

# Jonah's Anger at the LORD's Mercy

## 4: 1-3

**DIG:** Why is **Jonah** angry now? How did **Yonah's selfish anger** compare with **God's righteous anger**? How was this a reflection of the northern kingdom of **Isra'el**? How did **Yonah** rationalize his out-of-control anger over **Nineveh's repentance** and **ADONAI'S forgiveness**? What was **Jonah's greatest fear**? Compare **Jonah's five-point description** of **God** to **Moshe's** description of **Him** in **Exodus 34:6-7**. What attribute is missing? Do you think this omission may have been purposeful on **Yonah's** part? Why or why not? How did **Jonah** know about the **LORD's** mercy based on his experience with the northern kingdom of **Isra'el**? What is the difference between **God relenting** and **repenting**? Why the pause at this point? What does **scene six as a whole** say about **God**?

**REFLECT:** Have you ever tried to make an unspoken "deal" with **God** in exchange for your obedience? How did that work out? Did it affect your relationship with **Him**? Have you ever been displeased when you saw **YHVH** extend grace and mercy to someone you thought didn't deserve it? When was the last time you obeyed **ADONAI** but your emotions lagged behind? What compelled you to obey the **Lord** despite the way you felt about it? Can you think of an attribute of **God** that you only appreciate in certain situations? What does our anger at the **LORD** reveal about our desire to control **Him**?

**Short description of scene six:** One of the issues driving the story of **Yonah** from the beginning has been: What will happen to the city of **Nineveh**, whose wickedness is so great that it has come to the attention of **ADONAI**? That issue has now been resolved. The **Ninevites** heard the message of the prophet, they changed, and the announced destruction of the city has been called off. But another issue remained. What will happen to a **reluctant prophet** who disobeyed **HaShem**? **Jonah** discovered that it is impossible to run away from the **Almighty**. His preaching in **Nineveh**, it would seem, has been tremendously successful. One would think he would be overjoyed. But as the scene opens **Jonah** is **absolutely furious**.

**Commentary on scene six:** But **Jonah** . . . The cat and mouse game continues, so we should pause on the word **But**. Throughout the book (1:3, 1:4, 1:17, 4:1, 4:7), there is a constant dialogue between **Yonah** and the **Grandmaster**, often with action and counteraction, like a chess game. **But Jonah was absolutely furious and burned with anger because the Ninevites had been saved** (4:1). Most evangelists would have been delighted. Imagine preaching for **forty days** and ending up with about 600,000 people repenting and radically changing their behavior. But **Yonah** was not just upset, he was **absolutely furious** (Hebrew: *ra'ah*). Once again **Jonah** is playing upon a few of his favorite words. The previous chapter

spoke of **the people of Nineveh** turning from **their evil** (Hebrew: *ra'ah*) ways (3:8). **God** saw that **they** had turned from **their evil** (*ra'ah*) ways (3:10a) and therefore relents about bringing **evil** (*ra'ah*) upon them (3:10b). **YHVH** has turned from **His** fury, while **Jonah** is **absolutely furious**. **God** has turned from "the heat [Hebrew root: *hrh*] of **His** anger (3:9) while **Yonah** is burning up (root: *hrh*) with it. Several times this chapter speaks of **Yonah's** burning **anger**. **He** was **angry** at the **grace** and **compassion** of **God** (4:4), and because **the plant** that provided **shade** had **withered** (4:9).<sup>88</sup> **His** response turned out to be anything but what we would expect from a man sent by **God** to deliver a divine message.

**Jonah's** out-of-control **anger** over **Nineveh's** repentance and **God's** forgiveness can best be understood in reference to **Nineveh's** well-documented **evil** (see **Aj - The Word of the LORD** came to **Jonah: Go to Nineveh and Preach Against It**). Yes, **the LORD** hates **wickedness**, but **the Jewish prophet's anger** contrasts with **YHVH's** because **he** does not believe that **their evil** should be forgiven. In this, **he** symbolized the nation of Isra'el. **Yonah's** self-interests were a reminder to Isra'el of her lack of concern for the ways and mercies of **God** for anyone but herself.<sup>89</sup> **He** cannot accept **Micah's** pronouncement: **God does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in grace** (**Micah 7:18b CJB**).

From the preaching of **Amos**, **Jonah** already knew that Assyria had been chosen by **HaShem** to destroy the northern kingdom of Isra'el. If **Nineveh** was spared destruction, that would signal the certain doom of **his** homeland. **Yonah** didn't want to be the instrument that **God** would use to bring **Nineveh** to repentance, and therefore, spared. Not only that, but **he** probably believed that if he aided in the northern Kingdom's demise that **he** could also be an instrument in the southern kingdom of Judah's destruction.<sup>90</sup> Oy vey!

