Kikayon (Jonah 4:1–11) 12 July 2026 KRCN

1. Jonah was on his way to Tarshish when he became food for a great fish. Three days later, he was vomited out onto dry land. Looking at Jonah's experience from an outside perspective, we have said that he passed through death. Extending this picture further, we compared it to the history of Israel: just as Israel came out of Egypt and passed through the Red Sea, so Jonah passed through death into new life.

2. Seen from this perspective, Jonah chapter 4 may be understood as Jonah's own **Feast of Booths**. Exactly what he is commemorating is not the point. Scripture simply tells us that Jonah built a shelter and sat beneath its shade. If we think of Jonah as having gone down to Joppa around the time of Passover, then by the time of the Feast of Booths he is sitting east of the city of Nineveh.

3. As we enter chapter 4, the Book of Jonah suddenly begins to use several striking expressions. First, it repeatedly mentions **direction**, especially the **east**. Second, it introduces an unusual word—the very word that gives today's sermon its title: **kikayon**, translated in many Bibles as a vine or plant. This word appears nowhere else in the Old Testament. Third, the language in this chapter becomes remarkably intense. Almost every conversation ends with Jonah speaking about death or wishing to die.

4. Look at v.1. It says, *"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry."* How angry was he? In v. 3 he says, *"It is better for me to die than to live."* In other words, he would rather die than see Nineveh forgiven. Again, in v.s 8 and 9, he insists that he has every right to be angry—even to the point of death.

5. If we focus only on these dramatic emotions, our attention is naturally drawn to the one whose feelings rise and fall so violently. We see only Jonah. Reading the passage this way, we may even assume that Jonah is the main character of the story. Yet if we pay close attention to the Hebrew expressions used throughout the chapter, we discover that this is not the case at all.

6. If we read the text as it is written, the statement that Jonah became angry carries a slightly different nuance. It is more literally, **"A great anger came upon Jonah, and it caused him to become angry."** The picture is like rising water that completely engulfs everything. In other words, someone else brought Jonah into that state. The distinction may seem subtle, but the subject of the sentence is different. Therefore, the focus of our attention should also be different.

7. Expressions like this reveal an important biblical truth: even Jonah's deeply personal and subjective emotions are not ultimately his own to govern. Human beings are not the absolute owners even of their own feelings. Scripture points out that our emotions themselves are dependent upon Another.

8. Therefore, although we may become angry, burn with indignation, or even—like Phinehas—take up a spear in righteous zeal and pierce the sinner, it is true that the act is performed by the person. Yet the ultimate Lord over that anger is God. This is especially true of those who, like Jonah, have passed through the waters of death and new life.

9. Jesus once asked Peter, **"Simon, son of John, do you love Me?"** Peter replied, **"Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."** Peter does not ground his love in himself, but in Jesus' own knowledge of him. Even his love for Christ is confessed as something that depends upon the Lord.

10. This question and answer are recorded in the Gospel of John. There Jesus addresses him as **"Simon, son of John."** Yet elsewhere, the one who confesses that even his love depends entirely upon the Lord is called **"son of Jonah."** The contrast invites us to see that the true source of faith and love is never the believer himself, but God who works within him.

11. This is not a difficult idea. When we read the passage in ordinary language, Jonah appears to be the one who is angry. Yet Scripture records even this as something that belongs to God’s work. And in reality, this is true of us as well.

12. The true Lord over a believer’s thoughts, words, and actions is not the believer himself, but God. Therefore, to those who still want to read Jonah as the main character, Scripture urges the angry Jonah to discover the true Lord of his emotions and confession.

13. What is striking is that this angry Jonah prays to the LORD in v. 2. Whose prayer, then, is this? To our ears, it comes from Jonah’s mouth. Yet in truth, it is a prayer whose cause lies in God—a prayer brought forth by God Himself.

14. That is why, although Jonah pours out this prayer in anger, there is nothing false in its content. Why? Because God caused him to pray it. There are no mistaken expressions in it. Why? Because it is a prayer inspired by God. Only a trace of the praying person’s own character remains visible within it.

15. Look at v.2: “O LORD, is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. For I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate

God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, a God who relents from sending calamity."

16. Here Jonah makes a confession. What is he admitting? He reveals that he had already known what he was supposed to proclaim. Last week we asked, *"If Jonah had known the message beforehand, would he really have fled to Tarshish?"* We gave him the benefit of the doubt, assuming that he did not know. But in reality, he knew all along. He fled anyway. In fact, he proves to be far more calculating and cunning than we had imagined.

