

Jonah 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: 27 November 2022

Preacher: Bing Nieh

[0 : 00] Jonah 4. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry, and he prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?

That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish. For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. And the Lord said, Do you do well to be angry?

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade till he should see what would become of the city.

Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah. That it may be a shade over his head to save him from his discomfort.

[1 : 04] So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant so that it withered.

And when the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind. And the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, It is better for me to die than to live.

But God said to Jonah, Do you do well to be angry for the plant? And he said, Yes, I do well to be angry. Angry enough to die.

And the Lord said, You pity the plant for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night.

And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left.

[2 : 05] And also much cattle. This is the word of the Lord. Father, we come to you.

And we pray that the word of the Lord may come to us. And so, would your spirit illumine your word. May our hearts be receptive to it.

May we hear. Not only hear, but understand and be changed. Help us to this end, we pray. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. The book of Jonah should have and could have ended at the end of chapter 3.

By the end of chapter 3, the short book has recorded, arguably, the most successful preaching ministry of any of Israel's prophets.

A doom and gloom message of confrontation had led the capital city of Assyria, the mighty Assyrian empire to repent, or the capital city to repent of her moral evil.

[3 : 29] Even her king's submission. The people have received merciful pardon from God, a God who holds not only individuals responsible for their actions, but certainly nations and kingdoms.

The first three chapters have shown us that God is merciful. And his mercy is on a mission to rescue and save those in helpless circumstances.

What is mercy? Well, most generally, it's God's mercy is his tenderhearted, loving compassion for people.

It is his tenderness of heart toward the needy. The range of the word carries with it this loving kindness and goodness. And if we stand back and look at the book as a whole, we are shown that God in his mercy is able to save us from storms, literally and figuratively.

Regardless of how great the tempest, his mercy is more. Astonishingly, even Jonah's rebellion, it led to a boat filled with Gentile sailors that came to salvation.

[4 : 42] In spite of his defiance, Jonah himself had experienced salvation from the most unusual of deliverances. God is buried in a fish for three days, as though dead, only to be regurgitated to new life for his own salvation.

Regardless of how lost your condition, even to the point of death, God is able to save you in his mercy. Regardless of how your sins may have abounded or how vile they are, God is able to save you from judgment.

We saw then chapter three, the first three chapters shout that God's mercy exceeds any human predicament.

The first three chapters attest to the saving power of God, seemingly irrespective of even the messenger himself by whom the message comes. It testifies to what is asserted in chapter two, verse nine, salvation belongs to the Lord.

It's an indiscriminate mercy. Unaware Gentile sinners, caught in a storm, reluctant Jewish prophets, rebelling against God, immoral empires that are enemies.

[6 : 07] God's mercy is extensive and encompassing. It's worth pausing to mention this morning that if you're looking for mercy in life, sympathy, compassion, one to be mindful of your condition, you'll find it in the God of the Bible.

Whether you be an individual, small family, or even entire city, desperation is met, can be met with divine mercy.

The whole world of the book of Jonah receives mercy. And for that, we ought to rejoice. If there were a fourth chapter, it should be one of jubilation and celebration.

Chapter four, verse one should read. It please, or on the heels of chapter three, verse 10, and I'll just read it again. When God saw what they did, namely repent, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them.

And he did not do it. Chapter four, verse one should read. And it pleased Jonah exceedingly. And he was joyful.

[7 : 22] It should rightfully follow up with a song of jubilation, adoration. However, we're shocked to find not a song of adoration, but a speech of objection.

Instead of rejoicing in God, we find resentment toward God. This is what makes Jonah chapter four. So astounding.

I've tagged this morning's sermon, mad at mercy, mad at mercy. And there are two points I want to establish for us this morning regarding mercy, particularly God's mercy.

The first is this mercy. God's mercy. It's scandalous. It's a scandalous mercy. The scandal of mercy. And secondly, I want us to see the mission. Mercy, the mission of mercy. Within this final chapter. And certainly the entire book, we find the mysterious workings of God's mercy.

[8 : 27] It's marvelous nature. And it's a, it's mission. The scandal of mercy. Verses one to four. Jonah is not the first person in the Bible to be mad at God.

King David was actually angry at God. I don't know if you recall the time where he was trying to bring the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem.

And he's prevented from doing so. And it's the Bible writer records for us there in second Samuel that God prevented the Ark from going into Jerusalem.

And David, the king got angry with God. The book of Job at times could argue, it could be argued to carry an angry tone as Job seeks to deal with his immense suffering.