**Jonah** explains his **anger**. **O LORD, isn't this what I said when I was still in my country** (4:2a)? **It may not have been spoken, but maybe only thought**. In the Hebrew text, the emphasis is on the words **my country**. Regrettably, **Jonah** is often pictured as an anti-Gentile bigot, but this was not the problem. If **he** were a bigot, **he** would not have wanted to go to **Tarshish** either, since it was also a **Gentile city**. The problem was not that **he** was anti-Gentile, but rather, that **he** was pro-Isra'el, a nationalist. This is seen from **his** statement, **my country**.

This verse carries the fullness of **the disgruntled prophet's** relationship with **HaShem** combined with the basis of **his** dispute with **Him**. **Yonah's** prayer begins with the same formula that **the sailors** used in 1:14: **Please ADONAI, Please! That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish** (4:2b). The key to understand this verse is found in the Hebrew behind the words: **I was so quick** (*qiddamtî*). The verb form *qadam* means *I anticipated* or *I was out in front* of the action. **Jonah** just *knew* how things were going to turn out. This proves **Yonah** was not faithless. In fact **he** suspected that **the Ninevites** *would* repent and that

ADONAI *would* relent, but the prophet wanted strict justice and didn't want to have anything to do with any other kind. Even more than that, however, he didn't approve of the LORD's intent or action.

This familiar **five-point description** of the true God places the son of Amittai in a long line of important witnesses in the TaNaKh. The first use of this revelation of HaShamayim's self-description was to Moshe after he forgave the Israelites for worshiping the golden calf (**Exodus 34:6-7a**). The prophet Joel warned of coming judgment but reminded the Jews that it was not too late to repent for the sake of God's reputation (**Joel 2:13**). David expressed the joy of YHVH's forgiveness of his sin (**Psalms 103:11-13**). Ezra reminded the Israelites of the LORD's long history of faithfulness to them as they rededicated the rebuilt wall in Tziyon after returning from the Babylon captivity (**Nehemiah 9:17b**). The psalmist also knew that although the arrogant were attacking him for his failings, God would still receive him (**Psalms 86:15**). But Jonah recites God's reputation as the reason for his anger.

Jonah lamented: I knew that You are a **merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and a God who relents from sending calamity** (**Jonah 4:2c**, also see **Joel 2:13**). Jonah was very clear about God's unique qualities. When the runaway prophet went to Nineveh he knew that ADONAI would very likely extend His mercy to them if they repented. While Yonah appreciated the character of God when expressed to him and Israel, he did not understand why they should be shared with the evil Ninevites.

*While we may be shocked at Yonah's response, we can often harbor the same feelings. When the ex who betrayed us, the friend who deceived us, or the offender who committed a crime against us receives God's forgiveness and even His favor, we can quickly fall into a pit of anger and frustration because we secretly longed for their demise.<sup>91</sup>*

**Merciful:** The adjective **merciful** or **gracious** (*hunnun*) occurs thirteen times in the TaNaKh and is used only in reference to God. Rabbi Sha'ul quoted **Exodus 33:19** when he wrote: **What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moshe, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion** (**Romans 9:13-15**). Jonah knew much about God's mercy, based on his experience with the northern kingdom of Israel. He had been a prophet in Israel during the long reign of King Jeroboam II, who did what was evil in the LORD's sight (**Second Kings 14:24**). Despite that, God used Jeroboam to save Israel from her enemies and to recover some of the territories taken away from her earlier by Syria. In fact, Yonah had prophesied about this (**Second Kings 14:25**). Could it be, Yonah may have wondered, whether if God was still sparing apostate Israel and even prospering them under such a wicked king as Jeroboam II, He was not thinking of promoting the terrible Assyrian nation in like manner as He had done for Israel - especially now that they seemed repentant of their ways (**3:10**)? It is

interesting that **Joel** prophesying in the southern kingdom of Judah probably many years later, seems to quote from **Jonah** when he speaks of **God's** relenting of the evil He had threatened: **Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead." Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with steadfast love. He is eager to relent and not punish (Joel 2:13 NLT).**<sup>92</sup>

**Compassionate:** The Hebrew word for **compassionate** (*raham*), is related to *rehem*, the word for *womb*, and thus has something of the sense of *motherly love*. This adjective also occurs thirteen times in the TaNaKh, always in reference to **ADONAI**. **Merciful and compassionate** are paired in **Jonah 4:2; Exodus 34:6-7; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17 and 31; Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 145:8; Second Chronicles 30:9; Joel 2:13).**

**Slow to anger:** The literal Hebrew for **slow to anger** has the sense *long of anger*. Being **slow to anger** is one of the virtues described in **Proverbs**; it is the opposite of having a hasty temper (**Proverbs 14:29**) or a hot temper (**Proverbs 15:18**) and is better than might (**Proverbs 16:32**) or pride (**Ecclesiastes 7:8**). This particular characteristic appears in many other places in the Bible (**Exodus 34:6; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 14:8**). **Yonah** had a heart problem and didn't want **YHVH** to be patient any longer.

