

Fury over Bush?

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- [0 : 0 0] I mean, please be seated, friends. Well, we're in the final chapter of the book of Jonah. I've got a bit of an echo.
- We'll see what happens to that. And the final chapter of the book of Jonah has a few twists in it, and it's a very, very emotional chapter. And if you have been listening, if you have any emotional intelligence, and I don't have a whole lot, but you may have noticed that the whole book of Jonah has been an emotional ride.
- Let me take you through the book very quickly. Chapter 1 was a very emotional chapter, and the emotion was fear. There was lots of fear of death, fear of waves.
- There's a boat, and God is sort of disciplining with all his power against his prophet. The sailors come to fear God in a worshipful way.
- So there's a lot of fear in chapter 1 of Jonah, and fear when Jonah is finally cast into the deep, it seems to die. Chapter 2 was very emotional.
- [1 : 0 5] What was the great emotion of chapter 2? Think about it. Do a little test in your head. Can you think about what was the great emotion of Jonah? It's the chapter of thankfulness.
- Thankfulness. So the emotion of Jonah chapter 2 was great thanks, that Jonah was at the bottom of the ocean, and God miraculously rescued him by means of a fish.
- And there was this great emotion that Jonah's been rescued from Sheol itself, from the underworld itself. And so he had a lot of thanks and praise to God. So that was very emotional.
- And last week, Jonah got to Nineveh and preached the word. And what was the emotion there? Can you remember what was the great emotion of chapter 3? I think it was repentance or godly sorrow for sin.
- The Ninevites were extremely emotional in responding to God. They heard God's word through his prophet. And this is important. They not only responded with the right action, they responded with the right emotion.
- [2 : 0 6] The right action was repentance. The right emotion was godly sorrow for sin. And so we see from the book of Jonah, God cares about our emotions. They are very significant in our relationship, in our walk with God.
- And so today we come to a final emotion for the book of Jonah. And the emotion is anger. This is a very angry chapter. Jonah is extremely angry, I hope you'll see.
- And he's angry toward God. He's resentful toward God. So the emotions of this chapter are very, very heated. And so we're going to examine that today and we're going to, in a sense, critique and judge Jonah and for his wrong anger toward God.
- But before I do that, I want to just encourage you that in the Bible, among the gamut of emotions that are expressed toward God in the Bible, there is a place for godly anger toward God.
- The Bible actually does give us permission in Psalms that are called the Psalms of Lament. To actually, if you are hurt and if you are angry at God, there is a place with faith to cry out to God.

[3 : 21] Like Psalm 88 is probably one of the darkest Psalms. It says, How long, O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?

The psalmist is angry at God and expresses that anger in faith toward God. So there is a godly anger that you can have toward God if it's with that attitude of bringing it all to him in faith and asking him to help you.

There is a place for that. But today we're looking at something really different. Jonah's anger to God is not like that. Jonah's anger toward God is bitter. It's a nurtured bitterness or a nurtured resentment against what God has done that Jonah doesn't like.

Jonah, in effect, is going to place himself on the throne of God and critique God himself and say, God, I wish I was God. I would do a better job than you. I would rather die than have you as my God.

So it's very strong, Jonah's anger. So let's have a closer look at it. It's very helpful that we read chapter 3, verse 10. I'll read it again.

[4 : 25] When God saw what the Ninevites did, when God saw their emotion of godly sorrow and their action of repentance, that they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry. Now, the Hebrew there is very strong. This was wrong to Jonah. It's the same.

This word's used a lot in Jonah. It's like a calamity to Jonah. It's almost a wicked thing to Jonah that God could do this. It's so wrong to him that God could show mercy to the Ninevites.

And in his anger, Jonah does pray to God. But it's a funny prayer. He says, O Lord, is this not what I said while I'm still in my own country?

And the attitude is something I think like, I told you so, God. I was right. That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning. He's justifying his disobedience.

[5 : 30] For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, I'm so angry.

