

JONAH 4

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is a chapter of contrasts, for we see Jonah being angry when he had no right to be angry and we see God being gracious when he had no reason to be. Jonah is angry with God because God is a God of great grace and he displays his grace to whomever He likes. The whole problem that Jonah is wrestling with and the one we will wrestle with in this sermon is what we call the sovereignty of God's grace.

1. WHY IS JONAH ANGRY (vs. 1-4)?

a) First of all He is angry because God does not punish Nineveh in the way that Jonah had hoped and indeed wanted. For Jonah Nineveh was pagan, they were not God's people and indeed were enemies of God's people. If God had of judged them then that would have been one less nation for Israel to have to worry about. After all they deserved God's judgement; they were pagan and worshipped their own gods. They could be cruel and oppressive as a nation; therefore God would be doing everyone a favour by wiping them out.

Jonah was so angry because it appears that God had changed his mind concerning Nineveh. After all was it not God who sent Jonah to Nineveh with a message of judgement (3:3). Was Jonah not faithful on this occasion and proclaimed God's coming judgement? But now God has changed his mind or so it appears. Was God making poor Jonah out to be a liar, is his ministry as a prophet not being undermined by God's actions? Jonah is so angry that he wants God to take his life, what is the point of living if God does these sorts of things on you? If God saves pagans instead of judging them then what is the point of living?

But God asks Jonah a very important question (v 4). Did Jonah have any right to be angry? Of course the answer is No. After all Jonah knew what God was like (v 2) that is why he refused to go to Nineveh in the first place, he knew that God is gracious and delights to relent from sending calamity upon repentant sinners. Therefore he ought not to be angry with God because God is only doing what is in keeping with his own character. That was why God sent Jonah to Nineveh in the first place; he wanted to show grace to them but in order to get them to respond to God he sent them a message of judgement.

If you do not repent then in 40 more days I will judge you says God. The message of judgement was to warn them and urge them to repent. When repentance took place then God simply responded to the new circumstances with great grace.

God was not making Jonah out to be a liar he was simply fulfilling his purposes for pagan Nineveh and he was using Jonah as the messenger, His servant.

b) Jonah had no right to be angry because had not God been gracious to Jonah instead of judging him. What did Jonah deserve? He ran away from the presence of the Lord, he rebelled and therefore deserved God's judgement. What did he receive? Grace from God. God had provided a fish to save him from certain death. Why did God do that? Because Jonah repented while in the sea, and it is only because God is gracious and compassionate slow to anger and abounding in love and relents from sending calamity (v 2) that Jonah was saved.

You see Jonah had no right to be angry with God, God was simply being true to himself, his character enabled him to respond to Jonah in order to save him from God's judgement and his character enabled God to rescue the Ninevites from his own judgement.

Before we move on and look at Jonah's third reason for being angry let us pause and try to apply this truth. Does God's grace and mercy ever make us angry? Let me tell you a story to illustrate what I mean. There once was a Christian lady who was married to an unbelieving husband. He used to abuse her physically and eventually after many years of abuse they got divorced. She in truth hated him for what he did to her, and in all honestly the only consolation she had was knowing that one day he would have to face God and would receive his just punishment in hell. However one day she heard that her former husband was dying and on his deathbed he repented of his sin and sought the Lord Jesus for forgiveness. As far as it was possible to ascertain, his repentance and faith seemed genuine. He died soon afterwards.

But when his former wife found out, she was angry; angry with God, for the last person that she wanted to see in heaven was her abusing husband. It took some time before God dealt with her sufficiently so that she could rejoice in her former husband's salvation. I know that, that is an extreme example, but the question comes to us, is there anything about God's grace that makes us angry, or could make us angry?

Sometimes we don't mind God's grace working in our hearts and saving us for after all we are respectable sort of people, with good morals etc. But how would we feel if God saved a disreputable sort of character, or a vagrant or even a murderer. Then how would we feel, would we rejoice or would we become angry with God? How would we feel if God showed his grace to the Omagh bombers or to those responsible for the September 11th destruction of the World Trade Centre? Or just take that person who makes life difficult for you, perhaps a family member, a work colleague, or a neighbour. How would we feel if God showed his grace to them and saved them? It's so easy to be critical of poor old Jonah but I would suggest to you that if we were honest enough perhaps we would have to admit that we could not bear it if such and such a person got saved and then joined our church. O you may not mind them getting saved as long as you don't have to rub shoulders with them and share fellowship with them every week.

Be honest is there any hint of Jonah's attitude within our own hearts. If there is then God says to us have you any right to be angry? Is it not because God is gracious (v 2) the very reason why you are saved.

c) But Jonah is angry for another reason and we find this in verses 5-11. Jonah cannot stay in the city when revival is taking place so he goes out and sits down east of the city. He probably withdrew and watched, hoping that God would still carry out his threat of judgement. Because of the climate in which he lived he built himself a shelter and waited to see what would happen. But God is gracious to Jonah in spite of his anger and he provides a plant to grow over him to give him shade and to ease his discomfort. Jonah was very happy about this plant translated here as vine but the exact plant is unknown to us. This is the first time in the whole book that we read of Jonah being happy about anything.

