**Divine Appointments**

Jonah 4:5-9

***Jonah spiraled downward very quickly into depression.*** In verse 8 he says, “It is better for me to die than to live.” Even when God asks him directly, “Do you really think you should be this angry about a plant?” Jonah insists, “Yes, I am right to be furious - angry enough to die!” He is like a toddler having a temper tantrum.

How did Jonah spiral down so fast?

**Jonah’s Downward Spiral:**

| 1. Refuse God’s Assignment 2. Reject God’s Affection 3. Refocus on the World 4. Resign to Despair | “Jonah went out of the city… The sun beat down on Jonah so he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’”  Jonah 4:5,8 |
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There were **four steps in this spiral to depression and despair**. I’m not saying this is the only way to experience depression. Mental illness is very real and some people face legitimage chemical imbalances that need to be diagnosed and treated like other diseases. We wouldn’t refuse insulin to a diabetic; neither should we counsel everyone who struggles with depression to just power through and move on.

But in Jonah’s case, ***his depression was very much self-inflicted*** as a result of his rebellion and idolatry. So let’s not miss this point by making the other one. Not all depression is the result of rebellion - but some depression definitely IS the result of rebellion. Jonah’s certainly was. Elijah didn’t rebel against God but just threw himself a dramatic pity party because of his isolation and suffering. There are many paths to discouragement and despair. A common one is the one Jonah followed - the path of disobedience and idolatry.

Let’s look at these four steps to despair and then flip the script to **the four shifts** we need to make away from Jonah’s worldliness to the way of worship.

First, in verse 5, we see ***“Jonah went out of the city.”*** In chapter 3 Jonah went into the city one day’s worth, spoke 8 words and that’s all we hear from him. Did he keep going all the way through the city? Did he keep speaking that same message or maybe elaborate on it a little? Not according to the book of Jonah.

In terms of what is documented in this book: ***Jonah went ⅓ of the way*** into this great city, spoke 8 words, and then turned around and went right back out. God said, “Get up and go to this great city.” Jonah reluctantly went and did the absolute minimum. Then, abruptly, Jonah left.

No indication that his work was done. No new word from the Lord to leave town and wait for the results. Jonah just left. **He refused to fulfill the assignment** God had given him. And he explained why in verse 2 - he knew God was merciful and forgiving and didn’t come the first time because this was exactly what he was afraid of: that God would show mercy to these wicked pagans and not wipe out their city.

So Jonah refused God’s assignment because he rejected God’s affection - particularly for the Nineveites, Jonah had no interest in the mercy of God. But also for HIM. The whole book God is calling to his reluctant, rebellious servant - trying to get him back on track. But Jonah won’t have it. Maybe there’s a glimmer of repentance in chapter 2, but no lasting heart change as evidenced by chapters 3 and 4.

But don’t you **hear God’s heart** in chapter 4, speaking so gently to Jonah? “Do you do well to be angry?” He’s like a patient, compassionate mother trying to calm down her belligerent toddler. But Jonah just crosses his arms, stamps his feet and says, “Yes! I have every right to be angry!”

So, having rejected God’s plan for him and rejected God’s pursuit of him, **Jonah refocused** away from God and latched onto the little piece of the world available to him - a little booth he had built and a little plant that had grown up overnight to give him shade.

Here is one of the most tragic ironies in the whole book - the happiest we see Jonah is here in 4:6 when this little plant grows up on his booth. You can see his pride that he built that little structure right where he did. You can sense him taking credit for the wisdom of where he sat down and the genius of the construction. Yes, he knew the plants of that region and set himself up in exactly the place where a shade plant was super likely to grow in just a few hours.

