

Jonah: Part 4

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 August 2018

Preacher: James Ross

[0:00] Jonah chapter 4, as we finish looking at Jonah, the reluctant prophet and a merciful God. So we're going to read the whole of chapter 4 and then think about it together.

Jonah chapter 4. In fact, we'll read chapter 3 verse 10 into chapter 4. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish.

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sin and calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it's better for me to die than to live.

But the Lord replied, Have you any right to be angry? Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.

[1:16] Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort. And Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered.

When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die and said, It would be better for me to die than to live.

Then 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. But the Lord said, You've been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow.

It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well.

Should I not be concerned about that great city? Amen. Now, Ian, as he was sharing his testimony, was talking about life in a family.

[2:32] And I want us to think, how do children pick up family values? You can think about your own family context, perhaps. There is usually some kind of process.

Perhaps we are training and we're giving lessons, if we're parents, looking to model patterns of speech and behavior that we feel it's appropriate for them to imitate.

And there's also that process of inviting children to reflect on where things don't go so well. And maybe asking questions like, How could we have done that differently?

How could you have reacted differently in that moment? Now, as we look at the whole story of Jonah, in a sense, that's what we have.

We have God the Father helping Jonah to see and adopt his own family values. God the Father really wants to highlight in Jonah's life for Jonah, the importance of mercy and grace.

[3:35] So as we've gone through the first three chapters of the book of Jonah, we've seen in God's actions what mercy looks like. Mercy towards Jonah, even while he was disobedient and was thrown overboard into a storm, sent by God.

God in mercy sent a fish to swallow Jonah as an act of grace, giving him a second chance as a prophet. We've seen mercy shown to wicked, pagan Nineveh, and that they were spared the judgment because they turned to God in repentance.

And we hear in chapter four, God as Father now inviting Jonah to reflect on his attitude to the mercy of God as it's seen towards Nineveh, asking him a couple of times, do you have the right to be angry?

So Jonah's story is one of seeing mercy and then being pushed towards reflecting on it. And so that's what I want us to do this morning, to reflect.

How am I responding to God's mercy and grace? What limits and barriers do you and I either deliberately or unconsciously put on the mercy of God?

[5 : 01] And is God's mercy towards us in Jesus something that we celebrate and share with others? So two questions for us to reflect on as we work our way through this passage.

First one, coming out of the first four verses, do I take God's mercy for granted? Verse four begins with Jonah greatly displeased and angry.

Why? What's prompted his anger? And even going back in our story, what has prompted his earlier disobedience when he ran away from God?

And maybe the surprising answer is it's because of what he has seen and what he knows of the character and nature of his God. There is something that he knows about God that makes him not want to go to Nineveh in the first place and makes him really disappointed with what happened.

So does Jonah think that his God is some kind of a tyrant, some kind of a monster? Is that why he pulls away from God? No, it's quite the opposite, isn't it?

[6 : 10] Look with me at verse two. It sounds like a wonderful statement of faith, but actually it's the basis of Jonah's complaint. I knew that you're a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

He knew that it was in God's heart to pour out mercy on violent, evil enemies in Nineveh, and he wants no part of it. In verse three, we discover that he would rather die than live, knowing that God has spared his enemies.

And so the Lord invites him to think about his attitude, have you any right to be angry? Knowing what you know about me, do you have the right to be angry?

It's really interesting. Jonah obviously knows his Bible, and he's got this wonderful picture of God's character that God himself has revealed to Moses.

So way back in the book of Exodus, Exodus chapter 34, verses six and seven, there's a point where Moses asked to see the glory of God and God says, you can't see my glory, but I'll tell you my name.

[7 : 28] And it's exactly what we have here. When that happens in the story of Israel is really important because God has saved Israel, shown mercy to Israel, rescuing them from slavery, brought them to Mount Sinai so that he could enter into a covenant with them so that he could be their God and they might be his people.

But while Moses is away for a few weeks talking to God, the people have built, constructed a golden image of a calf to represent God.

So while they're turning away from God and his ways, God reveals his character. God reveals himself after sparing Israel from the destruction that he said he was going to bring on them.

He said to Moses, because of what they've done, I'm going to destroy them and start again. And Moses prayed and God said, well, I'll continue with the people. So here's the thing.

They knew, Jonah knew, and Israel knew in their history that it was because of this quality of God that they continued to exist, but he wasn't happy when it was shown to others.

[8 : 39] That they experienced grace. Jonah experienced grace in his life, God's kindness and love that he didn't deserve or merit. That he knew what it was to have the compassion of God.

God looking down, seeing their need, seeing their distress, and acting out of goodness for them.

That Jonah knew, and Israel knew, the patience of God. That they weren't judged instantly when they'd messed up and when they'd walked away from God.

Instead, they had an opportunity to repent. That time and time again, the story of Israel, and the story of Jonah is one of them knowing love. Living in the overflow of God's infinite love.

