

KEEP THY HEART

A Bible-Based Devotional

Turn to: **Jonah 4**
“**Three Effects of Bitterness**”

Bitterness is powerful. It can destroy our attitude and poison our soul. Unfortunately, Jonah experienced quite a bit of it in this chapter. Let's see some of its effects on his life so that we can hopefully avoid this toxic sin.

1: Irrational anger (v1-4). Jonah had just witness an unprecedented revival in a very wicked city; but breaking all expectations of a revival preacher, **it displeased Jonah exceedingly**. But this is what bitterness can do; it can make you angry irrationally. Sometimes, we might want to call fire down from heaven on our enemies right now (Luke 9:54-56), but really, at this point, we should desire their salvation. I wonder if the Ninevites were confused when **he was very angry**. All these people are getting right with God, yet the preacher himself storms out in a huff, and no doubt his body language was full of anger.

Maybe this city had slaughtered or tortured his friends. As silly as this anger seems at first glance, if we try to put ourselves into Jonah's sandals, we may understand that he may have had some *human* justification for his bitterness. Hopefully this wasn't a permanent trait of his. If he were truly saved, I think he would have forgiven them in the end (Matthew 18:35). But we aren't given the end of the story, so we don't really know.

(v2) Jonah **prayed** his best prayer in the worst of times, and his worst prayer in the best of times. It's as though he tells God, "I told you so!" ("**was not this my saying**"); and perhaps there's a bit of racism as well (**my country**). His *real* reason for fleeing, according to him, was not cowardice, but bitterness. It wasn't that he was afraid to preach; he just didn't want them to get saved. And oddly, knowing good theology led him to take the *wrong* action in this situation, and he lists the sweet, beautiful attributes of God with apparent contempt or

even mockery. Bitterness certainly warps our views.

(v3) Jonah may have been serious about wanting to **die**, having his emotions compounded by the physical effects of being in the whale; but I suspect that at this point, he's just throwing a temper tantrum (cf. Acts 22:23).

(v4) God wants to hear us out. And we do **not do well** to be angry in certain situations, such as when our anger lasts into the evening (Ephesians 4:26), when we don't have a reason that is legitimate (Matthew 5:22), when we're envious (I Samuel 18:8), when we're angry with God (Psalm 2:1), when others take a stand for God (Daniel 3:19, Genesis 4:5), or when people are getting right with God (cf. Luke 15:28). Bitterness produces irrational anger.

2: Self-inflicted isolation (v5-8). Isolation is *not* always self-inflicted; in fact, oftentimes doing the right thing results in isolation from friends, coworkers, peers, church members, or family members. But if isolation is a result of bitterness, then that's a problem. And that's what happens with Jonah.

(v5) Apparently, Jonah doesn't answer God's question and just storms out. Since he went to the **east** side, he likely saw this beautiful city full of people getting right with God below an incredible sunset, though I doubt he noticed any magnificent colors. Jonah is acting like a child in some ways, going off and pouting. I think he **made him a booth** to get a front-row seat in case God's judgment fell after all. Sadly, I think he hopes that this repentance of theirs doesn't stick.

(v6) Most people seem to think that the **gourd** is a castor-oil plant, or a plant with very large leaves. It probably felt good being sheltered by it from the hot sun. He already had a booth, but this gourd increased the **shadow** area around Jonah, thus decreasing the radiating heat from the surrounding ground. I think his **grief** was a combination of bitterness and the physical effects of the whale. The fact that he was **exceeding glad of the gourd** seems to show us that his emotions were unstable; he was going through a difficult time in his life.

(v7) Some think the **worm** was a black caterpillar. We're just worms before God, but if

God can use this worm, He can use us, too! Imagine the brilliance **when the morning rose the next day**—casting its rays on the city from behind Jonah, his shadow long in front of him. And maybe the gourd was *behind* Jonah, explaining why he didn't see this worm. Perhaps this worm eats through the base of this gourd like a tiny chainsaw, leaving the gourd to wither and collapse.

(v8) As the morning wears on, the **sun did arise** fully, and the day is starting to get warm; and the **vehement** east wind was blowing from behind Jonah toward the city; and some say this wind likely contained particles of sand, like a dust storm. I wonder if Jonah's booth blew away. Or perhaps his booth was a failed DIY project. Maybe he purchased the booth kit in a hardware store in Nineveh as he stormed out of the city; but maybe he purchased the wrong size or had no clue how to build it (he was a prophet, not a builder, after all). But in any case, it's not protecting him from the sun anymore. So now, if we snapped a photo at this point, you would probably see a rubble pile of booth material, a withered plant, a **fainted** Jonah, and a happy, well-fed worm all in one place by themselves on a hot, summer day.

Jonah now **wished in himself to die**, so it's not just a tantrum; he is utterly exhausted. But let's think about this for a moment; Jonah surely *could* have been in the finest hotel in Nineveh, maybe with the king himself, under the shade of the best trees, sipping lemonade and cool fruit punch while the others sat in sackcloth. But his bitterness resulted in self-inflicted isolation. If we are to be isolated, let it be because we love Jesus; let it not be because we are cold, bitter, and unfriendly.

3: Misplaced priorities (v9-11). Now God asks Jonah the same question He asked before, but with a twist. And Jonah effectively responds rather haughtily, "You bet I do!" He's a hard person in a lot of ways.

(v10) God **pities** us in a good way and is upset when anyone goes to hell (Ezekiel 18:32, James 5:11); He has spent **labor** in forming us (cf. Psalm 139:13-14) and considers us an investment! He **makes us grow** and knows we have intrinsic worth (cf. Job 31:15). Unlike a mushroom that **comes up overnight**, God has

invested much time in creating us, and He knows that we will spend eternity somewhere, unlike plants which can **perish in a night**. For these reasons, human souls are far better than plants.

(v11) When others repent, our attitude should be, "Let the party begin!" (Luke 15:32) I think the six hundred thousand probably refers to young children, meaning the total population was many millions. And that's not to mention **much cattle**; if Jonah was upset about a plant dying, then he should have at least been upset about innocent cattle being killed. Do we have a forgiving attitude, wanting people to repent so we can throw a party? Or do we *not* want real repentance and reconciliation?

As an aside, today our culture often places the value of plants and animals above that of people. Human beings are much more valuable (Matthew 10:31, I Corinthians 9:9-10). Many people today will become upset at the loss of plants or animals, but do they become upset at the loss of *souls*? We need to make sure we place first things first; but bitterness causes us to misplace our priorities.

Jonah may be the only book that ends in a question, and we will never quite know how this story ends until we get to heaven. Bitterness leaves an unresolved, messy feeling in the air. Let's try to avoid this trap of bitterness. Let's get *excited* thinking about the possibility of our enemies coming to Jesus Christ. Let's have our "party gear" ready to go, so to speak, in hopes that we can be reconciled through Jesus Christ and celebrate; and as far as heaven goes, we should have an attitude of, "The more, the merrier" for all who sincerely come to Jesus. After all, we who are Christians were lost sinners once too, deserving of the same punishment (Titus 3:2-3).