17. How much did Jonah know? He knew that Nineveh was to be destroyed in forty days. But he also anticipated that if he went to Nineveh in obedience to God's call, the people would surely repent. And he was convinced that, in response to their repentance, God—being merciful—would relent from judgment. In other words, Jonah already knew that Nineveh would ultimately be spared.

18. If you read Jonah with a map beside you, another detail becomes clear. Tarshish lay to the **west** of Israel. Joppa, too, was on Israel's western coast along the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, Jonah's decision to go down to Joppa and sail for Tarshish was like a move in a game of chess. Knowing that God intended to send him **eastward**, Jonah deliberately fled in the opposite direction before the command could be fulfilled.

19. Although the Book of Jonah does not state this explicitly, his movement toward the west reveals two things. First, it was a course Jonah himself initiated. Second, it was driven by his own will, emotions, and judgment. If we think of the journey westward as symbolic, it represents the path a person chooses when he, rather than God, becomes the controlling subject of his life. It was, so to speak, the decision of a judge attempting to avoid presiding over a case in order to remain "fair."

20. Yet in chapter 4, Jonah leaves the city of Nineveh and, as v. 5 tells us, **"sat down east of the city."** There he built himself a shelter and sat in its shade. Then, in v. 8, we are told that God appointed a **scorching east wind**. Not a west wind or a north wind, but specifically **an east wind**. This detail is recorded deliberately.

21. For the people of Israel, the **east wind** was a familiar wind. It was the east wind that the Lord sent throughout the night when He parted the Red Sea. Those who heard these words in Hebrew would pay even closer attention to the word **"wind"** than to **"east."** Why? Because the Hebrew word for *wind* is **ruach**—the very same word used for the Spirit, as in **Ruach Elohim**, "the Spirit (or wind) of God."

22. Therefore, when chapter 4 repeatedly mentions the **east** and the **east wind**, the point is not merely that Jonah's journey westward was the wrong direction. Rather, it signals that the true subject of the story has changed. If Jonah's westward journey represented the will of man, then the wind blowing in the opposite direction represents the will of God. The **east wind** becomes the true actor—the one directing the events of the story.

23. Another significant event takes place after Jonah builds his shelter. At the center of the narrative stands the **kikayon**—the plant that gives this sermon its title. Jonah neither planted it, watered it, nor cared for it. It came entirely by God's provision. Yet it is Jonah who sits beneath its shade, and he does so on the east side of the city of Nineveh.

24. At this point, it is difficult not to think of Jerusalem during the **Feast of Booths**. Picture the scene. Jonah builds a booth east of Nineveh. Likewise, during the Feast of Booths, temporary shelters would have been built on the eastern side of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. And what lies to the east of Jerusalem? The **Mount of Olives**.

25. It was there that Jesus spoke these words. After leaving Jerusalem, He looked back toward the city and declared that the temple would be destroyed. Yet He also said that He would raise it again in three days. Later, He explained that He was speaking of the temple of His own body—His death and resurrection.

26. Therefore, the **kikayon** above Jonah's head represents the shade of Christ's cross, which shelters him from the scorching sun in his place. The worm that chewed the plant so that it withered in a single day points forward to Christ Himself, who would likewise wither and die. This **kikayon** is not a mighty cedar but a tender plant that springs up quickly. Whom, then, does it symbolize?

27. The central message of the Book of Jonah, therefore, is not simply that we must go out as missionaries, nor merely that those who hear the message must repent. Rather, it is that Someone must personally accomplish this work. Indeed, in order to change Jonah's own heart, that One must die as the **kikayon**. Christ goes to the cross not only for the salvation of Nineveh, but also to complete the salvation of Jonah.

28. This is the message that Scripture proclaims to us: the God who saves us and leads us toward the full maturity of Christ is the God who is rich in love.

29. Jonah knew this well. Yet even though he had experienced new birth, he despised that love. Why? Because God's love was not reserved exclusively for him; it extended even to those whom he hated. More than that, Jonah still wanted to be the one in control—even in

God's work of saving Nineveh. He expected God Himself to submit to Jonah's own will. This is the stubborn nature of the old self, a disposition that remains difficult to overcome even after one has been born again.