There are places in the New Testament as well, where the anger of religious leaders are implied by the text. So the anger of an individual toward God is not something new.

[9 : 25] The book of Jonah is significant in that the anger of it, of an individual is more explicit than any other place in the Bible. You see it repeatedly that he is angry.

Jonah is angry because he, God is actually acting contrary to Jonah's desire. It's incredibly ironic because as God's anger subsides at the end of chapter three, Jonah's anger is triggered.

Why? Because he's experiencing the scandal of mercy. Ironically, although Jonah knew God, he was unsettled by God.

And here we're given the explanation of why Jonah ran in chapter one. He says he did not go to Nineveh because he knew God would spare Nineveh.

That's why I fled. I made haste to flee in chapter one, verse two, for I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

[10 : 36] Jonah conceived that God would pardon and relent. So he fled. A doom and gloom message would prove to be untrue. He anticipated.

And Jonah would be made out to be a liar. He knew that if he went and he called out to Nineveh, God would relent. God would not execute his judgment and his justice against evil, but would rather

exercise mercy.

And this infuriated Jonah. God, I knew you were merciful. And the history of Israel attests to this, this divine disclosure in verse two, that Jonah sites is actually found in the 34th chapter of Exodus, following this grand idolatrous incident in the history of the nation, having come out of Egypt, receiving, having received God's word as they were emerging as God's nation.

And, they were only shortly thereafter to displace his rule with a golden calf. The anger of the Lord was now kindled. And he said to Moses, the leader in Exodus 32 verse 10.

Now, therefore, God says to Moses, leave me alone. That my wrath may burn hot against the people of Israel, that I might consume them.

[12:02] Moses intercedes. God's judgment subsides as atonement is made. And Moses requests that God reaffirm his commitment to Israel. And it is here that God discloses himself as he passes before Moses.

And it's important verse. You need to highlight it in Exodus 34. It reads, This becomes a foundational text in our Bibles, particularly the Old Testament.

It's littered throughout the Old Testament. You find it in the Pentateuch. You find it in the writings.

You find it in the prophets. Numbers, 2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, the Psalms, Joel, Micah.

It's arguably one of the central texts to all the Bible. Why? Because it tells us who God is. God tells us who he is. And as Israel received mercy following her rebellion, Nineveh now receives the same. This was scandalous. God, you're Israel's protector. You're her defender. You're her upholder, deliverer. Nineveh is an enemy and ought to receive her due.

[13:31] God, this is not a time for mercy. This is a time for judgment. Nineveh deserved it. They deserved it because they were wicked.

They deserved it because they were Israel's violent oppressors. They deserved it because they were not God's people. They deserved it, to be frank, because the world would simply be better off without them.

And this is the scandal of mercy. that even God's enemies receive his mercy.

This is his divine prerogative, that he would look out in all the earth.

And what he said to Moses, I will have, I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious. I will show mercy on whom I want to show mercy.

[14:33] And here, when justice is expected, is expected, mercy is despised. When we see wickedness, we want justice.

When evil is evident, we need retribution. When violence is so perverse, wrath is invited. It will not take long to incite one of us to anger.

You follow current events, you scroll through your feeds, and you listen to reports. Perpetrators abound, heinous offenses avail, and we shout justice for the victim, justice for the oppressed and the offended.

And in a day when our cries are for earthly and immediate justice abound, mercy is diverted. Jonah could not fathom the statement that would come from the Apostle James later in our Bibles, that mercy somehow triumphs over judgment.

You see, it doesn't sit well with us, does it? Mercy. If God exists, then he certainly sees all this, doesn't he? Why doesn't he act upon it?

[15:45] He seemingly restrains himself. Yes, vengeance is the Lord's, and he will repay, but why not now? Is he aware of these global issues?

Is he oblivious to how regimes oppress nations, breed violence, and bloodshed abounds in our streets? We must admit, mercy kind of bewilders us.

It's undeserved. It's unmerited. It's unfair. It's unpredictable. We're not sure how it's dispensed, but we certainly have opinions on who should receive it, don't we?

And Jonah chapter four exists for this purpose, to show the perversity of the human heart. How bent and how crooked are our judgments?

Chapter four in Jonah is here to show you and I, the reader, that divine mercy, we mock it because of how it is distributed.

[16:56] And this is the great irony of mercy, because Jonah rejoices in the mercy he received in his own preservation, but is infuriated the preservation of others.

Mercy, we are its recipients. But we also insist on being its distributors as well. I freely receive it, but I certainly should have the right to determine who gets it.

Can you imagine that? Jesus died for me, but he didn't die for you. He died for us, but certainly not them.