Of receiving forgiveness. Of knowing that the verdict of judgment against them was changed by God's merciful grace. They knew that.

Jonah knew that in his own experience. And here's again where we see this kind of disconnect in Jonah's life. And maybe it's something that we have ourselves sometimes, where he doesn't display God's family values, when he doesn't pass on what he's received himself.

[9 : 48] So these qualities that have saved Israel, these qualities of God that means Jonah isn't at the bottom of the ocean, he doesn't celebrate that in the lives of the people of Nineveh.

He's enjoyed the mercy, but he wants God to place limits on it for others. It's for us, yes, but not for those people over there. He fails to remember that he needs God's mercy every bit as much as the city of Nineveh does.

Now at this point, it's very easy to point the finger at Jonah. He sounds like a spoiled brat in truth, but it can become very convicting when we turn the spotlight on ourselves, when we think about how that attitude can play itself out in our own hearts and lives.

One problem that we see Jonah has is that he divides people into deserving and undeserving.

Maybe it's easy for us to be quick to label people as good people and as bad people.

Jonah certainly did that. Yes, of course God should show mercy to the good people, to Israel, and to people like me, but not to people like Nineveh. Look at what they've done in their past.

[11:09] Look at the way they've treated God's people. And when we label people, it then inevitably influences how we treat them, how we speak to them and speak about them, how we pray for them or fail to pray for them, how we move towards or move away from people.

Think about the leaders in Jesus' day. This is something that Jesus confronted so often. The religious leaders decided, okay, the good people that God will be pleased with are the ones who are the strict rule keepers like us.

And so they kept their distance and shut people off from receiving the mercy of God. And Jesus was so different because he spent time with the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the sinners, and they were glad to hear God's true message of grace.

There is a danger when we look at people and pass judgments on them that we then become simply judgmental, harsh people, that we can segregate ourselves.

Say, I'm only going to spend time with these people and pull away from others, to label people as no-hopers. God would never work in their life or save someone like them.

[12:27] And that's clearly what Jonah has done with the city of Nineveh. But God's grace and mercy is greater. So let's remind ourselves, there are no people so bad as to be beyond the grace of God.

Nineveh stands as an object less than that. And there are no people who are so good that they don't need God's grace and mercy. And that's what we see in the life of Jonah. There's a second problem that we see with Jonah that we can perhaps detect in our own hearts, and it's that disconnect, disconnecting the mercy that we receive from God with how we treat others.

It's why we read that parable from Jesus in Matthew 18. It's that heart that's, oh yeah, I'm happy to receive mercy and forgiveness, but I'm not going to pass it forward.

And that can happen to us when the grace of Jesus doesn't melt our hearts, it doesn't tear down barriers, when we don't realize that this is an incredible gift that we don't deserve.

If we think it's our right, then it will keep us being harsh towards others. Ask yourself the question, is there somebody who I am bearing a grudge towards?

[13:45] Is there somebody that I refuse to forgive even when I know that God has forgiven me? Or am I jealous of God's kindness shown to other people?

That I want mercy, and I don't like it when this other person seems to prosper. Perhaps connected to that, does the gospel, the good news of God sending Jesus to save sinners, does that bring joy and hope?

Or does it leave me cold? Have I become so familiar and so comfortable and feel like this is just something I deserve, that it doesn't move me and change me?

I think this is a really convicting chapter of God's word, because honestly, when you start to think about it, certainly in my case, I discover I'm maybe not as far away from Jonah as I would like to be. We were up in Sky a couple of weeks ago visiting my folks, and especially last year, it was all over the news, just how busy Sky is becoming with tourism, and it's a real struggle now to find any places that are still kind of hidden gems where you can go, and there's not going to be crowds of people and cars everywhere, and it seems to be a thing.

[15:11] We're having lots of conversations with different people from Sky, and when there's limited space, it's a relatively small island, and there's limited resources, it's a fact that when other people are enjoying it, when lots of other people are enjoying it, my pleasure of it is then diminished, and so it can be very easy to have the attitude that, hang on a minute, this is my island.

Get out of the way. I want to go and see the nice places. And you know, sometimes we can do that with the mercy of God. We can hoard it for ourselves as if it was some kind of limited resource.

But God's mercy is infinite, and there should be deep joy in our hearts when other people come to experience that mercy too.

So let's examine our hearts. Let's reflect. Do I take God's mercy for granted? And if we do, what's the antidote?

How do we get beyond that? When we're grudging mercy to others, when we are living with a sense of bitterness and a lack of forgiveness, where do we go with that? Now, of course, the answer is that we need to reflect time and again on the gospel to remind ourselves, you think about the character of God that we find in verse 2.

[16:32] Remind ourselves, God has poured out His grace on us in sending Jesus to be our Savior. That He has chosen to show mercy to us in responding to us when we were blind and lost and dead in our sin.

