

Jonah's Mission (6): Jonah's Not Happy Ending

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[0 : 00] Perhaps you could turn back with me to the book of Jonah and chapter 4 where Jonah gets angry.

Jonah gets angry. I wonder whether you've ever been genuinely angry like Jonah was. I don't just mean peeved like we all get from time to time but furious. Perhaps angry enough to do something bad to yourself or to someone else. For many of us including the prophet Jonah, anger isn't an unwelcome guest. Anger is a besetting sin. It's something not to be welcomed. It's something of which to be repented and against which to battle. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised at an angry Jonah because angry men make strange decisions like running away from God's call like Jonah did in chapter 1. And yet there's another level at which we should be very surprised at Jonah's anger because this is the same Jonah who in the belly of the whale clung to the steadfast love of God and through whose preaching God sparked the greatest revival in human history.

If I were a psychiatrist, I'd have my work cut out with Jonah or maybe not because as we're going to see, many of us, if not all of us, aren't altogether unlike him.

If I may remind you, the book of Jonah is God's biblical manual of mission and evangelism. God's biblical manual of mission and evangelism. We've learned things from Jonah we would not have learned anywhere else. Perhaps the most insightful lesson we've learned is this, and this is going back a few months before I went off. Before God will do a work of grace through a man, he must first of all do a work of grace in a man. God has a fashioning work to do in each one of us to make us men and women who are devoted to mission and evangelism. And like as not, that work is unsettling.

But here we are at the end of a breathtaking journey geographically, psychologically, and spiritually, and Jonah's angry. He is furious. Give him out a carpet, and he'll chew it bare.

[2 : 54] In some ways, Jonah 4 is a very sad place to end such a momentous story. But in other ways, in deeper ways of God's love for all the nations of the world, it is the best place.

For although Jonah chapter 4 might be the end of this book, it is the beginning of a far greater book altogether. Well, let's see three things tonight as we wrap up our studies in the book of Jonah.

First of all, furious with God, verses 1 through 4. Furious with God. Second, foolishness toward God, verses 5 through 9. And then thirdly, finished by God, verses 10 and 11. Furious with God, foolish toward God, finished by God, finished by God. Oh, and by the way, that greater book of which Jonah 4 is just the beginning, it is the book of Gentile mission. And it's still being written today.

First of all, furious with God. Furious with God. It takes a long time to get to know someone.

I've been married for 25 years, and I still get surprised by things I don't know about my wife. Now, perhaps Jonah's not quite so complicated as my wife or any other woman, because in these verses, we get to know him very well. He reveals what makes him tick, and it's not very pleasant.

[4 : 35] Remember, God has used him to stage a great revival. Over 100,000 people have moved from death to life. But then we read in verse 1, it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

Now, that's not the response we expected, especially after Jonah's change of heart in the belly of that great fish, surely. Jonah 2 records the dependence of a man who knew God had been right, the record of a man after new obedience. Sure, the Jonah 4 verse 1, Jonah, isn't the same Jonah of Jonah 2, but he is.

And at this moment in time, he is livid. We might have expected him to be at least a little upbeat.

After all, it's not every day God uses you to do something so amazing. But he's so angry, he prays in verse 3, and Peter read this beautifully. Please take my life from me, for it's better for me to die than to live.

What's the problem? This is where we get to know Jonah, but not just Jonah. Because as we've learned throughout the whole book of Jonah, he stands as a representative of the nation of Israel. The Israel which God had loved and called to spread the message of his steadfast love and faithfulness to all the peoples of the world. But instead of doing so, Israel had selfishly hoarded God's treasures to themselves. They had chosen to forget the covenant that their God had made with Abraham included blessings for the whole world. Rather than turn outward in loving invitation to the nations, Israel had turned inward in hateful xenophobia against the nations. They didn't want to love the nations. They wanted to destroy the nations. And the last thing Israel wanted was for the nations to experience the love and blessings of their God. They wanted to keep all that to themselves. In many ways, the Israel of the Old Testament was the wealthiest nation on earth because it was loved by God. But rather than sharing that wealth, which is what God had commanded them to do, they hoarded it to themselves. Not to put too fine a point upon it, and with all reference, their attitude to the world was to hell with them all.

That had been Jonah's problem all along, and now he makes it plain. Oh Lord, verse 2, is this not what I said when I was yet in my own country?

[7 : 37] That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

You see, Jonah knew only too well what would happen when he went to Nineveh. Jonah knew that his God would show them mercy when all he wanted was for God to destroy them.

Jonah ran away from God, not just because he hated the Ninevites, but because at base level, he hated the idea of a God of grace and of mercy.