And God will have none of that. He will have mercy on whom he has mercy. Grace on whom he has grace. It's scandalous.

The scandal of mercy. For the rest of the chapter, verses five to the end, I want us to spend the remainder of our time here.

[17:58] The mission of mercy. The mission of mercy. What is its purpose? Jonah, Jonah, we find, sets out camp, sets up camp on the east side of the city.

In verse five, hoping to witness its demise. The timeline is unclear, but it seems as if the city's transformation came within the 40-day prophetic announcement.

That he goes into Nineveh, announces its demise within 40 days, and maybe a few days later, there's already a revival breaking out, and Jonah doesn't know what to do, and he goes out, and he camps outside the city.

Though he has been told Nineveh will be spared, his heart is so hard that he seems to hold out hope that it will be destroyed.

The reluctant and rebellious prophet is still steaming, so much so that he would rather die, in verse three. However, in God's mercy, he's not going to abandon such an angry and cold heart.

[19:04] Having spared Jonah from death in chapter two, he now spares the hot-headed, pun intended, prophet from discomfort in chapter four. God orchestrates an object lesson.

In God's kindness, he appoints a vine that grows up alongside Jonah to provide shelter from the sun. Jonah's anger turns to gladness, however it's short-lived, as God appoints a worm now to devour the vine, followed by an appointment of a scorching wind to oppress Jonah.

Satisfaction now turns to self-loathing, according to verse eight. He's angered once again, not by God's pardon, but now by a dead garden plant.

The object lesson is telling, for reveals the prophet's heart and our heart. In a moment, he's given a gift, a blessing, we may say, which leads to great gladness, but as quickly as it emerges, it disappears.

Jonah rejoices in its provision and is enraged by its withdrawal. And here we see something at work. Relief and removal are both acts of God's mercy to accomplish something greater than Jonah knows.

[20:23] Allow me to explain. Jonah chapter four is God's pursuit of a disgruntled prophet and an estranged son. Mercy is on a mission.

And if you only read the first three chapters, you would be like, oh, I see the mission to save Gentile sailors, to save a reluctant prophet and to save a rebellious nation.

But here in chapter four, divine mercy is being demonstrated for a particular purpose. It's this.

Mercy in chapter four is after the heart of the prophet.

If God was a utilitarian and he just wanted tasks to be done, it'd be easy. This task is accomplished regardless of the instrument. But the book would have ended, like I said, in chapter three.

However, chapter four is given so that we can see that it goes beyond doing work for God. He's inviting us to worship God.

[21:31] You can see it this way. Mercy saves Jonah in chapter two, but mercy is sanctifying Jonah in chapter four. God wants our labors, but God also wants Jonah's love.

The heart of Jonah was still far from God. The aim for Jonah was that he would share in the pity that God had for his enemies. mercy was on a mission to bridge this gap.

And so it is with our lives as well. You and I may think of mercy as relief in troubling times. I'm aching, maybe physically.

I need physical relief. Or I'm hurting financially. I need financial relief. Or I'm burdened emotionally. I need emotional relief.

But God's mercy, interestingly, not only brings good things, but it removes good things.

[22:44] You see that. Let me give you the vine to bring you gladness. Let me give you X, Y, Z for your prosperity, your gladness, your joy, your enthusiasm.

Relationships may appear for a season and disappear in the next. Profits may increase for a moment and be withdrawn in the next. The full life may be emptied in a moment.

But these are all mercies. Scandalous and subversive as they may be. In the language of Job, should we not say, shall we not receive just good from God?

And shall we not also receive evil or what we interpret to be evil? He gives and he takes away. Why? So the beneficiary doesn't become so dependent on the gift, but ultimately the giver. You see, our successes can actually be stumbling blocks. Our plants provide shade, but they may also hinder our worship.

[24 : 01] So God is out to confront Jonah. You set out to do it in duty. The word of the Lord came to Jonah. Arise, go to Nineveh and preach to it.

That's your duty. But you failed to do it while delighting in God. The New Testament parallel to Jonah is the parable of the prodigal son.

There are two sons, Luke tells us in chapter 15 of his gospel and you may recount the parable. Two sons, a younger one, demands his inheritance while his father is still living.

He squanders it in wild living. He wastes it. A famine hits. Desperation commences. He's eating pig food. And he comes to his senses and he decides, it's actually better to be a servant or a slave in my father's house.

And I will place my fate into the mercy of my father and I will return. Upon his return, he's joyfully received, lavishly celebrated and abundantly restored.