Please take my life from me. It is better for me to die than live. And the Lord said, Is it right for you to be angry? And we'll see what Jonah does in a minute.

Now, why is Jonah angry? I think there are two main areas of his anger. The first is that something to do with the character of God. He's angry that God has acted in consistency with his loving character.

And what he says about God, you know, I knew that you're a gracious God. I knew that you're merciful. I knew that you've got steadfast love. Now, Jonah's in effect quoting what God reveals about himself to Israel at the time of the exodus out of Egypt.

They're at Mount Sinai. And Moses has been interceding for the people because they've been worshipping a golden calf. And Moses says to God, Show me your glory.

[6 : 37] And God says, I can't quite do that, but I'll hide you in the cleft of this rock and I'll pass by you and I'll speak to you the words of my glory. And God says in Exodus 34, The Lord, the Lord, Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

Now, why would that make Jonah angry? I think it's because he felt that that was God's stance to Israel alone. He thought that was good if it was for him and his people, but for no one else in the world.

And so he's angry that God's great character is not just for Israel, but it's for the whole world. And so, you know, he's in effect, it's a form of being selfish.

It's a kind of, you know, it's a spiritual pride that he wants God to be like that to them, but to be judgmental and destroying of other nations. So that's one aspect of his anger.

The other aspect of his anger is a bit more subtle, but I think it's there, and it's this. Jonah is frustrated and angry that God keeps him on a tight leash, as God does with all his prophets, as God does with all his children.

[8 : 08] He keeps him on a very tight leash. Let me explain what I mean. See, Jonah was told to preach judgment, and he's angry that he's been, in effect, used by God as an instrument to, he preaches judgment, the people repent, and God is seen to be gracious and loving.

Jonah, in effect, has to be the bad guy so that God's glory can be seen in mercy. And Jonah is resentful that he only plays a role as an instrument for one part of the mission, whereas God actually has a whole plan and a whole purpose that Jonah is not privy to, that Jonah is not a partner in the whole plan.

Jonah does not tell God the big picture. Jonah can only play his role on his short leash. He would like to be co-equal with God. Jonah would like to be able to tell God, are you there in, that city's out, this city's in.

But that's not the role we play, is it? God keeps his prophets on a very short leash. They are used by him for a specific purpose, and they are to trust God for the result, for God's result.

This is what John Calvin says about Jonah 4, the great reformer John Calvin. He says, We now then understand how God often works by his servants, for God leads them as the blind by his own hand where they think not.

[9 : 41] God leads, Calvin says, his servants as if they were blind. You know, we do not know where God is leading us as a church, where God is leading us in our Christian lives.

We are blind, as it were, to God's purposes for what he's going to achieve through us in Australia in 2008 and beyond. See, what can you do, friends, if that's the relationship we have with God?

Well, what we're called to do is just to be faithful to God, to live godly lives, to share the gospel whenever we can, with whoever we can, to not change the gospel to get a result.

We're just to be faithful and leave the fruit to God. We're to be faithful and leave the fruit to God. That's the sense in which we're on a short leash or we're flying blind.

We know the heart of God, but we don't know the plan of God for how he will providentially work out his glory among the nations. We have to be prayerful and faithful, but leave the fruit to God.

[10 : 45] I think it's helpful to say God wants us to be godly messengers. He doesn't want strategic consultants. He doesn't want us to tell him, this is what you should be doing, God, and go this way and do this in Australia.

God doesn't need that. That's actually his sovereign role. So often I think Christians, churches, take Christian mission as a kind of a game of chess where you can sacrifice pieces of the gospel somehow to gain your checkmate, your strategy, but we don't have that power.

Our job is to be faithful to the whole gospel, to the whole word of God as Jonah had to be and to trust God for the results. If you have a sketch in your mind, say you've got a family member or a loved one who hates God, you know, is angry at God, you may have a sketch in your mind for what needs to happen for them to become a Christian.