**Filled with steadfast love:** In addition to the above, the expression **filled in steadfast love** occurs in prayers, such as **Nehemiah 13:22** and **Psalms 5:7, 69:13, 106:7 and 45**. **Steadfast love** translates the Hebrew word *hesed*. We may bring the sense of this word into focus by looking at its usage in a non-theological context. **David** and **Jonathan** made a covenant with each other, sealing their friendship (**First Samuel 18:1-3**). Later, **Jonathan** asked **David** to remember him and his family, no matter what the future might bring, saying: **If I am still alive, show me the steadfast love (*hesed*) of the LORD, that I may not die; and do not cut off your steadfast love (*hesed*) from my house forever, when the LORD cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth (First Samuel 20:14-15).** This is love with a strong element of loyalty.

**God** gave **Hosea** a marriage comparison to illustrate this kind of **steadfast love** when He said: **Isra'el, I will make you my wife forever. I will be honest and faithful to you. I will show you my love and compassion (Hosea 2:19).** He tells **Hosea** to marry a prostitute and to be faithful to her as an example of **God's** faithfulness to a faithless people. **The LORD** said to me, **"Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes of Baal worship (Hosea 3:1).**

**A God who relents in sending calamity:** This is one of two kinds of compassion in this verse. The compassion of **God** (*raham*) is a gentle womb-like compassion of **HaShamayim** (the

One in the heavens) for His good creation; **the God who relents** (*naham*) is an agonizing compassion of ADONAI in relation to a sinful humanity. This concept of **God relenting** was discussed in more detail in 3:10. But **Jonah's** thirty-nine-word speech (in Hebrew) here in 4:2 is balanced by a thirty-nine-word speech (in Hebrew) by **the LORD** in 4:10-11.<sup>93</sup>

*God spared the people of Nineveh although He had already decreed that they would be destroyed because of their evil ways. This teaches us that no matter what we have done, the grace and mercy of ADONAI awaits us if we only repent wholeheartedly.*

Yonah had just about enough of **God's mercy and compassion, slowness to anger, steadfast love and relenting** toward the wicked. How differently he would order events if he were in God's place! He wanted the **Grandmaster** to destroy those wicked and cruel Assyrians. Now that they had repented, it seemed as though ADONAI might spare them all. They might even fare better than his own apostate and corrupt nation of Isra'el and he couldn't stand the thought! In fact, he became so **angry** that he would rather die than see anything like that happen. He didn't fear death anymore because he already died once and had been resurrected. He had already been at **Abraham's side** (see my commentary on **The Life of Christ Hx - The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus**) and would rather be in Sh'ol with him than live in a world dominated by the hated Assyrians.

Therefore, the prayer: **Now, ADONAI, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live** (Jonah 4:3, also see Numbers 11:15 and First Kings 19:4) is a measure of the depth of his displeasure. Out of tune with God, the reluctant prophet was distraught. Out of all mankind he was the most miserable. Yet, it is ironic that the cause of his discontent was the goodness of God, which he himself had experienced so dramatically when ADONAI had resurrected him.<sup>94</sup> But he still had doubts. Would anyone in Isra'el understand what he had done? **Dying** was better than living . . . if the enemy lived.

At this point, **Jonah's** Masoretic scroll (one of the oldest and most reliable Hebrew copies of the TaNaKh) and the Dead Sea scroll both insert a *setumah*, or a grammatical indicator that punctuates the text with a pause when the story is read.<sup>95</sup>

**Reflection on what scene six as a whole says about ADONAI:** God does not respond to Yonah by declaring that the wicked will meet strict justice. More accurately, God affirms His reputation by assuring His chosen prophet of His care for the wicked, even for their animals. **Jonah's** complaint helps us to consider the full burden of believing and serving such a God. It means the world will be a place where the potential for great evil will remain. Exactly because our free will to reject or accept Him, the LORD hopes for the salvation of the wicked. Our faith is complex and even challenged **Jonah**, and it continues to challenge believers today to place their trust in a God who loves those whom we find despicable.<sup>96</sup>