[25 : 08] And the other son, the older son, is out in the field. And when he hears of the party or the welcome and the reception of his younger brother, he's outraged.

In his anger, he confronts his dad and he argues, Dad, I've upheld my familial duty all these years. I resent, and he resents how the father has fully accepted the younger son back into the household. The older son successfully fulfilled his familial obligation and duty, but he failed to understand the father's heart and delight.

He missed the father's heart. And here, Jonah misses it as well. See, God's mercy is at work in order that he may not make us merely creatures of duty.

Certainly, there are duties, responsibilities as Christians. His mercy exists not only to instill us a sense of duty in us, but also, ultimately, to do what pleases his heart, to become creatures who delight, who share in his heart.

[26 : 30] See, Jonah could preach out of duty to God, or Jonah could preach out of delight for God. They're very different.

The task was accomplished, but they are not the same thing. We can all recognize individuals that do things out of duty rather than desire. Any parent can attest to this reality.

One could recognize a child doing a chore out of resentful obedience, obedience, and one could recognize a child completing a chore out of willing delight.

Well, the final two verses are divine speech in the book. God would have the last word. God confronts the attitude in Jonah's heart.

Jonah felt for the plant, but he failed to feel for the people. One writer puts it this way, Jonah is filled with compassion regarding a mere plant, yet remains hard-hearted towards the entire population of a city.

[27 : 39] He shows concern for one small item in God's creation, yet fails to care for a large mass of people who like Jonah himself were made in the divine image.

To paraphrase God's concern, it goes something like this, if you feel compassion about the destruction of the vine or the plant which you did not create, shouldn't I, God speaking, care about the destruction of people and animals that I did create?

And here, God highlights the distance between human mercy, human compassion, and heavenly compassion.

Regardless, let me assert, regardless of how merciful you and I may feel at one time or another, it will not outmercy our father in heaven.

While Jonah pitied a plant, God was pitying a people. While we may lament and pity loved ones, God pities his very enemies.

[28 : 49] While we may pity those who we know and can identify and can observe, God pities the unknown, the forgotten, the unseen.

While our mercy, though commendable, is selective and limited. God's mercy is indiscriminate and boundless.

The argument, the inconsistency doesn't hold up. Jonah you have compassion, a little bit of compassion on yourself.

My compassion, my mercy far exceeds yours. God's mercy was for his enemies.

God's mercy was for Jonah, a rebel. God's mercy was for both Gentile and Jew. God's mercy is for you.

[29 : 54] It's on a mission. His mercy has a mission. And as the Bible unfolds, it will record for us another individual, another prophet, who one day would sit atop a mountain and he would come to another great city, not Nineveh.

and as Jonah arrived reluctantly to call out against Nineveh, this prophet, this newer prophet, arrives willingly to call out for it.

As Jonah sat on the east of this great city to await its destruction, another prophet sat east of the city crying and weeping for her salvation.

Jonah wanted to die because Nineveh was delivered. Jesus would come to die so Jerusalem would be delivered. Buried not in the fish but in the rock.

Swallowed up not because of his disobedience but swallowed up because of his obedience. dead for three days the Bible tells us lifeless for three nights sealed in a tomb until death could no longer hold him and had to vomit the Son of God out.

[31 : 24] See the mission of mercy is embodied and exemplified in the sending of the Lord Jesus. The writers of the New Testament provided all the meaning that we need regarding Jesus.

but God being rich in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses!

and sins he made us alive together in Christ by grace you have been saved but when the goodness and the loving kindness of God our Savior appeared he saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness but according to his own mercy by the washing and regeneration the renewal of the Holy Spirit blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ according to his great mercy he has caused us to be born again for we don't have a high priest who's unable to sympathize with us in our weakness but we have one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin let us therefore in confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy to find grace and help in time of need when you consider these verses it's actually really hard to be mad at mercy to be mad at mercy and so here you have a book about the mission of mercy its ability to save us in whatever tempest its ability to deliver you from death its ability to change an entire nation and its ability and its pursuit to seek after the rebellious heart of an individual well as the psalmist says early goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life and may it be so father we thank you for this morning together and as we see a prophet angered by your mercy we're confronted of our by our own hearts we can certainly identify some when we think not ought to receive that mercy and yet!

you demonstrate your love for us in this while we were even your enemies you died for us and so may that mercy abound in our own lives may we be merciful as our heavenly father is merciful may we seek mercy as you dispense it may we hold it out to those around us a free mercy from God above and so help us this and we pray as we respond we ask that you would really tune our hearts to sing your praise we ask these things in Jesus name amen