*At dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered* (4:7). When Jonah awoke, he anticipated another day of comfort, blessing and joy under God’s vine, only to find the plant dead, struck down by a pest. Imagine Jonah’s confusion: one day God gives the vine, the next day God takes it away. The vine brought comfort, blessing and joy to Jonah. The worm brought him sorrow, disappointment and loss.

*When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint* (4:8). Losing the vine was bad enough, but now, God adds insult to injury by sending the east wind. The vine brought comfort, blessing and joy. The worm brought him sorrow, disappointment and loss. The east wind brought pain, affliction and distress.

The vine, the worm and the wine: which of these came from God? All three! Scripture says God *provided* a vine, God *provided* a worm and God *provided* a scorching east wind. God’s hand was as much at work in the worm and the wind as it was in the vine. This raises some big questions. How can the great sorrows, disappointments and losses in life come from the hand of God? How can God be present in our pain, affliction and distress?

Pastor Alan Redpath gives us some insight. Redpath suffered a severe stroke which threw him into a spiritual crisis, but ultimately proved to him the faithfulness of God. He wrote of this experience: “There is no circumstance, no trouble, no testing, that can ever touch me until, first of all, it has gone past God and past Christ, right through to me. If it has come that far, it has come with a great purpose, which I may not understand at that moment. But I refuse to panic, as I lift my eyes to [God] and accept it as a coming from the throne of God for some great purpose of blessing to my own heart.”

Redpath knew that God’s hand worked in the wind that brought him pain, affliction and distress, and in the worm that brought him sorrow, disappointment and loss, as much as God’s hand worked in the vine that brought him comfort, blessing and joy. Nothing comes into our life without going through the hand of God first. We call this God’s providence.

Providence means that every detail of our life is ordered by God who works through all things, the evil and the good for our ultimate joy. When Jesus says that God sees a sparrow fall to the ground, he is telling us that God orders the smallest details of life. When Jesus says that hairs of our head are numbered, he is telling us that God knows us better than we know ourselves (Matt. 10:29-30). Everything about us is important to God.

Jonah’s story is peppered with testimonies of God’s intricate care for every detail of life. Fish swim to God’s appointed location. Plants flourish at God’s Word. Worms eat their fill at God’s command. Ships in the port, storms on the water, and winds in the desert all bear witness to the providence of God. God provided the fish to spare Jonah’s life, and God provided the vine, the worm and the wind to deal with the selfish anger in Jonah’s heart. God’s hand is at work in all of the events of life and there is purpose in all that God does.

God used the worm and the wind to save Jonah from a vine-centered life. A vine-centered person is one who is so taken up with the joy of God’s gifts that he or she ends up loving the gifts more than the Giver. Jonah was angry before God gave him the vine, but the vine made him happy. The anger seemed to be gone, but it was simply in hiding; as soon as the vine withered, Jonah’s anger resurfaced with a new vigor and a fresh focus.

*God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?” “I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.” (4:9).* Jonah remained trapped in a deep-seated resentment towards God. The vine masked the problem for a time, but when the worm and the wind came, they exposed Jonah’s true feelings: he was angry enough to die. Jonah took such joy in the vine itself, that when God took it away Jonah felt he had no more reason to live.

It is possible to love the vine so much that when it withers we may wonder if there is any reason to go on. The Bible has a name for this: idolatry. When we love the gift more than the Giver, we make that thing an idol. If we feel that without a certain person, or position, or achievement, our life would not be worth living, we may be deeper into idolatry than we think. Friends, family, money, ministry and success are good gifts from God that can bring us great happiness in life; but they are not the purpose of life. Thank God for the vine, but don’t live for the vine. Our reason to live lies not in the gifts, but in the Giver! The vine will pass away; God’s love for us will never pass away.

Each of us is on a journey leading in one of two directions: either we are loving God more or we are resenting God more; toward the praise of God or toward the reproach of God; to perpetual joy in God, or perpetual opposition to God. The vine, the worm and the wind will either lead you to praise God or they will make you angry with God.