Now, probably God will delight to help them become a Christian, but it won't be the way that you plan. And if you invest yourself in your own little sketch for how someone is going to become a Christian and God doesn't follow that game plan, well, then you are going to be tempted by bitterness.

You're going to be tempted to be angry at God or resentful that it's not working according to your plan. God loves to thwart the strategies of men, to humble us, to make us just more prayerful and for him to get the glory, I think.

[12 : 24] So Jonah is in this place. He's actually, God has not followed his plan. Will Jonah submit to God's plan? Well, what does he do?

Verse 5, Jonah went out of the city, sat down to the east of the city, made a booth, set up shop, watching the city from outside. Now, someone after the 8 o'clock service said to me, they feel sympathetic for Jonah.

And they said that to me because I actually don't feel sympathetic for Jonah because I'm a parent of toddlers who throw tantrums all the time. And I just learned to be not very sympathetic to tantrums and not very sympathetic to rude children.

And my children, you know, as I would have been as well, as we all have been, can be very rude. I mean, God asks Jonah a question. You do not walk away from somebody when they're talking to you.

Not when they've asked you a question. Not when it's God. God has said, is it right for you to be angry? Jonah walks away. He's so rude, so petulant to God.

[13 : 33] And he sets up sort of a base outside the city to the east almost so that he can have one eye on the city, another eye kind of on the direction of Jerusalem, the place he loves, which is sort of to the south, southwest.

And he's waiting for God to destroy the city. He's probably gone to Nineveh thinking God's going to get them and then I'm going to watch it. I'm going to watch this.

It'll be great. And so God is clearly not going to do that now. God has shown mercy to Nineveh. And yet he's still sticking to his own game plan. He wants God to destroy it with burning fire and sulfur.

And he's just like a stubborn three-year-old child. He's just sitting there waiting for it to happen. And so, you know, friends, we've got to think about Jonah as a challenge to us.

I think it's a great temptation for us today to become sulkers about what God is doing, to become petulant toward God, to become bitter, you know, to become complainers about what God is doing wrong or what God is not doing or what the church is doing wrong.

[14 : 48] They should have done it our way. The ministry of sulking is very alive and well today. And we can laugh at Jonah, but we are very much at risk of it in our own lives.

I think the more that you are committed to something, the more at risk you are to be disappointed and therefore sulk. So the more kind of godly you are, the more committed you are, say, to a church, the more at risk you are to sulk if the church doesn't go where you want it to go, doesn't do what you want it to do.

Do you know what I mean? So if anything, I'm more at risk of sulking than anyone because I've invested a lot in Holy Trinity. I want so much to happen here in the lives of people and God may not do what I want this church to do.

And so there's a spiritual danger here. Sulking can lead to a nurtured bitterness and nurtured bitterness can lead to a hardness of heart and a hardness of heart can just rob you of all joy in God and rob you of actually enjoying and praising God for what is going on, what God is doing among us.

So friends, it's a great danger. The more invested you are, the more temptation there is to sulk. I imagine even, you know, Paul Barker is tempted by this as Paul, you know, has so much planned and gives so much to himself.

[16 : 05] If things don't work out, we need to pray for him that he resists bitterness. Just by way of a side, I was singing on the weekend, what would be like the worst thing I could do while Paul Barker's away?

And I've thought of it. I could host, I could announce today that we're going to have the Holy Trinity Annual Scrabble Tournament done and hosed while he's away.

Because he won it last year. He won it. He would be sulking then, I tell you. But we won't test his faith. We won't test his faith. Friends, Jonah is a godly believer.

He knows God's character. He loves it for himself. But he does not want it for others. And he sulks when God gives it to others. You know, his faith in a way is right.

His relationship with God is right. But his ecclesiology is bad. His doctrine of church is bad. Because he doesn't like who's in and out of the church. His missiology is bad. He doesn't like where God is headed.

[17 : 13] He doesn't like what God is doing in the world. And so he is sulking and bitter. So friends, let me encourage you to shun the temptation to be a sulker. You know, the more invested you are or the more strategic thinker you are, the more vulnerable you'll be to this temptation to become bitter.

