

# What Ticks You Off?

## Jonah 4:1-4

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ August 13, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



<sup>1</sup>But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup>He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. <sup>3</sup>And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>4</sup>And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” (Jonah 4:1-4, NRSV)



When was the last time you were angry, really angry? Can you remember?

Anger is a wonderful diagnostic tool. If you pay attention to it, your anger will tell you something crucial about yourself. Mostly it will tell you what you value, what you consider to be most important. When you get angry, something valuable to you has been threatened.

If somebody was trying to do harm to my family I would become angry because my family is very important to me. I’m guessing you’re the same way. You don’t get between a mama bear and her cubs unless you want to make mama bear angry. And this tells us that anger, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. God himself regularly gets angry. Numbers 32:13 is typical - **“And the Lord’s anger was kindled against Israel.”**<sup>1</sup> Coincidentally, God’s anger is also always provoked when his children are threatened with harm, often because his children are doing great harm to themselves or one another. Anger like this is righteous anger. Whether or not your anger is similarly righteous all depends on what it is that has made you angry.

A father comes home after a long day at work. It hasn’t been an easy day. The deal fell through. The boss wasn’t happy. Coworkers were rude. At dinner that night his young daughter spills Kool-Aid all over the table. It’s the last straw. The father erupts and yells at his little girl, who immediately bursts into tears. Whether or not she was paying attention to what she

was doing is almost beside the point. Where does that anger come from? If that man pays attention to it, what will it tell him about himself, about what is most important to him in life? Is it possible that success at work, and maybe even the opinion of others, or even just having things go his own way, has taken on far too much value in his life? It’s certainly hard to characterize such an outburst as righteous anger.

I’m telling you, if you pay attention to your anger, you can learn a great deal about yourself. It’s certainly a much cheaper strategy than therapy! In general, when we get angry we usually assume that something outside of us is the problem. But most of the time, the problem is inside. What is it that makes you angry in life? What is that telling you about what is inside your heart? And if nothing really makes you angry, that is worth exploring as well. We at least ought to get angry about the things which anger God!<sup>2</sup>

Jonah is furious. In verse 1, the word “displeased” is repeated twice in the Hebrew. Literally it reads, “Jonah was displeased with a great displeasure.” And the word anger here literally means “burned up.”<sup>3</sup> Spoiler alert, Jonah doesn’t calm down by the time the story ends. At the end of the book Jonah is still royally ticked off.

Now, is this how we wanted the movie to end? Wasn’t last week the perfect place to end? Jonah finally relents and does the job God gave him to do. To everybody’s surprise, the wicked Ninevites all repent, from the king to the cattle, and put an end to their violent ways. Everybody lived happily ever after. Let the credits roll. Hollywood loves that movie. We love that movie!

Several years ago my wife somehow tricked me into watching Downton Abbey. It’s on PBS, she said. It’s Masterpiece Theater! I could use a bit more sophistication in my life. Don’t be fooled, that show is nothing but a highbrow soap opera. Still, I got addicted. I admit it. Watched all the way to the end. And the last episode of the last season did what you hope all television shows will do, it tied up all the loose ends, answered all the questions, reconciled all the differences, made sure all the good people found their

<sup>1</sup> This and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> I’m indebted here to Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 157.

<sup>3</sup> <https://studybible.info/strongs/H2734>

way in life and the bad people got what they deserved. It was supremely satisfying.

The story of Jonah will give us no such satisfaction, because as I said at the very outset, this is not a story about Jonah. It's primarily a story about God, and how we, the reader, will relate to God in the end. In other words, the end of the story isn't written. God is writing it even now. We get to decide how we fit into the script.

So why is Jonah so angry? What does his anger tell us about what is important to him. If we can answer that question, we might be able to see if the same sort of anger exists in us, and whether or not that anger is righteous. Biblical commentator Leslie Allen summarizes it this way, "Jonah finds that the time-fuse does not work on the prophetic bomb he planted in Nineveh."<sup>4</sup> As I hope you know by now, Jonah hated the Ninevites. Not only were they pagan Gentiles, they were wicked, a threat to his people Israel. More than anything, he wanted to see them get what they had coming to them. He only went to visit them and warn them of their pending destruction because he knew God wouldn't leave him alone until he did. Even then, as he gave them forty days to shape up, he hoped they would ignore the warning and meet a bitter and well-deserved end.

