think about other people.

I. GOD IS BIGGER THAN YOU THINK ABOUT HIM

When OLIVER CROMWELL sat for the official portrait that would portray his appearance to future generations, he was said to have instructed the artist to

paint him just as he was. He wanted no flattery involved in the portrait. In Cromwell's famous words, he instructed the artist to paint him "warts and all." This is one of the reasons I am absolutely convinced that the Bible is the word of God. The Bible does not gloss over or clean up the imperfections of those who love God and follow Jesus Christ. Scripture paints the biblical personalities just as they are... warts and all. So scripture tells us that Abraham, the father of the faithful, lied and said that his wife was only his sister in order to save his own neck. Moses, the meekest man who ever lived, was disqualified from spiritual leadership, because he struck the rock in anger in stead of speaking to the rock as the Lord commanded. Elijah who called down fire from heaven on Mt. Carmel against the Baal prophets, rather in fear from Jezebel, asking God to take his life. David the man after God's own heart, committed adultery with Bathsheba and killed her husband to cover up her subsequent pregnancy.

Scripture paints the personalities of scripture warts and all. This is what we find in Jonah 4. If the book of Jonah ended at chapter 3, verse 10; this would be a wonderful story and Jonah would be considered one of the great heroes of the Bible. Sure, the story begins with Jonah rebelling against God. But the Lord gave Jonah a second chance. And when Jonah went to Nineveh and proclaimed God's message, the whole city turned to the Lord. It was the greatest revival in the history of the world. But Verse 1 says, "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry." How many men of God have become troubled because they proclaimed God's message faithfully, clearly, boldly, passionately, and authoritatively; but no one responded. Here Jonah is displeased because the entire city turned to God as a result of the divine message he proclaimed. In Luke 15:10 Jesus says, "*Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*" But as the angels were rejoicing in heaven; Jonah was angry. Jonah finally did what the Lord wanted him to do. But the Lord did not do what Jonah wanted him to do. Jonah's angry prayer and the Lord's gracious response teaches us that God is bigger than what you think about him.

A. JONAH'S ANGRY PRAYER

In Jonah 4:2-3, Jonah prays. It is the second time in this book that Jonah prays. Chapter 2 records Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish. But the attitude, content, and tone of this prayer are greatly different. It begins with a question: "*O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?*" In chapter 1, Jonah challenges the omnipresence of God by trying to flee from the presence of the Lord. Now, in Jonah 4, Jonah questions the omniscience of God as he tells the Lord, "I told you so." Apparently, when the Lord commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh, he did not immediately run away. He first made his case with God as to why he did not want to go. Now Jonah reminds the Lord of that conversation and says, "I told you this would happen."

A confession: *"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."*

For instance, Exodus 34:6 says, *"The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.'"*

STUART writes: "He was actually expecting God to suppress his own natural inclination to show mercy wherever possible. It was not simply the case that Jonah could not bring himself to appreciate Nineveh. Rather, to a shocking extent, he could not stand God!"

A request: *"Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

B. THE LORD'S COMPASSIONATE ANSWER

Verse 4 says, *"And the Lord said, 'Do you do well to be angry?'"* The Lord is omniscient. God is

With this question, we see the great compassion of God

II. GOD IS BIGGER THAN YOU THINK ABOUT YOURSELF.

God appoints a plant (v. 6). Verse 6 says, *"Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant."*

God appoints a worm. Verse 7 says, *"But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered."*

God appoints a scorching east wind. Verse 8 says, *"When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'"*

Here is a good test of godly character. Consider these questions: What makes you happy? What makes you angry? What makes you want to give up?

III. GOD IS BIGGER THAN YOU THINK ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE.

Verses 5-8 record the Lord's confrontation with Jonah. Then verses 9-11 record the Lord's conversation with Jonah.

Verse 9 says, *"But God said to Jonah, 'Do you do well to be to be angry for the plan?'"* Again, the Lord is asking a rhetorical question. Foolishly, Jonah answered this time, saying, *"Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."* Jonah answered this rhetorical question the wrong way.

God had the first word in the book. Now he also has the last word.

In verse 11, God says, *“And 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?”*

In Genesis 18:32, God determined to spare the city of Sodom for the sake of ten people. How much more would the Lord spare the city of Nineveh, who did not know their right hand from the left.

It is about moral confusion. As Jesus died on the cross, he cried out, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus says, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

JOHN PIPER says, “Cities are not autonomous. They do not grow without God. Even though the people in them may think that they are building a monument to human independence, they aren’t. They depend on God at every minute and not a single building in this city was built without God’s work. The waterworks, the sewer system, the electricity, the traffic plan, the government structure, the laws and ordinances, the educational and cultural and technical and entertainment institutions – they are all there because God’s gifts and God’s power and God’s wisdom have been used.”