So the question is now, will Jonah get it? Will Jonah let go of the sulking? Let's see what happens. God kind of sets up a test for Jonah.

The Lord God appointed a bush and he made it come up over Jonah to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. And so Jonah was very happy about the bush.

But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush. God appoints a lot of things in Jonah. He appoints a worm, a bush. He appoints a fish. He appoints the storm in chapter 1.

You know, God is in control here. And the bush withers and the sun rose. And God prepared a sultry east wind. And the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint.

[18 : 25] And he asked that he might die. He said, it is better for me to die than to live. You know, God, in a way, uses this sort of setting up this scenario, this environment, to really pinpoint where Jonah's heart is at.

He uses this suffering of this hot sun to really pinpoint the issue in Jonah's heart and to see whether Jonah will actually, you know, receive God as God.

But actually, Jonah fails the test, doesn't he? He accepts God's mercy for himself and then gets angry at God again when God takes away the comfort.

Jonah is, you know, angry enough, it says, in verse 9, God asks him, is it right for you to be angry about the bush? And he says, yes, angry enough to die.

He speaks back to God and disputes God. He doesn't trust God's word. And he says, I'm angry, I'm angry enough to die or I'm angry enough to be angry till I die, until I die to be angry.

[19 : 32] Jonah has locked himself in, it seems, to judging God. He's actually fixed his mind and his heart. And I think what's happened, his emotions have blinded him to seeing the bigger picture of the goodness of what is happening.

You know, I love the fact in Jonah that God saves Nineveh. I think it's wonderful. It's clearly the best outcome. It's clearly a great outcome. You know, if the gospel's going to get to Australia, it's got to at least get to Nineveh before it can get to us.

So I'm very happy that the gospel spreads through the Bible. But Jonah has been blinded because of his anger, because of his emotions, because of his immediate response to God.

You know, he hasn't been able to bridle or curb his emotions and now he's blind to the goodness and greatness of his God. I think today, friends, that again happens to us.

That if we let an immediate emotion or an immediate reaction make us angry toward God, we can fixate ourselves on a course of action that's very hard to come back from.

[20 : 45] You know, we often, I meet people who are angry at God because he's taken away their comforts. You know, they're angry at God for some sickness, but they're angry at God after, you know, 50 years of wonderful health and blessing.

Who among us praises God daily for the gift of life? Who among us thanks and blesses God daily for, you know, the good health we have and the comforts we have in Australia.

You know, we are very good at picking what's wrong but not actually seeing the bigger picture, the good of what God has done. So many people I have seen where God has actually relieved them of their sickness, healed them and then they forget and they quickly go back to forgetting God.

Friends, God is very good at caring for his suffering people. He has been caring for his people through thousands of years of trials and he's taken good care of them.

He's actually expert and experienced at taking care of you and me and yet we question him, we judge him, you know, we critique him.

[22 : 04] Ultimately, God, through Jesus, has experienced our predicament. He's experienced human pain and suffering all the way to the cross where he's experienced the worst suffering, the punishment for sin that we should receive.

He has experienced that so we cannot say God does not know what it's like to be one of us. We cannot say God is not expert in caring for us. We ought not to get angry at God when we have the unexpected sickness.

We ought to just bring ourselves before God, humble ourselves before God and renew our commitment and faith in him. God has promised us an eternity with him through Jesus.

Through faith in Jesus, we can live with God forever. This life is very short. I think there's a big problem today with Aussie Christians that we are expert at generating self-pity and it is pity for ourselves and feeling sorry for ourselves when that's actually the wrong emotional response.

God has not rejected us but God may be trying to rebuke us. God may be trying to chastise or discipline us. He may be trying to call us to walk closer with him but if we are just wrapped up in self-pity we will not see that.

[23 : 31] This I think friends is the great benefit of meeting together, coming together today, of meeting in small groups. Surround yourselves friends, not with people who are sympathetic to you.

