

“All the Prophets Testify”: Jonah 4:1-4, 5-11

Midweek Bible Study – 2026 January 21

Rev. Dr. Jayson S. Galler, Pastor, Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Kilgore, TX

<https://www.pilgrimlc.org/bible-studies/prophets>

Invocation & Opening Prayer

Follow-up to last class: pace, depth, other comments or questions

Outline (*TLSB* p.1479):

- I. Account of Jonah’s Call and His Reaction (1:1-3)
- II. Onboard Ship in the Midst of a Storm at Sea (1:4-17)
- III. Inside the Great Fish (2:1-10)
- IV. Yahweh gives Jonah His Assignment a Second Time (3:1-3)
- V. Jonah Delivers the Message; Nineveh’s Response (3:4-10)
- VI. Jonah’s Prayer in Nineveh (4:1-[4])**
- VII. Jonah Sits Outside the City of Nineveh; Yahweh Teaches a Lesson on Mercy (4:[5]-11)**

Roehrs-Franzmann comments on 4:1-11, “The final encounter between God and His servant Jonah glaringly exposes the evil root from which sprang the disobedience which had expressed itself first in the flight (ch. 1) and then in the ominous omissions of his prayer (ch. 2). That root is self: self-love, self-assertion, self pity.”

Jonah’s Prayer in Nineveh (4:1-4):

4:1 *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly*: the Hebrew conjunction translated “But” could be a simple “and”, though there surely is some contrast with the Lord’s “relenting” from the disaster mentioned in the preceding verse (3:10). As the ESV text note and *TLSB* note, the Hebrew reads “it became evil to Jonah as a great evil” (compare the reaction in 4:6). As *TLSB* also notes, there is a question about how Jonah knew that God had relented and perhaps so also a question about the chronology in the flow of the narrative, for example, whether the forty days mentioned in 3:4 had elapsed; Jonah may have preached the forty days and sat outside of the city to watch its destruction that did not come to pass (4:5; confer *TLSB* at vv.5-11).

and he was angry: As *TLSB* notes, Jonah’s anger is questioned by the Lord in both 4:4 and 4:9 (confer Jonah’s defense of his anger in 4:9), and Jonah’s being angry contrasts with the Jonah’s confession of the Lord’s being “slow to anger” (4:2). And, *TLSB* quotes Luther’s observation of the evil of Jonah’s action but God’s continued regard for Jonah. Roehrs-Franzmann comments that Jonah was angry this first time “because the Lord has been too gracious, gracious to the undeserving; he is like the sullen elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, who views his father’s lavish welcome for his undeserving brother as an insult to his deserving self (Lk 15:28-30). He is angry because he is hurt in his self-esteem, where all good men are most easily hurt. In his furious self-assertion he actually dares to reproach God with all that constitutes the glory of His name as the Lord, the covenant God of Israel (2).”

4:2 *And he prayed to the LORD and said:* There seems to be some parallel relationship between Jonah's prayer at this point and his earlier prayer inside the Great Fish. We see in 4:4 that, more than our one-way prayer, God in some way converses with Jonah. Keil-Delitzsch note a certain degree of piety in Jonah's prayer.

"O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?": Luther reads Jonah's statement as blaming God for Jonah's flight that God subsequently punished. If Jonah "said" any such thing, the book's earlier narrative does not include it or its role as the rationale for Jonah's fleeing, as expressed in the following clause.

That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish: Confer the narrative of 1:3 on Jonah's fleeing. In other words, to prevent what has now taken place, from Jonah's perspective, God's not carrying out His judgment (so Keil-Delitzsch).

for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster: Note that "steadfast love" in the Hebrew is *cheved*, sometimes translated "mercy". Luther appropriately refers to Romans 9:15, God's saying He will have mercy on those whom He has mercy. How did Jonah know God's character? God revealed His character to Jonah, and God likewise reveals to us Who He is, what He does, and how He works. Confer Exodus 34:6-7, but note the addition in this verse of "relenting from disaster", the same Hebrew verb used, for example, in 3:9 and 10. *CSSB* again refers to Jonah's using fixed confessional formulas, as in 1:9 and 2:9d. Of course, Jonah himself benefited from God's character but did not want God's grace extended to Nineveh, Israel's "national enemy" (confer *TLSB*; *CSSB* refers to Jews vs Gentiles).