But it never happened. His worst fears were confirmed. Not only did the Ninevites repent, but God defused the time-bomb and spared the whole lot of them. Jonah is furious, displeased with a great displeasure. He shakes his fist at God. **"O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning..."** I told you so, God! I knew this would happen. It's the worst thing ever.

And so here's the question. What does Jonah's anger tell us about what is most important to Jonah? We've covered this before, so let me keep it simple. The problem is not with the Ninevites. It's certainly not with God. The problem, as is usually the case with us, is inside. The problem is with Jonah, and it's at the roots of his heart. He thinks he deserves God's favor and believes that the Ninevites do not. He is a Jew, a member of what he believes to be exclusively God's chosen people. God had made a covenant with Israel, promised to prosper Israel, to protect Israel. And now here was God sparing the very nation which was a threat to Jonah and his fellow Jews. Jonah's identity, his security, his meaning in life, was all tied up in the fact that he was a Jew, one favored by God more than others. He is now being forced to set aside that which

he believed brought ultimate value and worth to his life. No wonder he is angry. What is most precious to him has been threatened. And as he makes clear later, he would rather die than set aside the thing which makes his life worth living.

Now, if this idea of valuing one's own national and racial identity over the global mission of God seems unfamiliar to us, think again. It is not hard to find people in the American church these days who are more concerned with the greatness of our own nation, than they are concerned with the ultimate salvation of our world in which there are currently more than 3 billion people who have never yet even had the chance to hear the good news about Jesus' love and grace towards them, or concerned that there are more than 3 million children in our world who die of hunger every year! Of course, God's wants us to care about the flourishing of our own nation, because God cares about the flourishing of all nations. But when we become more angry about threats to America than we become angry about the forces which keep billions of people in our world in spiritual darkness and material desperation, we have to be honest about what it is we really care about.

For you, it may not be national or racial pride. If that's the case, think hard about what it is that does make you angry. And when you are angry, what is it that is being threatened? Answer that question and you will discover what it is that you most value, and whether that anger is righteous or now. Jonah would gladly serve the Lord as long as the Lord didn't ask him to betray his national pride. Fill in that blank for yourself. Lord, I will gladly serve you...as long as you keep me and my family healthy and safe...as long as you make me comfortable in life...as long as people continue to think well of me...as long as I succeed in my career...as long as I don't have to love *those* people...as long as I don't have to forgive *that* person...as long as I don't have to live there, or leave here...as long as (you fill in the blank). When that thing becomes threatened, we get angry. Give that thing up? Over my dead body!

It's fascinating to me that right in the middle of his tantrum, Jonah offers this powerful creedal statement, a stunning testimony about the character of God. He's actually quoting Exodus 34:6-7 here when he declares to God, **"you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment."** It's quite beautiful, actually. He admits that God is full of grace, giving people what they don't deserve, and also full of mercy, not giving people what they do deserve. He knows God has anger, but only the righteous sort, which is always in control.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), 227.

He knows God's love is not only unchanging, but abounding. He knows God doesn't want to punish people.

The problem is, Jonah is only selectively quoting Exodus 34. He leaves off the last part of verse 7, not because he doesn't know it, but because he no longer believes it.

**...yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents  
upon the children  
and the children's children  
to the third and the fourth generation.**

Jonah doesn't buy it. He does not believe that God punishes evil. Clearly God does not. If anybody was guilty of evil and deserving punishment it was the Ninevites. They deserved to get toasted. And yet God let them off the hook. He believes God is loving. He does not believe God is just. If God were just, then good and deserving people like him would find favor, and wicked and undeserving people like them would be condemned.