***Do you see how silly Jonah was - and how silly we are?***

* Has **your business** succeeded? Do you take such pride in that? You knew the market. You plotted the timing. You did the advertising. You built the relationships. You took out the loan. You put in the time. Yes, you built a little structure and God appointed a little plant to grow so you could enjoy the shade for a minute. But don’t you see how ridicilous it is for YOU to take credit for that success? Yes, you built a little structure. Well done. But the only reason it succeeded is because God APPOINTED that success.
* Has **your family** flourished? Do you take so much pride in that? You studied human anatomy. You did in depth research on human reproduction. You analyzed the timetables of fertility. You built your little structure, but God APPOINTED each and every child. Our first son, Seth, was born at our first anniversary and we named him Seth because the name means “appointed one.” It wasn’t our plan to start quite to soon. But it was God’s plan and we are so glad it was.
* Have **your finances** been blessed? Do you take the credit for that? You set up your budget. You made the sacrifices and put the money away. You diversified and invested and kept at it through the years. Yes, you built a little structure, but the only reason that little plant is there to shade you is because God appointed a plant to grow there.
* We could keep going and talk about your physical body, your house, your relationships, this church - any area of life; any little piece of this world.

We are just like Jonah. God gives us a little blessing and instead of looking up to praise Him and thank him for the blessing, ***we become exceedingly glad because of that BLESSING***. I really wonder if the main reason Jonah was so glad about the plant was because of his little booth. He was just so impressed with himself.

Regardless, do you see **how foolish it is to worship the plant**? It’s so tempting to shift our focus from God to the world - to focus our happiness on our little plants. But anything we love more than we love God is an IDOL. And God will not have rivals when it comes to our love. If we start to worship the blessings instead of the Blesser; if we start to rejoice in the gifts instead of the Giver, do you see how God has no choice but to take away those blessings? For our own good He has to show us that our idols are useless, worthless!

Do you now how you can identify an idol in your life? Imagine if you lost it.

The thing that ***if you lost it you would feel like life isn’t worth living*** - **that’s your idol**.

* If you didn’t look so young or thin or attractive anymore…
* If you didn’t have X amount of money in your bank account anymore…
* If you lost your job and how people viewed you because of your position…
* If you lost your wife or a child to illness or death…
* If you lost your health, your energy, your productivity…

Oh, we love our little plants, don’t we? We become exceedingly glad. And it’s not wrong to rejoice in the good things God has given us. We should be thankful and enjoy all of these little gifts and blessings. ***But it’s a small step from enjoyment to worship.***

Jonah dove across that line, rejecting God’s assignment and God’s affection. ***So when God took away the little plant Jonah was devastated.***

**It’s one thing to be sad** when you lose something important to you. ***It’s another thing to be devastated*** by that loss. Sadness and grief are a part of the human experience. We sometimes have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But that’s the point: to WALK. Don’t lie down in the pain and sadness. Don’t make your home there. Get up and walk WITH GOD through that dark valley, letting other believers walk with you and encourage you along the way. You can’t RUN through grief and loss, but you don’t need to lie down in it either. That’s from Tim Keller’s book, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering.* Helpful resource.

***The whole story of Jonah is a story of idolatry.***

* Jonah worshiped his comfort and status as the prophet of Gath Hepher and refused a new assignment to a foreign mission field.
* Jonah worshiped his own comfort as he lay down and went to sleep in the ship - with no concern for the sailors above him.
* Jonah worshiped his own piety as he wrote down his chapter 2 prayer of “repentance.”
* Jonah worshiped his own culture as the Ninevites repented and he grew furious that God didn’t vaporize them.
* And Jonah worshiped his comfort again when the little plant grew up over him.

***Disobedience and idolatry will always lead to depression and ultimately to death.*** Because as your heart bonds to something in this world, you will eventually and increasingly come to realize that you can’t keep that thing. And God Himself will do all He can to pry our hands off of our idols - because they keep us from loving and serving Him. This isn’t a petty, vindictive thing God does - it is the most loving thing He can do, because He knows our idols can’t do anything for us - only He can.

So do you see the three APPOINTMENTS in our passage today?

1. Refuse God’s Assignment
   * Interruption 1 - a plant to **Encourage**
2. Reject God’s Affection
   * Interruption 2 - a worm to **Disrupt**
3. Refocus on the World
   * Interruption 3 - a wind to **Distress**
4. Resign to Despair

Verse 6 - “The Lord God appointed a plant.”

Verse 7 “God appointed a worm.”

Verse 8 “God appointed a scorching wind.”

