

## (4) Grace despised

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[ 0 : 00 ]     Jonah chapter 4 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 might be a shade over his head to save him from his discomfort. 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. 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.

[ 1 : 38 ]     And the Lord said, You pity the plant for which you did not labour, 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 and also much cattle?

Heavenly Father, we want to rejoice this morning in the fact that you are a God who speaks. Thank you that you don't leave us in the dark wondering how to relate to you and to live in this world.

We thank you that as we come to the Bible, we can be confident that this is your word and your voice. And therefore we pray that you would do your work amongst us this morning. Please help us to listen carefully.

We pray that you would do that work of rebuking us, correcting us, teaching us and equipping us to live for you as we hear your word this morning. And we ask it for Jesus' sake.

[ 2 : 42 ]     Amen. Well, as Bruce said earlier, this is the fourth in our series of talks and the last talk in Jonah, which we've been looking at over the last few weeks or so.

And if you have been with us for the last few weeks, then you'll know that the compassion of God is at the very heart of this book. In other words, the book is not first and foremost about Jonah, although it's called Jonah, but first and foremost, it is about the compassion of God.

It shows us, doesn't it, what a nonsense it is when people say, and you do sometimes hear people say this, that the God of the Old Testament is an angry God, whereas, of course, the God we see in the face of Jesus Christ is a loving God.

And in each of the first three chapters of Jonah, we have seen the compassion of God in that he relents from sending judgment.

So, just flick back a page, and we saw that, didn't we, in chapter 1. In verse 4, God hurled a great wind on the sea, which created a storm, the storm being the instrument of his judgment.

[ 3 : 54 ] The sailors in the boat feared God, they cried out to God, and they were delivered from the storm. Over the page, a similar thing happens to Jonah in chapter 2.

For Jonah too, he faces God's judgment. He recognizes that the storm is an instrument of his judgment. As he says in verse 4, I am driven away from your sight.

Yet, he too cries out to God, and he is delivered from drowning. And then in chapter 3, the Ninevites, they too face the judgment of God. As in verse 4, Jonah proclaims to them, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

They too cry out to God, and God relents from sending his judgment. Have a look at chapter 3, verse 10. When God saw what they did, 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.

It is a book about the compassion of God. The compassion of God on the sailors, on Jonah, and the Ninevites. And on each occasion, God brings the reality of judgment before them.

[ 5 : 13 ] They repent, and God relents. The same thing happens in each chapter. So I take it to make the point that God will have compassion on anyone who turns to him in repentance and trust.

That anyone who calls out to him can be rescued from the judgment to come. And perhaps you can imagine the parting that followed in Nineveh as they took off their sackcloth, and as they started eating again, knowing that they would not face God's judgment.

Which, of course, would be a great way to finish the book, wouldn't it? You can almost imagine chapter 3, verse 11, reading, They all lived happily ever after. But, of course, the book doesn't end there.

And the next surprise of the book, and it is a book full of surprises, isn't it? Is that Jonah is angry with God. Have a look at chapter 4, verse 1.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. It seems that what is good news for the Ninevites is very bad news indeed for Jonah.

[ 6 : 31 ] Rather like during the Olympics last month, we couldn't quite believe it, could we, as our tally of gold medals sort of increased beyond our targets, and kind of each day we found out there were another two or three, until Team GB came home with 19 medals.

But, of course, what was good for Team GB was less good for other nations, in particular in Australia.

Now, I rather hesitate, Judy, to mention Australia, but I just couldn't help noticing some of the press comments amongst some of the Australian sports commentators who couldn't quite believe, I think, that Britain had won more gold medals than we had, and that we actually had the nerve to win more gold medals than they.

One Australian sports journalist indeed complained that the only sports Britain was any good at were the sitting-down sports. Things like cycling and rowing and sailing.

The implication, of course, being that they're not proper sports at all. Well, that seems to be, doesn't it, what happens here in Jonah chapter 4. That the same news is good news, very good news, for the Ninevites is bad news for Jonah.

[ 7 : 46 ] Verse 1, he is angry. Literally, he is deeply offended and furious. Again, verse 9, he is angry. Angry enough to die.

Why is he so angry? Well, have a look at verse 2. Jonah is angry because God is compassionate.