As a church we are reading through the book of Isaiah right now. I hope you're reading along with us. It's not the easiest book in the Bible, but it is crucially important. The New Testament quotes Isaiah more than it quotes any other Old Testament book.<sup>5</sup> One of the things you will notice in Isaiah is how God's covenant love and his righteous justice and anger are all mixed up together. One minute God is gushing about how much he wants to bless his people because he loves them. The next minute, often in the very next verse, he is angry, determined to punish them for their great wickedness. It's as if God's love for us is inexhaustible, but also his hatred of our evil and rebellion equally inexhaustible. Jonah isn't the only one who has struggled to hold these two seemingly contradictory things together.

Part of our problem – and Jonah is the poster child for this – is that we can tend to think that it's other people who deserve to be punished more than us. It's truly stunning that Jonah can't recognize his own sin. Literally everything and everybody in this story comes off looking better than him. Even the fish obeys God! And yet, he's furious because he thinks he and those like him are more deserving of God's favor. How many people got angry with Jesus in his day for the same reason when he showed favor to what they considered

to be the spiritual scum of the earth. Do we think that this tendency in us has gone away in our day?

In the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice there is a painting by Paolo Veronese which got him in hot water with the church of his day. It's a painting of Jesus at a banquet with his disciples, but also around the table are Roman soldiers playing in one corner, a man with a bloody nose on the other side, probably as a result of a fistfight, stray dogs roaming around, a few drunks, people of many races, even Huns, who would have been despised in those days. Church leaders were furious, and Veronese was called before them to explain these irreverences. He tried to show in the Gospels that these were, in fact, the sorts of people Jesus ate dinner with often. It didn't matter. They made him change the title of the painting and make the scene secular rather than religious.<sup>6</sup>

Pastor Tim Keller says that self-righteousness like this is the normal human condition, the default position of the human heart. We justify ourselves, try to find value and worth, by looking sideways at others and imagining that because of our goodness, our efforts, our status, our race, our religion, our knowledge, our (fill in the blank), we are better than others, more deserving than others. But that is never how God sees it. There may be differences in our goodness, but such differences are negligible at best from God's perspective. Writer Philip Yancey points out that proportionally the surface of the earth is smoother than a billiard ball. From the perspective of Mars, for instance, the heights of Mount Everest and the troughs of the Pacific Ocean are indistinguishable from one another.<sup>7</sup> In the same way, compared to the righteousness of God, the best of human goodness is nothing. Certainly the difference between my goodness and your goodness is nothing at all from God's perspective, especially when compared to the goodness of God.

Jonah should have known that. He deserved God's punishment just as much as the Ninevites. We all should know that. None of us deserve God's favor. And yet when this reality is brought before us, none of us are happy. Richard Lovelace writes, "People who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons... Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce, defensive assertion of their own righteousness, and defensive criticism of others."<sup>8</sup> It also makes them angry. Jonah's prayer gives lip service to the greatness of God, but it really is mostly focused on himself. The words "I" and

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.simplybible.com/£591-isaiah-in-new-testament.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Cited by Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Zondervan, 1997), 53-54.

<sup>7</sup> Yancey, 210.

<sup>8</sup> Cited by Timothy Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah* (Penguin Books, 2018), 62.

“my” appear nine times in his prayer. He’s mad at God because apparently God’s favor is not all about him, and he wants it to be all about him.

Jesus’ most famous parable is probably the Parable of the Prodigal Son. You can read it in Luke 15. Most of you know the story. A younger son betrays his father in the most offensive way possible. But in time this wayward young man comes to his senses and returns home, hoping at best to be welcomed as a slave. To everybody’s shock, the father welcomes him home with open arms, receives him as his beloved son, and calls a great feast to celebrate his return. Meanwhile, the older son, the one who all these years has stuck around and done all the things expected of him, hears the news and immediately is furious. He refuses to come into the feast and instead shakes his fist at his father, telling him essentially that it is over his dead body that he will join in any party thrown for one who is absolutely undeserving of such favorable treatment.