However Jonah's happiness is short lived for the next day God provided a worm to chew the plant so that it withered. God then turned up the heat literally on Jonah by sending a scorching east wind along with the sun. The effect on Jonah was that he grew faint perhaps he suffered from sunstroke. Again he wants to die, in his thinking it would be better to die than to live. God's response is the same do you have a right to be angry about the plant Jonah? (v 9) Jonah thinks he has every right to be angry, angry enough to die.

Now comes the punch line (vs.10-11). We do not know how Jonah responded and that I think is deliberate for we are supposed to give our own response to God's question. The lesson God taught Jonah is a lesson that we all need to learn time and time again.

Jonah was more concerned about himself and his little comforts of life than he was about the 120,000 pagan Ninevites. He was angry that his little comforts were taken from him, because he was

more concerned about them than anything else. God's point is an argument from the lesser to the greater. Jonah you are concerned about a silly plant, but you expect me not to be concerned for the cattle and people of Nineveh. Surely if you Jonah can express concern for a plant then can I as the Almighty God not show great concern for animals and most importantly for people?

What is it that makes you angry? Do we get angry when our little comforts in life break down or are removed from us? If so then why do we get angry about such things? Well we get angry because those things are important to us and therefore when we don't have them or they don't work we are caused a certain discomfort.

But the truth is and I know that this is a hard lesson to take in but it is one that we must grapple with today. We are more concerned about the things of this world that bring us comforts and benefits than we are about the state of the souls of people. You know there are Christians who get angry if you walk into their house with mucky feet but who never get angry about the effects of sin upon this world. There are Christians who are more concerned about home comforts than they are about the souls of men and women.

There are Christians who get concerned when their car gets scratched but seemed unmoved about the plight of the lost. There are Christians who are more concerned about where they are going on holiday than they are about those who are going to hell.

How do I know that? Tell me what are the two activities that the church struggles to get Christians to be interested in? I will tell you; Evangelism and prayer. Christians will move heaven and earth to decorate their house but will not give up a little of their time to do evangelism or to pray for the lost. Some Christians will not think twice about staying at home, while others in the church are praying or doing the work of evangelism. Others would prefer to stay in bed rather than rise a little earlier to pray for the lost.

If we were honest some of us may prefer to watch our TV's rather than attend that prayer meeting. In a world where work is increasingly becoming more important then we have Christians who feel more committed to their company than they do to the work of the church. Behind all of these things that I have just mentioned is concern for this world our little comforts and ease of living rather than a passion for the lost.

The message of Jonah is a message that the church needs to hear today. The attitude of the church today is I'm Ok jack, to hell with the world. We would never dare say it but our actions say it loud and clear.

What concerns you most? Think about it for a minute. What consumed your thinking this past week? Those are the things that concern you most. Perhaps it was your family, or health or car or house or job or your money or computer or football team and so on. Perhaps we get angry when our TV breaks down and get all concerned about it, yet we never once, or at least rarely get concerned about the plight of the lost. It's so easy for the church to point the finger and laugh at Jonah today, but I'm afraid the church today is full of people like Jonah.

2. WHAT WAS JONAH'S PROBLEM?

Jonah's problem was that he was wrapped up in himself. Look how many pronouns he uses in verses 1-3. When Jonah's will was not in line with God's will then as far as Jonah was concerned, God has got it wrong. As far as Jonah is concerned he doesn't mind God being gracious and compassionate etc to himself and even to his fellow countrymen but not to pagan Nineveh.

That can be our problem with God as well. Perhaps we are so wrapped up with ourselves that we don't mind God blessing us, we are glad that he showed his mercy and grace to us, and we don't mind if he does it to our fellow westerners, but O we do not think that God should be gracious to Muslims, Hindu's, pagans and atheists. They don't deserve God's grace at least we grew up in a Christian country at least our religion is civilised.

But of course we all know that no one deserves God's grace, we in Britain do not deserve it any more than those in India, or Iran or Iraq or China. So often we can lead others to think that Christianity is a western faith for westerners only. Sadly the way we have kept it to ourselves for generations would certainly lead some people to think that? Perhaps we are overly concerned about our homeland at the expense of the other countries of the world.

Is there any resentment or anger in our hearts when we hear of God blessing other countries, countries perhaps that have never had a Christian heritage? If there is then we are just like Jonah wrapped up in ourselves only concerned about ourselves, our family our country, our western lifestyle. All we long for is that touch from God for our land, but we find it hard to rejoice when we hear the news of others in other lands coming to know the Lord.

Let me finish by asking us all how would we respond to God's question in verse 11. I am not asking us how we think we should answer it but how do we answer it. Then once we have done that ask ourselves is our answer in accordance with the message that comes clearly from the book of Jonah. What adjustments do we have to make to our lives, what priorities do we have to sort you in order to bring our lives into line with God's word.

The message of the book of Jonah is a painful one for the church today. But will we respond to it, will we rid out of our lives the prejudices that are there. Finally will we by God's grace seek to have a passion for lost souls, and will we do whatever we have to do in order to make both prayer and evangelism important priorities within our lives.

Amen