He is angry because God is gracious. He says that is why he fled in the first place. You see, if chapter 4 wasn't here, we might have guessed, mightn't we, any number of reasons back in chapter 1, when we saw Jonah running away, fleeing from God's call to go to Nineveh.

But chapter 4, verse 2 silences any speculation at all. He fled because he knew that God is a God of compassion. He knew it because he knew his Bible.

Hundreds of years early in Exodus chapter 34, the prophet Moses asked if he could see God's glory, to see what God is like. And I put part of God's reply on the outline on the back of the service sheet, in Exodus chapter 34, verse 6.

[ 9 : 20 ] This is how God begins to answer that question. The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

Words which Jonah quotes here, verse 2, almost word for word, doesn't he? Gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

Jonah knows his Bible all right, just he doesn't like what he finds there. He'd have known it too from Jeremiah. Jeremiah chapter 18, verses 7 and 8, also on the outline there, where God speaks of his compassion, not just for his own people, but his compassion to any nation, anyone, who will turn to him.

As God says, if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I'll pluck it up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.

Because God's compassion is not just for some people, but for anyone. God in his compassion doesn't want anyone to perish at the judgment.

[ 10 : 51 ] In the words of the Apostle Peter, in 2 Peter chapter 3, verse 9, the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

So we're bound to ask the question, aren't we? What is it that stops Jonah having the compassion of God? Well, I think we're going to see this morning the same things which so often stop us having the compassion of God for those around us.

First of all, Jonah's self-righteous anger, his self-righteous anger. Have a look again at verses 2 and 3, because it is extraordinary, isn't it, that Jonah finds himself complaining that God is too compassionate.

Assyria, of which Nineveh was the capital city, was a nation renowned for its cruelty. And it's clear, isn't it, that Jonah simply doesn't want to live in a world where the obvious need for justice and judgment is triumphed by God's mercy.

To Jonah's mind, to forgive Nineveh is simply unjust. It is not right. Now, of course, it's correct that God would have been perfectly justified in bringing judgment on Nineveh.

[ 12 : 26 ] Indeed, it would have been a good thing for him to do. It would have demonstrated that he is indeed the righteous God who rules the world. But the point is, it is even more wonderful for God to be merciful.

And so, in verses 5 to 8, when Jonah goes outside Nineveh to wait to see what's going to happen, God sets out to bring Jonah to his senses.

Have a look at verses 5 to 8 again. 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 might be a shade over his head to save him from his discomfort. 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. 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.

[ 13 : 43 ] And he asked that he might die and said, it's better for me to die than to live. Do you see what happens there? In verse 6, God appoints a plant to shade Jonah from the heat of the day and Jonah, of course, is delighted.

In verse 7, God appoints, same word, a worm which attacks the plant and kills it. In verse 8, God appoints, same word again, a scorching wind.

Jonah gets sunstroke and he wants to die. Verse 9, God said to Jonah, do you do well to be angry for the plants? And Jonah says, yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.

Now what is it that Jonah is revealing about himself at this point? surely it is that he is self-righteous. Surely it is that he cannot accept God's undeserved compassion and grace.

Surely it is that he's taking God's grace for granted. You see, God is teaching him the lesson that he's, the plant, which is a gift from God, he's taken it for granted.

[ 15 : 04 ] It is a mark of God's compassion towards him, wasn't it? Yet he is angry when it dies because, of course, Jonah feels that the plant is his by rights.

I take it as the sort of thing you might see in a child when it's their birthday. They've been looking forward to opening all their presents. One present in particular, which is beautifully wrapped and considerably larger than all the others.

It's open with great excitement. The child thinks they know precisely what's inside it, that it's exactly the present they wanted, the one thing they really wanted to have. but to their dismay, it is not quite what they were expecting.

And what happens? They go into a big sulk. They're angry. In fact, I remember doing a very similar thing myself, aged at seven or eight or something like that.

Hopefully, I wasn't too much older than that. Now, what does that reveal about the child's heart? Well, it shows, doesn't it, they fail to see that the present is a gift.

[ 16 : 17 ] And so, they're angry when they don't get what they think is theirs by rights. They think they deserve the present, just like Jonah.

As long as God is running his life the way in which Jonah feels God ought to be running it for him, like providing a plant to shelter him from the sun, he's happy. But as soon as God does things differently by sending a worm or the scorching wind, he is angry, a self-righteous anger.