You know, the more you think about it, the more Jonah reminds you of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Remember the story of how the younger son wasted his inheritance in riotous living, but when he returned home, his father welcomed him with forgiveness, mercy, and love?

What, as the older son, who had never put a foot wrong, became resentful of his father's mercy?

Jonah, representing Israel, is that older brother.

[8 : 46] Resentful not just of the younger son, but even more resentful of a father who could show such love, mercy, and grace to undeserving sinners like the Ninevites.

That's why the religious leaders crucified our Lord. That's why they rejected the message of the apostles. That's why they directed their fury toward the church.

It wasn't just because they hated the Gentiles, but because they hated the idea of a God who could be so merciful, so loving, and so gracious to us to extend salvation even to Israel's enemies.

On a regular basis, we need to all take a long, hard look at ourselves and ask, Am I Jonah? Am I Jonah?

Does the sheer grace of God which gives generously without finding fault make me mad? Would I prefer a God who rewards me directly according to my sins and my righteousness to the God whose face I see in Jesus Christ?

[10 : 05] A God whose love is conditional upon my performance, my background, my culture, and not a God whose unconditional love will show no favoritism to any man?

The Lord says in verse 4, Jonah, Do you do well to be angry?

Do you do well to be angry at me? Having gazed at the suffering of the Son of God on the cross, dying to take away our sins, and having looked inwards at the darkness of our own sinful hearts, do we not realize that the only God there is, the only God we need, is the God of grace and love, of beauty and righteousness, mercy and compassion.

Jonah, Jonah, if he'd been thinking straight, would have thought that also. He's furious with God. But then secondly, in verses 5 through 9, foolish toward God. Foolish toward God. He's an angry man, Jonah is.

[11 : 24] He's furious. When we're angry, we are more liable to lose control of ourselves and compound our fury by making foolish decisions. In verse 5, Jonah's doing what toddlers do.

He sulks. He's in a booth, to use a good Scottish word. And he's gone east from Nineveh. He's made a shelter for himself, given some shade, while he waits to see whether God's going to pour down brimstone on the city of Nineveh.

While he's there, God causes a plant to grow up over his booth. The booth that he gave, he built for himself to give him shade.

And we read in verse 6, Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant that God caused to grow up above his shelter. You know what's happening here is that God's giving him time out to think. Think, Jonah. Use your head, Jonah. You're out in the desert, Jonah. You're under a burning sun, Jonah. You've made for yourself a shelter, Jonah. Doesn't that spark anything in your mind?

[12:35] One of the most important Jewish festivals of the year was called the Festival of Booths, or shelters. We read about it in Leviticus 23, verses 33 to 43.

It was a time of great celebration, of worship and reflection for the whole nation of Israel. I summarize it from Leviticus 23, 42 and 43.

God says, You shall dwell in your booths, your shelters, for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.

I am the Lord your God. So the Festival of Booths, or shelters, was an annual reminder of God's saving grace toward the nation of Israel in releasing them from their slavery in Egypt.

The booths are a reminder to Jonah, or should be a reminder to Jonah, of God's gracious salvation. That while Israel was altogether weak, undeserving, and in slavery, God redeemed them by his strong hand from Egypt.

[13:56] They didn't deserve salvation any more than the Ninevites did now. The only reason God saved them was because he loved them.

Now, Jonah, you've made yourself a booth in the desert, a little bit like the booths you make every year in Israel during the Festival of Booths. Shouldn't that remind you that it's by grace you've been saved, not by works, so that no man may boast?

How can you forget? How can you be so foolish as to forget that you and your people have been saved by grace? Unless God was the kind of God you're angry with, you would still be making bricks without straw in the fires of Egypt's sun.

And then the plant God causes to grow up, the plant the NIV identifies as a vine. This is a picture of the nation of Israel. In Psalm 80, we sung these words together.

Israel's pictured as a vine that God brought out of Egypt and planted in Canaan, a vine that covered the hills with its shade. Psalm 80, verse 10.

[15:17] The nation of Israel plucked from Egypt, planted in Canaan. And as you read through Psalm 80, you're repeatedly struck by God's gracious actions as the vine dresser.

You brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it.

Just like God caused this plant to grow over Jonah's booth, so God had caused the vine, the people of Israel, the nation of Israel to grow in Canaan. You see, there's a lot more going on in Jonah 4 than you think.

God had graciously saved his people from Egypt. That's what the imagery of the booth should have stirred up in Jonah's mind. God graciously caused his people to thrive in the land of Canaan.

That's what the imagery of the plant should have jogged in Jonah's mind. Come on, Jonah. Think. You're angry with God for being so gracious to Nineveh, but can't you see that Israel, just as much as Nineveh, depends upon the grace of God?