4:3 *Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me:* Notably, Jonah does not simply take his own life but still recognizes the Lord as the giver and taker of life. *CSSB* refers to Elijah's request in 1 Kings 19:4, and Roehrs-Franzmann gives also the examples of Moses in Numbers 11:10-15 and Jeremiah in Jeremiah 15:10 and 20:14-18, although Roehrs-Franzmann notes that in the cases of Elijah and Jeremiah the desire for death came because their work had been unsuccessful, while in Jonah's case the desire for death followed his mission's success, against his expectation and desire. Confer Keil-Delitzsch, who refers to Jonah's praying for death because his proclamation of judgment had not been fulfilled.

for it is better for me to die than to live": *TLSB* comments, "Reflection of Jonah's selfish anger. He would rather die than endure the reality of God's pity for Nineveh."

4:4 *And the LORD said:* Luther refers to Jonah's and God's "chatting". Confer/compare Jonah's "praying" in 4:2. Laetsch accents God's not slaying His grumbling prophet.

"Do you do well to be angry?": Laetsch thinks a better translation is "Is it right?" *TLSB* comments, "With this rhetorical question, God gently endeavored to get Jonah to reconsider his attitude." Confer God's question in 4:9. Laetsch reminds us that God had just spared Jonah when he fled, and Laetsch points out that Jonah was not ready or willing to confess his sin.

Jonah Sits Outside the City of Nineveh; Yahweh Teaches a Lesson on Mercy (4:5-11):

4:5 *Jonah went out of the city*: the Hebrew has a connective conjunction that could be translated “and”. As noted above at 4:1, vv.5-11 may take place before vv.1-4 (confer Luther; *TLSB* notes some consider vv.5-11 “a flashback”). Presumably Jonah left the city after he finished his preaching circuit, whether or not doing so took the full number of the forty days mentioned in 3:4.

and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade: Outside the city makes sense if Jonah expects it to be destroyed. Keil-Delitzsch refers to the city’s being bounded by mountains on the east. The “booth” might make us think of the wilderness wandering and the Feast of Tabernacles, but, regarding the “booth”, *TLSB* comments simply, “Temporary shelter made of branches to protect from the sun and wind.” The booth’s shade would seem to not have been good enough in 4:6. *till he should see what would become of the city*: again, presuming he does not already know that the Lord has relented (see 3:10 and 4:1), though *CSSB* suggests that “Jonah still hoped that Nineveh would be destroyed.” Keil-Delitzsch discusses the possibility that in Jonah’s mind the judgment had just been delayed.

4:6 *Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah*: Keil-Delitzsch sees “thoughtful deliberation” in the different uses of the different names for the Lord God (confer Laetsch and Allen). The Lord God ordains the plant, as He had ordained the Great Fish in 1:17 and would ordain a worm in 4:7 and a scorching east wind in 4:8. God works through the humblest of means. The ESV text note and *TLSB* suggest a castor oil plant, “which can quickly grow to a height of 15 ft.” *CSSB* further notes that the plant had “large, shady leaves”. Allen refers to the plant’s growing in “Jack-in-the-beanstalk fashion” (surely he means Jack *and* the beanstalk fashion). Whatever the plant is, and whatever it might normally do, we should not underappreciate the miraculous in this incident.

that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort: regarding shade, see also 4:5. *TLSB* comments, “Jonah’s booth by itself was probably not very good protection from the sun.” Roehrs-Franzmann refers to the leaves’ withering and falling. As noted by the ESV text note and *TLSB*, the Hebrew translated “discomfort” is more literally “evil”. And, Keil-Delitzsch understands the evil not of the heat but the displeasure or vexation of 4:3.

So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant: *TLSB* notes that the Hebrew is literally “rejoiced with a great joy” (compare the reaction in 4:1), and *TLSB* comments, “This is the one time we are told that Jonah was truly happy.” Keil-Delitzsch says Jonah may have seen the plant as a sign from God approving of his waiting for Nineveh’s destruction.

4:7 *But when dawn came up the next day*: again the Hebrew conjunction can be a simple “and”, though the context certainly presents a contrast between Jonah’s initial joy over the plant and subsequent desire to die and anger over the plant’s death caused by the worm. “Dawn” in this clause is distinguished from perhaps the sun’s height in the next clause.

God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered: Laetsch refers to a cutworm, caterpillar, borer, and the like. The Lord ordains the worm, as He had ordained the Great Fish in 1:17 and the plant in 4:6 and would ordain a scorching wind in 4:8. *TLSB* comments, “God used elements of His creation to try to change the hard heart of His stubborn prophet.” Allen suggests that God destroys the plan as Jonah wanted God to do with Nineveh. Keil-Delitzsch translates in such a way as to accent the withering first of the plant and then of Jonah in what follows.

4:8 *When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind:* on the progression of time, confer 4:7. Again, God ordains a scorching east wind, as He had ordained the Great Fish in 1:17, the plant in 4:6, and the worm in 4:7. Roehrs-Franzmann identifies the wind as a “hot and withering sirocco”.

and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint: *TLSB* comments, “God made Jonah so miserable that, feeling faint, he wished to die [more than wished, as we see in the next clause]. God was setting the stage to again challenge Jonah’s attitude toward Nineveh.” Laetsch comments that every pleasure and every sorrow “is sent by a loving Father who governs all the world for the welfare of His chosen children”.