In chapter 1, things got hurled - God hurled a wind, the sailors hurled cargo overboard and then hurled Jonah. In chapter 4, things were APPOINTED. That word calls back to 1:17 when Jonah plunged into the turbulent ocean, God appointed a great fish to swallow him. Isn’t that a beautiful word? God APPOINTED… a fish, a plant, a worm, a wind.

***Do you consider the experiences of your life to be DIVINE APPOINTMENTS?*** Do we see them as invitations to connect with God? Do we realize that God is calling us away from our idolatry and focus on the world to true worship and devotion to Him?

**The three interruptions all have the same purpose** - ***to call Jonah back to the Lord***. Do you see the generosity and creativity of God to use all means at His disposal? He will use blessings and comfort to show us His love. But He will also take away something we love too much and He will sovereignly orchestrate pain and suffering to get our attention. As C.S. Lewis said, “God whispers in our pleasures but he shouts in our pain.”

So let’s look at the four shifts God is calling us to make, from Worldliness to Worship. First:

**Four Shifts from Worldliness to Worship:**

1. Respond to God’s Call

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city.” Jonah 3:1

The first time God sent him, Jonah went the opposite direction. The second time he went to Nineveh, but only like a child being forced to eat his broccoli. “How many bites?” God said three bites - three day journey. Jonah said, “I’ll take one bite.”

This whole series is about hearing from the Lord and moving forward in obedience - not halfhearted, minimal obedience, but wholehearted, “whatever it takes,” commitment. Respond to God’s call. Don’t resist the leading of the Holy Spirit, lean into it! Second:

**Four Shifts from Worldliness to Worship:**

1. Rest in God’s **Love**

“I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Jonah 4:2

Instead of rejecting God’s assignment and refusing His affection, we need to respond to his leading and rest in His love. Jonah knew the truth about God. He was a prophet! He taught this! In 4:2 Jonah cites the passage **where God reveals Himself to Moses**, “The Lord the Lord, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” No doubt that was a key verse Jonah used all the time in his ministry in Gath-Hepher. But he did not want to use it in Nineveh. And he forgot about it entirely for himself.

***Have you heard the Lord calling your name recently?*** He is calling you to HIMSELF. Are you listening? Are you responding by spending time with Him? Or are you going all **Cats in the Cradle** - “when you comin’ home, Dad, I don’t know when - but we’ll get together then, Dad, I know we’ll have a good time then.”

We can make a million excuses - the busy-ness of life, the demands of family, the urgent crises of the moment, ***the distractions of this world***. You remember what Jesus called those things? THORNS. The world is always going to have thorns - the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. In the end it’s a question of whether we will focus on this world or on the Lord. What gets your HEART?

***Oh, prodigal come home!*** Come rest in the love of your Father! Stop running and striving. It isn’t about you becoming good enough to earn your Father’s love. He has already loved you perfectly, infinitely in Christ. All of your sin has been paid for, all of your idolatry has been redeemed. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you REST.”

**Four Shifts from Worldliness to Worship:**

1. Renew your **Devotion**

“And the Lord said, ‘Do you do well to be angry… for the plant?’” Jonah 4:4,9

**Twice God asked Jonah the question**, “Do you do well to be angry.” First it was over Nineveh and the fact that God spared them. Then it was over the plant, the fact that God sent a worm to kill it.

Do you see God’s wonderful compassion in this question? “Do you do well to be angry?”

***Oh, we think we do well to be angry***. We feel righteous indignation about our idols.

* Yes, I am right to be angry when people don’t listen to me like they should - I am their pastor after all!
* Yes, I am right to be angry when my husband doesn’t love me well or my wife doesn’t respect me well - the Bible says he should or she should; I’ll show you the verse!
* Yes, I am right to be angry when someone hurts my feelings - especially within the church family - people are supposed to be loving and serve one another in the church!
* Yes, I am right to be angry when life doesn’t go my way - Lord, don’t you want me to be happy? Don’t you want me to have everything that I want?