[16:31] That it's by grace we've been saved and by grace we stand. Well, the next morning, verse 7, God causes a worm to eat the plant and then sends a scorching east wind to beat down mercilessly on Jonah's head.

Again, it's a reminder to Jonah of how the God whose grace caused Israel to flourish in the land of Canaan can withdraw his gracious hand and bring judgment upon them instead.

It's a solemn reminder to Jonah that if we should abuse the love and grace of God and turn it into an excuse to hate others, the God who gave the blessing can take it all away.

The day is going to come, you know, for Israel when God, because of Israel's unfaithfulness to him, will break down the walls of his vineyard by the invasion of an army from the east.

Incidentally, this army from the east that shall break down the walls of the vineyard that shall invade Canaan shall come from the Assyrian Empire of which Nineveh was capital.

[17:50] The time will come when the blessing God gave to Israel, he'll take it all away. The Israelites were displaced from the land God had given them and dispersed over the entire Assyrian Empire.

The God who gave the blessing to Israel because of its unfaithfulness and its abuse of his grace took it all away.

And the thing is, I reckon that the reason Jonah got so angry with God is because he knew only too well what God was saying and doing related not merely to the death of a plant but to the fate of his nation.

Ah, foolish, foolish Jonah. Your anger is directed at the wrong person. Rather than getting angry at God for being so gracious and merciful, get angry at your own people for being so stubborn and unrepentant.

Rather than be furious at God for being God, proclaim to Israel her need to return to God in faith and trust. Your anger, Jonah, is foolishly directed toward God and everybody else when it should be trained against your own people for their lack of repentance.

[19 : 16] What more could God have done for them than he already had? He had graciously saved them from Egypt. He graciously established them in Canaan. It's not God who has changed.

It's them. He remains the same faithful, loving, gracious God he's always been but his own people have turned away from him.

Don't get angry at God, Jonah and don't get angry at them, Jonah because that's utter foolishness. I was recently told of a funeral that took place on the island of Skye.

It was that of a very well-known local man. Maybe some of you knew him. He'd been born and brought up on the island. He wasn't an incomer. He was a local man who in his youth attended the Free Church of Scotland.

Over a thousand local men attended the funeral. So think of how many people actually attended. Over a thousand local men.

[20 : 23] The whole community came out to celebrate this man's life on the island of Skye but it was not a church funeral. Apart from one singing I think it was Psalm 23 and one short prayer the gospel was intentionally pushed out of the funeral service.

Up until relatively recently Skye was at the heart of Highland Christianity. Its churches were vibrant and full and healthy.

This funeral shows the new reality not just of Skye but of vast swathes of the Highlands of Scotland today. The Highlands were once spiritually vibrant but now with just a few exceptions Scotland the Highlands in particular are a spiritual wasteland.

We might be tempted rather like Jonah to get angry at God. Might be tempted to accuse him saying how could you allow this to happen Lord? Why have you hardened the hearts of our people?

Why have you withdrawn the lamp of witness from so many communities up and down our land?

We might be tempted even to get furious at God especially when we see him blessing the mission of the gospel all over the world.

[21 : 48] I was speaking to a worker with a Langen partnership this week. Went for a long walk with him up north and he told me that every single day across the world over 130,000 people are professing Christ Jesus as Lord becoming Christians every single day.

But not in Scotland. In countries where there were once no known Christians at all Peter mentioned one in his prayer there are now thousands of house churches and millions of believers.

but not in Scotland. Perhaps rather than getting angry with God for blessing the nations and not Scotland we need to start praying more fervently for the hearts of our own countrymen to soften toward the gospel and ourselves in the church repent of all we know to be wrong.

especially the pride of resting on our own laurels and of thinking we're somehow special. We don't deserve God's grace here in Scotland any more than those who come from parts of the world when until recently the gospel had not been heard.

Let's get that seared into our hearts. We in Scotland today don't deserve God's grace any more than the Israel of Jonah's day. it is foolish to think any different.

[23 : 30] A mission heart a heart which is shaped by grace will rather than turn against God turn toward God.

It will plead for a new outpouring of his spirit upon our people that in days to come yes even here in Glasgow we might see a new Nineveh type revival.

Foolish toward God. And then finally finished by God verses 10 and 11 as always is finished by God.

Answer me a question. As a Christian what thoughts keep you up at night? What thoughts keep you up at night?

What makes you angry? Well Jonah was angry about the repentance of Nineveh. He was furious about the vine God had caused to grow and then caused to wither.

[24 : 33] Let me suggest with all reverence that God's got bigger fish to fry than vines and bigger issues to deal with than to keep that keep us up at night than should keep us up at night. In God's sovereign love and mercy for the nations his big concern here is the 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left in verse 11.

And also many cattle. Answers on a postcard as to why cattle are mentioned in that verse. Jonah is furious and he's foolish.