Yes, Jonah's right about Nineveh. It's a city which deserves judgment. But God's grace and mercy is always undeserved. You see, Jonah has forgotten chapter 2.

Jonah has forgotten that God has been gracious to him. He's forgotten that like the Ninevites he too was facing death and judgment. That like the Ninevites he too cast himself on the mercy of God and God answered his prayer just as God answered their prayer and God saved him just as he saved them.

You see, God has treated Jonah and the Ninevites in exactly the same way and Jonah hates that. In other words, he wants to put limits on God's grace.

[ 17 : 47 ] Delighted that God is merciful to him and perhaps those like him, but not to people so obviously undeserving as the Ninevites.

God is to God's to God's love. Jonah can't we see just how self-righteous we can be.

Perhaps it's most clearly seen when things in our lives don't work out the way in which we would like them to work out or the way in which we think they should work out like Jonah and the plants.

Delighted when things go well for us, fed up with God when they don't. Perhaps when we lose our job or when we don't get the job which we hope for. Perhaps when we get ill or we find we have long-term health problems.

Or perhaps just when deep down we feel that God owes us a particular sort of life. Or perhaps when we see others for whom life seems to be much easier and we think to ourselves well why them?

[ 18 : 54 ] Why not me? Why can't I have a life like that? Very easy isn't it to think like that? As if God owes us one. Perhaps you're someone here and you're not the other Christian.

We're delighted you're here this morning. We very much say that Grace Church is for absolutely anyone. But will we accept the truth that God is good to those who don't deserve it?

God we live in a tabloid culture. We are quick to condemn, quick to pass judgment, quick to think to ourselves well at least I'm not like them.

But of course it's a very small step isn't it from thinking like that to thinking well yes I'm not like them but surely I am good enough for God to assume that God will forgive us.

Well actually the truth is of course that all of us are like Jonah. All of us are like the Ninevites deserving God's judgment. Will we accept that God's compassion is for those who don't deserve it?

[ 20 : 09 ] As for those who are Christians well we can very easily be like Jonah can't we? Our self-righteousness can so easily stop us having God's compassion for those who face the prospect of standing before God unforgiven on the final day.

Is God's mercy really for them? It's one thing for God to have compassion on those who are like us or for those we like or our friends or whatever but what about those who aren't like us?

Or even those who perhaps we think deserve God's judgment. perhaps those who have treated us badly or unfairly perhaps at school or at work or in some other context or simply those who are not like us.

Jonah's self-righteous anger. But secondly Jonah's selfish anger because verses 5 to 8 also reveal that Jonah is selfish about God's grace.

Now in a sense we've seen it already the way in which in chapter 2 verse 9 Jonah delights in God's grace as he declares salvation belongs to the Lord but then in chapter 4 verse 2 he's angry that God's grace has gone to others.

[ 21 : 33 ] And we see it in the rest of chapter 4 as well. Did you notice how he so overreacts when God appoints the plant? We're told Jonah is exceedingly glad.

And then again verse 8 he overreacts when the plant dies and he has no shelter. He wants to die himself. It seems doesn't it that Jonah is preoccupied with himself. It's why in verse 9 he falls so heavily into the trap that the Lord has laid for him.

Have a look at verse 9. God said to Jonah do you do well to be angry for the plant? And Jonah said yes I do well to be angry. Angry enough to die.

Jonah condemns himself. As he said to God look it's terribly wrong that the world is like this. It's terribly wrong that a poor plant can be struck down and die.

I simply don't want to live in a world that is run like this. But of course God has acted towards the plant in exactly the same way that Jonah would have God act towards the Ninevites.

[ 22 : 44 ] He's destroyed it. At which point Jonah's heart is exposed. Verse 10 And the Lord said you pity the plant for which you did not labour nor did you make it grow which came into being in a night and perished in a night.

After all in what sense could Jonah really have pitied this plant. His attachment couldn't have been very deep. He could never have had the devotion of a gardener who planted it and looked after it and tended it.

Jonah didn't care for the plant at all. He was simply concerned for his own comfort. Yet Jonah has argued furiously about the worth of this one day old plant.