And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”: *TLSB* comments, “Repeat of Jonah’s words in v 3, but here his wish to die is caused by physical wretchedness.” In the order of the book the words “repeat” here, but these words may anticipate the others in the order of the events (see above on 4:1 and 4:5). Luther thinks the narrative resumes here and that the Lord did not twice ask Jonah if he was doing the right thing by being angry. Allen points out that Elijah was under a broom tree when he made his wish to die.

4:9 *But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?”:* again the conjunction could be a simple “and”, though the context suggests some contrast between Jonah’s reaction and God’s question. The question does repeat/anticipate the question in 4:4, except for the mention of the plant (confer *TLSB*). We note that 4:8 did not explicitly say that Jonah was angry, as did 4:1, though the Lord clearly knows what Jonah is thinking, and Jonah does not deny it but defends his anger in what follows. Roehrs-Franzmann comments that this second time Jonah “is angry because the Lord is not gracious enough—to himself. In overwhelming self-pity he asks to die when the gracious discipline of God removes his sunshade (6-9).”

And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.”: where Jonah did not answer God’s question of 4:4, here Jonah claims He does do well to be angry enough to die. *TLSB* comments, “Jonah’s extreme anger was the result of an inconsequential event, the death of a plant for which he could take no credit and which had only temporary value (v 10). Jonah wanted things his way, even if it was not part of God’s plan or if it interfered with God’s grace.” Laetsch warns against our sitting in judgment on Jonah without recognizing our own sin in not focusing as we should on the sending of the Church, and Luther in several places remarks on the “coexistence” of faith and sinfulness in Jonah and in us.

4:10 *And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night.":* the Hebrew conjunction can be simply a connective "and", but again the context might warrant an adversative "but". *TLSB* comments, "Jonah's concern compared poorly with God's concern for Nineveh. Jonah was preoccupied with his own condition and the fate of a plant, while God was concerned with the condition and fate of human beings [and cattle!]." Of the Hebrew word translated "pity" in 4:10 and 4:11, *TLSB* says it is "Commonly used negatively", as in the Lord's telling Israel not to pity the Canaanites in Deuteronomy.

4:11 *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?:* the Hebrew conjunction again could be translated "but" given the context. Confer above at 3:2 and 3:3 regarding Nineveh's "greatness". Regarding those who do not know their right from their left, *TLSB* comments, "Expression for extreme degree of spiritual ignorance and vulnerability of Nineveh's population", and *CSSB* likens them to small children who "needed God's fatherly compassion". Roehrs-Franzmann refers to "The immature and ignorant, yet penitent, pagans" who were "under the mercy of God, who will not leave them in their ignorance." Keil-Delitzsch discusses an age of 7 and extrapolates to a population of 600,000, but we would object to any relation to an age of accountability and to the idea that God would spare them for that reason. Luther refers to the state of the people before Jonah's preaching and takes the number as referring to the whole population. *TLSB* suggests the livestock is mentioned "to remind Jonah that sparing cattle was more valuable than sparing one little plant". And, finally, *TLSB* points out that God's final question is left unanswered, that we do not know whether Jonah changed his attitude towards Nineveh. *TLSB* comments, "This makes the story a challenge for us. It is a reminder that God has every right to show mercy to whom He wishes. We dare not demand that God should favor us and not others." Allen refers to the "the Jonahs among the listening circle" who "feel that Yahweh is putting the question to them personally." Roehrs-Franzmann says, "We cannot understand this love, for God is God and not man, and His love goes far beyond the utmost reach of human love. But we can, and must, bow before it and adore it; and it is for this obedient adoration that God's last question to His prophet asks. (11)." Roehrs-Franzmann further describes Jesus as answering the question affirmatively with His whole being. Keil-Delitzsch sees the book ending as it attains its object of giving the Israelites "an insight into the true nature of the compassion of the Lord, which embraces all nations with equal love." Laetsch quotes Huxtable's suggesting that Jonah's authorship of the book confessing his sin shows his humility and repentance.

What are you taking home from the prophecy considered tonight?

TLSB's Law and Gospel Application Note for chapter 4 says, "We have the immense privilege of sharing God's Law and Gospel with the world around us. We have opportunities to be part of His plans. May we never be found guilty of neglecting our mission to make disciples of all nations [properly understood]. Praise God, He did not neglect us but appointed His only-begotten Son as our Savior."

Next time, January 28, Amos Introduction

Closing Prayer & Benediction