God - our loving Father - is speaking this to each one of us today: ***“Do you do well to be angry?”*** **Anger is SMOKE**. Smoke doesn’t come from nowhere - there is something burning. Anger ties back to pain, suffering, loss. What is burning? What is smoldering in your soul?

If you look at it - ***what you’ll find there is your IDOL***. That thing that you love more than God. Your little plant that you were so glad about. Now it is gone or it is threatened and you are furious. You might say you’re mad at a specific person who hurt you or let you down, but ultimately all of our anger is directed at God. In the end we all know that whatever we have or don’t have is because of God’s plan.

We don’t like these ***little interruptions from God***. We like the first one just fine - when God gives us the little plant to encourage us. But we don’t like the worm that takes the plant from us or the wind that brings the heat to beat down on our heads.

This question, “Do you do well to be angry?” is ***a call to repent and renew our devotion to the Lord***; to turn from our love of this world and commit to love God with all we have and all we are. And that’s our final shift from worldliness to worship:

**Four Shifts from Worldliness to Worship:**

1. Rejoice in God **Alone**

“Now the Lord God appointed a plant… to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.” Jonah 4:6

The only time we see Jonah rejoice is when this plant grows up over him. Then, when it dies the next day he plunges into the depths of self-pity and despair. As I said, it isn’t wrong to enjoy the good things God gives us. But we need to be sure not to WORSHIP those good things. We need to **hold them loosely**, with gratitude for the time we have them - knowing that time will always come to an end.

* Every relationship is for a time. We have our kids for such a very short time.
* Even your husband or wife - you only have them for a time. One day you will say good-bye.
* Every job is for a time. It feels like forever, but it isn’t. You have a shelf-life in whatever job you’re doing.
* Every possession is definitely for a time - many of them very short periods of time.

**But GOD is forever**. Learning to rejoice in Him NOW is the best preparation for heaven FOREVER. Jonathan Edwards called that “building your capacity” for joy in the Lord. He wondered if that might be the difference in rewards that believers experience in heaven - all of us will be FULL of joy in the Lord. But some believers will be larger vessels, able to hold more joy because they developed that capacity in this life. This very short life.

This is why Paul commands believers in Philippians to **REJOICE IN THE LORD**. ***We must make Him our chief delight*** - to love the Lord with such devotion that all other loves fade into insigificance by comparison. When should we rejoice in the Lord? ALWAYS. Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again I will say, rejoice.

Paul also says, and James the apostle too says, ***“Rejoice in your SUFFERINGS.”*** Why? Because suffering loosens our hold on the things of this world and tightens our hold on Jesus.

That may be the best single answer to **the problem of evil** and suffering in this world - ***God is preparing us for the next one***. If it was only for this life that we had hope in Christ, Paul said we would be most to be pitied. But we have ETERNITY to look forward to. And in the light of the glory that awaits us, our present suffering is not even worth thinking about.

So let’s not be like Jonah - crying over our little dead plants. Let’s shift from worldliness to worship:

| **Worldliness** | **Worship** |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Refuse God’s Assignment | 1. Respond to God’s Call |
| 1. Reject God’s Affection | 1. Rest in God’s Love |
| 1. Refocus on the World | 1. Renew your Devotion |
| 1. Resign to Despair | 1. Rejoice in God Alone |

Do you see ***how Jesus lived this out for us?***

* He did not run the other way, He followed the Father’s call and came to earth.
* He did not reject God’s affection, Jesus rested in the Father’s love - hearing that voice, “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”
* Jesus did not focus on the world, He renewed His devotion to the Father - rejecting the temptations of the devil and even in the garden of Gethsemane said, “Not my will but yours be done.”
* And Jesus never gave in to despair - but always found His joy in God alone.

**Whatever your Divine Appointment right now** - ***see it as a call from God back to Himself.*** Maybe it’s a plant - a time of blessing and comfort to encourage you. Hear the Lord calling you, through His goodness and mercy, to Himself.

Maybe it’s a worm or a scorching east wind. See those challenges as a divine appointment as well. God is calling you to a more pure devotion to Him. Yes, we have to let go of the things of this world. ***But God opens our hands so we can receive more of Him!***

Let’s open our hands for Him!

Let’s pray.