How much more should God have compassion and mercy on Nineveh? Verse 11 And should not I pity Nineveh that great city in which there are more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left and also much cattle?

Can you see how Jonah is selfish about grace? He's delighted to receive God's grace for himself but far more concern for his own comfort than for the salvation of others.

[ 24 : 10 ] A selfishness that it seems has totally distorted his whole value system. He's reached the point where he's more concerned for a plant a one day old plant than he is for 120,000 people who are facing hell.

But he can't see it. He's blinded to it. just as perhaps we can so easily be blinded to our own selfishness and distorted values.

In his book, Don't Waste Your Life, John Piper tells of an American couple who took early retirement from their jobs on the east coast of the US. The man was 59, his wife was 51.

they moved to Florida where they spent their time sailing in their 30-foot trawler, playing softball and collecting shells. John Piper comments, picture them before Christ on the day of judgment.

Look, Lord, see my shells. He adds, that is tragedy. It demonstrates how easily our whole value system can be wrong, especially perhaps in a country as prosperous as ours or the United States, a value system which prizes comfort so much more than anything else.

[ 25 : 36 ] And Jonah chapter 4 is here for us as a warning against being selfish about God's grace. Yes, happy to have received God's compassion for ourselves, grateful to God for that, but selfish when it comes to being compassionate to others and indifferent to others.

Or even perhaps think, well, yes, actually, I am willing to serve Jesus. I am willing to be compassionate towards those who are facing God's judgment as long as I can do it in my way, as long as at the same time I can have the life which I want to have.

It's very easy, isn't it, to think like that. It's just what Jonah does. He's a prophet. He's used to taking God's word to people, but he will only do it on his own terms.

But surely once we have grasped the compassion of God, it should change us. I take it that once we have grasped the compassion of God, we'll be willing to go to places we do not naturally want to go to in order to proclaim the message of Jesus to others.

Willing perhaps to let our choice about where we live be dictated by a desire to help out in a church which needs the gifts that we have.

[ 27 : 01 ] If in due course we do manage to plant a church from Grace Church, something which many of us will know we are thinking about and praying about, then that may well be a very real issue.

For some of us. Or perhaps to give up our career for full-time paid Christian ministry. The need is huge, but so often it is our selfishness, wanting to maintain a particular lifestyle which holds us back.

Or willing to put friendships or relationships on the line at work or at home in order to faithfully explain the message of Jesus. Or retirement.

Will our retirement be shaped around our own selfish ambitions, longing to do the things we haven't been able to do for the previous 50 years, whatever it is, or shaped around demonstrating God's compassion for those who face judgment?

Jonah's self-righteous anger, Jonah's selfish anger. thirdly, will we let God be God? Because the last we hear of Jonah is in verse 9, as he says, yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.

[ 28 : 19 ] Now, we're not told whether or not Jonah came to share God's compassion. But then I take it Jonah doesn't really matter. What matters is whether we share God's compassion for lost people.

After all, I take it we've seen throughout the whole book that God won't be unfaithful to his own character. He is a God of compassion. And we see that supremely, don't we, in that he sent his son Jesus, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.

And therefore, the question which God leaves us with as we come to the end of Jonah is, will we? Will we see the world in which we live through God's eyes?

Will we be changed by the compassion of God? Will we allow his grace and compassion for others to flood our own hearts and to shape the way in which we live our lives?

Nineveh was a great city. It was a world class city, culturally sophisticated, economically advanced, at the centre of a world empire.

[ 29 : 34 ] Yet, what is God's verdict on it? Verse 11, they do not know their right hands from their left. Their moral confusion, their ignorance of God, the fact that they face God's judgment, should provoke compassion, pity, not fear or hatred.

And I'll take it you don't have to walk that far in London to find 120,000 people who are just like that. Will we join God in his compassion for his world?

Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. 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, and all say, much cattle.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for your compassion on your world, thank you for the way in which we see that supremely in Jesus Christ, that you sent your son to die, that whoever believes in him might not face the judgment, but have eternal life.

We're sorry, Heavenly Father, when in our self-righteousness and selfishness we are delighted to have received your compassion for ourselves, but are reluctant for it to go to others.

[ 31 : 17 ] And we pray that we would be those who are changed by your compassion. Please would you give us something of your compassion for others. And we ask it for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.