Sound familiar? Many scholars believe that Jesus had the story of Jonah in mind when he told this parable to a bunch of religious people in his day who were ticked off because he showed favor to the sorts of people Veronese included in his painting. At the end of the parable the father is almost pleading with the older son to come in and join the feast. He says to him tenderly, **“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”**<sup>9</sup> Sounds a bit like what God says to Jonah here, **“Is it right for you to be angry?”** I hear a similar tenderness in God’s voice.

I get it. Many of you, like me, have done our best to be good children, good students, good husbands and wives, good citizens, good church members, good neighbors. We have really tried. We know we aren’t perfect, but when we look sideways at others we can easily be tricked into thinking we are more deserving of God’s favor. And so when it doesn’t turn out that way, we whine, we grumble, we lament, we gripe, we get angry.

But no one of us is more deserving than any other one of us. The fact that the very Son of God had to come to earth to die on a cross is evidence that our debt before God is great, every one of us. But it is also evidence that the love of God for us, every last one of us, is even greater. In fact, the cross is the one place that we see the inexhaustible love of God poured out and, at the same time, the inexhaustible justice of God poured out as well. God hates our sin so much he declares it is punishable by death – he pours out his justice. He loves

us so much that he dies himself to pray the price – he pours out his love. As Romans 5:8 declares, **“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”**

In reflecting on the older brother who refuses to come in to the feast, Catholic priest and writer, Henri Nouwen, writes, “The elder brother stands back, looks at the father’s merciful gesture, and cannot yet step over his anger and let his father heal him as well.”<sup>10</sup> Jonah can’t take that step yet either. Both stories end with anger unresolved, each one, the older brother and the reluctant prophet he likely represents, unwilling to step into healing. And again, the stories end without resolution to put the question to each of us. How will we respond to the reality of who God actually is. Our Heavenly Father will not force his love on us, nor his grace. He has done just about everything else, even demonstrate his love for us by dying for us. But he will not force us to receive and then return his love. Love, by definition, can do no such thing.

What is it that makes you really angry in this life? Pay attention to your anger. Do not be surprised that, if you are honest, you will see that at least some of your anger is tied to your belief that in some way God or life is not giving you what you think you deserve. But what is it that God really owes you? Or life for that matter? Regardless of what God owes you – and I’m not so sure we want God to give us what he owes us – can you see what it is he is offering you in Christ?

Karl Barth is widely considered the greatest Christian theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His magnum opus was a work he called *Church Dogmatics*. It was a 10,000 page summary of what he believed was essential in the Christian faith. After all those words, Barth was asked to give a definition of God. He did so in just four words: “The One who loves.”<sup>11</sup>

If you come to believe that this is true, that God is one who loves, and one who can do no other, and that this and this alone is the reason that God loves you, then you will be healed and set free. Joy and resentment cannot coexist.<sup>12</sup> The one who comes to know the grace of God freely extended in Christ, at infinite cost to himself and wholly undeserved by us, is the one who comes to know this joy like never before.

Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 15:31

<sup>10</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Image Books, 1992), 78.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Yancey, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Nouwen, 73.

## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Jonah 4:1-4 again. What do you notice from this part of the Jonah story?
2. Why do you think that Jonah is so furious, angry enough to want to die? What's going on here?
3. When was the last time you got really angry? If anger is always an indicator that something important to us is being threatened, what does your anger in that moment teach you about what you value?
4. Have you ever been angry with God? What was the reason?
5. Do you ever become angry or resentful because it seems like other people receive blessings in life who do not receive those blessing? If so, why do you think this is so bothersome?
6. Fill in the blank: I will love and serve the Lord as long as \_\_\_\_\_. For Jonah, he was willing to love and serve God as long as God didn't ask him to compromise his national/ethnic pride. What is it for you? (Hint: Pay attention to what makes you angry.)
7. How can the love and grace of God set us free from all this? Have you experienced this freedom in your life?
8. What is God teaching you about yourself through this part of the Jonah story?

#### **Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.**



*Why do we get angry?  
 What does our anger teach us about ourselves?  
 What makes God angry?*