That He is the God who, as Father, continues to be patient with us when we mess up time and time again. When He showed us incredible love and holding nothing back in sending Jesus to die for us on the cross, showing us that great and costly forgiveness.

When we look at Jonah, we realize that He's not the prophet we need. Jonah is someone who would rather die than see enemies receive mercy. But then we look at Jesus and we see that Jesus did die so that enemies, so that you and me could become friends of God and know the great mercy of God.

Second question to reflect on is this one. Does God's mercy shape my priorities? Verse 5 onwards, we find Jonah in verse 5.

He went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade, and waited to see what would happen to the city.

[18:05] So in case you hadn't noticed, in Edinburgh it's festival time. So there's lots of people going to various shows, lots of people looking around for the best seat in the house, looking for the best kind of shows.

What's the show that Jonah is looking for? He's received his ticket to see this wonderful display of God's mercy to Nineveh, but he'd quite happily swap it for a show of God's swift justice.

He's sitting there thinking, maybe God will change his mind. Maybe the city will be overturned. And again, what we see in the rest of the chapter is God the Father's patience with Jonah through his reluctance and through his hard heart.

He actually gives him an object lesson in order to help him to reflect and to change his attitude to the mercy of God.

It's one of those places, again, where the Bible is so painfully honest, where Jonah is painfully honest. You know, we're not presented with caricatures of spiritual superheroes who never get things wrong, but rather we get very honest pictures of God's people so we remember that everybody needs the grace and mercy of God.

[19:22] So Jonah gets an object lesson. We see a theme of the Lord God providing. Just as in chapter one, it was God who provided the fish to swallow Jonah, an act of grace towards him.

So we see in verse six, the Lord God provided a vine and that vine gave very valued shade. Jonah was very happy about the vine.

But then verse seven, God provides the worm to destroy that shade. And then in verse eight, he provides a scorching east wind.

And Jonah is outraged. I am angry enough to die about the loss of this vine.

And God picks up on that heart attitude and uses it to employ a lesser to greater argument. Well, Jonah, if you care about this vine, which you didn't plant, you didn't look after, it sprung up and then it was gone.

[20:26] If you care for that, shouldn't I care for the great city of Nineveh? Shouldn't I care for those people that I made that are image bearers of God, those that don't know their left hand from their right, meaning they're morally and spiritually ignorant?

Shouldn't I care? I don't want to extend mercy to them, to those who'd be lost without God's intervention. And so Jonah's heart is being challenged.

How is he going to respond this time to God's mercy when God says, should I not be concerned about that great city in verse 11?

But notice, we don't hear Jonah's answer. We're kind of left with one of those cliffhanger moments. Will Jonah grasp the greatness of God's mercy?

Will he learn to celebrate it in the lives of others? At this stage in his story, we can see that God's mercy hadn't gone all the way down to his heart to really change his outlook, to change his priority. [21 : 37] His priority was his personal comfort more than people's conversion. He was more ready to see a vine preserved than to see 120,000 lives saved by God.

Again, he was very happy to receive more examples of God's mercy and kindness to him, but he wasn't yet ready to rejoice at God's mercy to outsiders.

One of the things about cliffhangers, and Jesus does it sometimes with his parables as well, they invite us into the story. How does the story go in our lives?

Again, I find it very convicting to see, here is Jonah focused on his very small problem. He's a bit hot and bothered. Failing to see the potential devastation that Nineveh had been saved from.

And again, it seems crazy, and he seems like a spoiled brat, and then we ask ourselves, well, hang on a minute, how much time and money and energy do we spend on first world problems?

[22 : 54] How easily are we distracted from the stuff that really matters? What is it that absorbs our time? What is it that gets our hearts?

I wonder, do you need to pray with me for a heart that hurts more for those who are lost and who are far from God and who have no interest in knowing Jesus Christ is Lord?

To pray that we would be moving towards people because we know that nothing matters more than knowing Jesus Christ as Lord, rather than getting absorbed in the relatively small and trivial stuff of our lives compared to that eternal perspective.

Again, to borrow from the imagery of the festival, think about those shows that are going on all the time. God's incredible show of mercy and grace in Jesus to the world is not something to watch from the stands.

It's not something to politely applaud or like Jonah sometimes to get frustrated by. Rather by faith, we're invited onto the stage. We're invited to be players, to receive that mercy and then to share that mercy with others, to be directed by the Lord Jesus, to live lives that are all about demonstrating the mercy and love of God in our communities.

[24 : 29] Again, as we finish our time with Jonah, we're left here with Jonah at a weeping prophet because a city, Nineveh, turns to God and is saved.

He's not the prophet we need. We need Jesus, the true prophet, priest and king, the one who weeps over Jerusalem because that city would reject him and would face destruction because they would turn their back on their saviour and king.

Amen.