Growing in the Christian life flows from a communion with Christ in which you love Jesus by savoring the depth of his love for you. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). The more you see God’s love for you, the more you will grow in loving God. This is why the apostle Paul prayed so passionately that we would know more of the depth and length and breadth of Christ’s love (Eph. 3:18): we will grow in love for Christ as we get a clearer view of Christ’s love for us.

Even Jesus faced the vine, the worm and wind. He chose twelve disciples and called them to be with him. There were his friends and he found joy in their company (Mark 3:14). Through their ministry he saw Satan fall like lightening, and on their return, his heart rejoiced through the Holy Spirit (Luke 10:18, 21). They were his vine-blessing.

Then the worm came. The disciples abandoned Jesus and fled. Judas betrayed him with a kiss. Peter denied him with a curse. Jesus plunged into sorrow and sadness. And the east wind blew. The soldiers scourged and mocked Jesus. They crowned whim with thorns and crucified him. From the cross he cried out to God, “Why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Christ endured the worm and the wind so that we could be brought into an eternity under God’s vine. Jesus understood that the worm and the wind were part of God’s purpose which leads to the vine.

Living a God-centered life means recognizing that the vine, the worm and the wind all come from God. How we react to the vine, the worm and the wind is what makes the difference. If we turn to God with thanks for the vine, and for help from the worm and the wind, we are living a God-centered life. If we live for solely the vine, and let the worm and the wind turn us from God, then we are living only for ourselves. The choice is ours to make.

Let me leave you with three simple prayers that can help move life from a vine-centered to a God-centered life. *“Lord, help me to receive your gifts gratefully.”* Every good gift comes from God. So, as God gives you friends, a job, money, family, or any gift that brings you joy, receive it from God’s hand with thanksgiving. Let it be a source of praise.

 *“Lord, help me hold your gifts lightly.”* God’s gifts are gifts: not rights. Confusing gifts with rights opens the door to bitterness and resentment. Gifts come from God. Nothing in this life lasts forever, so hold God’s gifts lightly. The gifts will pass: the Giver remains.

 *“Lord, help me to love you more than I love your gifts.”* We take down the idols not by loving God’s gifts less, but by loving God more; and grow in love for Christ by savoring his amazing love for you. Amen.

Source: Colin Smith, *Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life*. Bell & Bain: Glasgow. 2012.

**Submit to God’s Providence**

Sunday, August 6, 2017 Jonah 4:6-11 (NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Pastor Colin Smith tells the story of a family vacation to Scotland when he was ten. His brother and he enjoyed playing ball until they accidentally kicked the ball into a neighboring field. Their father hopped the fence to retrieve it, not knowing the field was actually a bog. The seemingly solid ground quickly proved to be a mirage. Smith says that by the time his father reached the ball, “the field was visibly moving as the thick moss undulated like a water-bed under his weight.”

There are seasons in life when solid ground suddenly gives way and shifts under our feet. Disappointments, illness, death and other losses pull the rug out from under us. Rolling along on life’s highway, we encounter a bend in the road and find ourselves facing a nightmare for which we are completely unprepared. When this happens, a coldness towards God creeps over our soul. It kills our passion for worship, hinders service, restrains prayer and silences testimony leaving us in a joyless relationship with God, much like a friendship that sours and the friends no longer speak to one another.

In chapter four, Jonah is barely speaking to God. He is disappointed, bitter and resentful toward God. He is angry that God has not taken his advice and destroyed the Ninevites. He is pouting outside the city, impatiently waiting to see what God will do next. What God does, surprises Jonah: He meets Jonah in his disappointment, bitterness and resentment and moves Jonah to a place where, instead of feeding his grief, He could write a confession in which God gets all the glory.

Jonah’s anger is not marked by outbursts of rage, but by a quiet withdrawal form the company of others and a growing preoccupation with the events of his own life. Jonah relocates to a place outside the city walls, where he builds himself a shelter, and there he squats in his own misery. Then, *The LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort* (4:6). Miracle-Gro never produced anything like this vine! It was a miracle vine. Picture a time-lapse video, showing the growth of a plant from seedling to full maturity in a matter of minutes. God provided a miraculous gift for Jonah, and *Jonah was very happy about the vine* (4:6). Jonah recognized the blessing God gave him, and enjoyed the shade of the vine.