He has lost control but God never loses control. Rather in peace and in wisdom he orders all things for our good and for his glory. His concern is for the souls of the inhabitants of Nineveh.

He's got bigger issues to deal with than Jonah's preferences and prejudices and comforts. Jonah preferred Jews to Gentiles and his preference was for shade not for direct sunlight.

Think for a second. Just think for a second. Because they believed God's message of repentance through the prophet Jonah more than 120,000 souls moved from eternal death to eternal life in Nineveh.

[25 : 51] They believed and God declared them righteous. Gave them eternal life. Tell me what is more important in the eternal scheme of things?

The salvation of 120,000 souls or Jonah's preferences prejudices and comforts? Let me come back to the question I asked at the beginning of this point.

Very uncomfortable question. When I was writing this sermon I was thinking, ooh, this is uncomfortable and challenging. What thoughts keep you up at night? What makes you angry? are they not all too often the denial of our preferences and comforts? Let me ask the question another way.

What thoughts should keep us up at night? What thoughts should make us angry? There are eight billion human beings on planet earth and less than a quarter know anything about Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection.

[26 : 59] When it comes to the spiritual life to be found in the gospel of Jesus Christ, they don't know their right hands from their left and according to the clear teaching of the Bible, eternal punishment awaits all those who do not keep their faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Should this thought not keep us awake at night? That the overwhelming majority of our countrymen and yes, our family our friends, our workmates are headed to a lost eternity.

Should this thought not make us angry that the vast majority of human beings today have been deceived by the evil one into believing his lies? These are matters of eternal moment.

The salvation of my family, the most important thing in the world to me, the salvation of my city, the salvation of my nation, the salvation of my world, these are the most important issues.

Unfortunately and damnably regrettably is how what keeps us up at night isn't the hell-bound fate of a sinful mankind, but the denials of my preferences and my comforts.

[28 : 18] I stand to get myself into trouble now. I struggle to believe that compared to the passion of God for his gospel and his world, we would even lose a wink's sleep about being denied our preferences concerning what we sing and how we sing in public worship.

I struggle to believe that compared to the eternal punishment awaiting half a million Glaswegians this evening who do not believe in Jesus, many of whom have never heard of Jesus Christ, we get angry about the color scheme in our church or what a young person chooses to wear to church.

You need to think about this. You get someone whinging all the time about what we're singing or what we're wearing ask them the question do you really care about world mission?

I need to ask myself this and perhaps repent of my selfishness and leave the final word to God.

Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons?

God's love to God. But with this I close. I want you to notice the difference in attitude between Jonah and God.

[29 : 55] Jonah versus God. You see, we're told that the God of the Old Testament is judgmental. God's and because we're told that by others, we resent him for that.

We don't trust him. We'd rather the God of the New Testament. I do hope we've seen as we've worked our way through the book of Jonah that in fact this is a gross misrepresentation of the God

of the Old Testament, that he is the same God, old and new, the God of infinite grace and endless mercy.

I do hope we've seen that. the book of Jonah ends with a very angry humanity but a very compassionate God.

A very angry humanity but a very compassionate God, the diametric opposite of what we're told of the God of the Old Testament. And we're told that ultimately it's not man's anger which triumphs. but God's grace. If you want to take away one message from this entire book, it is this one.

[31 : 12] God's passion for the salvation of the nations shall triumph over all the anger and sinfulness of man. God's passion for the salvation of the nations shall triumph over all the anger and sinfulness of man.

And if Jonah's not enough to convince you of that, then look to the cross of God's own son. Look to the cross where God's love and the death of his son triumphed over the wickedness and malice of men.

Look to Nineveh. Look to the cross. Think of the over 130,000 people who every day are becoming Christians over our world.

God and his loving purposes will always win. Let us pray.

Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for your goodness to us. We thank you for the message of your word, a message which confronts us with the puniness of our preferences and comforts compared to the great need of a world which knows so little of Christ.

[32 : 39] Lord, we repent of our fascination with our preferences, and we strive after a new obedience to you, that all the nations of the earth, many of whom who have come here to Glasgow for a better life, will hear and respond to the good news of Jesus.

But Lord, hope we long for them, we long for ourselves, and thinking this evening, oh Lord, of those parts of Scotland which I've already mentioned, the island of Skye, which once was the heart of hiding Christianity, and now is a barren wasteland.

My own county of Sutherland, which even ten years ago had produced more ministers for the free church than any other county in Scotland, and yet today I am the only remaining minister, ethnic Sutherland minister.

Lord, will you not cause your vine to grow again in our land? Revive us, turn again toward us, oh Lord, and show us your grace. In Jesus' name we pray these things.

Amen.