Surround yourselves with people who are sympathetic to God. We need friends I think that will actually defend God to us, who will speak the Bible to us and not just empathise with our self-pity.

Do you know what I mean? We need friends who actually stand up for God for us and our temptation is to surround ourselves with friends who will just empathise and not friends who will speak the word of God to us and defend God.

When I was younger and naive, I used to think I was a logical person. But human beings are not logical creatures, are they? Human beings are emotional creatures.

We are irrational creatures. And there is a great danger to irrationally become angry at God too quickly. But we need to learn to bridle our emotions in a way to see the bigger picture of what God is doing, to listen to our friends who will defend God to us.

[24 : 47] The more a person says to me, I'm not an emotional person, I'm a logical person, the more I can see they are extraordinarily irrational to say that.

That's the most logical thing to say that you're just a logical person. We need to be aware of that our immediate responses need to be submitted to God's word and need to be bridled lest we fall into sulking and bitterness and hardness of heart and lose all Christian joy that God offers us.

So friends, let's let God have the last word and God does have the last word in the book of Jonah and he speaks his final word of rebuke to Jonah and challenge.

You are concerned about the bush for which you did not labour, Jonah, you did not grow it, it came into being in a night, to perish in a night, and should I not be concerned about 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 many animals.

Jonah couldn't care less about Nineveh, he couldn't care less about other countries around the world who do not know God and who are ignorant of the ways of God.

[26 : 10] But God cares about that. God himself is emotional about that. He is passionate that people know him, know the truth about him, that they fear him, that they know his grace and mercy through Jesus.

God is emotional and passionate about his own glory among the nations, more than us, more than Jonah. I mean, it's so obvious, isn't it?

Why should you care about a bush? People are worth more than a bush. Animals, cattle are worth more than just a bush that came and gone and yet Jonah is somehow in his sort of irrational emotionalness become wedded to this bush.

church. Now, Jonah is a believer in God. He's converted, friends, but here's the danger for us. You can be converted to God but not converted to God's mission for the world.

You can be converted to God but not converted to God's love for the church, for his people. Are you converted to the Lord Jesus Christ?

[27 : 19] Are you converted to God's plan for the world, God's mission? Are you converted to God's people, the church? My own emotional response to the book of Jonah is actually great frustration against Jonah.

I feel a lot of empathy toward God. How much does Jonah try the patience of God? How much do we try the patience of God in our selfishness toward God's grace or toward our independence dependence and our trying to tell God what to do when he's actually got the plan intact?

Jonah is a frustrating book. It has three great chapters and now it ends and we don't actually know what happened to Jonah. There's a party going on in Nineveh.

They're worshipping God. They're celebrating God's grace and mercy. And Jonah, we don't know what he does. Does he go down and join the party and be happy with what God is doing?

Or does he stay out there and petulantly stick to his bitterness and his sulking? It's left open for us because it's to challenge us to think where will our lives lead?

[28 : 38] Will we align our passions with God's passions? Will we align our mission in life with God's mission in life which is that the whole world know Jesus?

Will we be faithful to God's gospel and leave the fruit to him? Or will we dictate to God what he should be doing and then get angry when he doesn't follow it? Friends, don't strategize God's gospel.

Just share the gospel. Just believe the gospel. Don't modify God's mission. Just be faithful to God's heart for the world, to God's gospel for the world.

Don't stubbornly sulk. Don't stubbornly sulk. But submit yourselves to God's providential wisdom and love and goodness and his own judgment that he will do what is right.

And friends, don't push God's patience. Don't push his patience. But trust him and be submissive to him that he will do what is right.

[29 : 47] And then retain the joy that we have in Jesus Christ. Retain the joy that we have as a church and retain the joy that we have as God's gospel does go to the world, which is his unstoppable will, which will be achieved according to his plan and to his purposes.

So let's commit ourselves to that now. Lord God, we do thank you that you are patient with us when we try your patience. patience. We confess to you that we have sulked and been bitter when you have not done what we want you to do.

But we thank you, Father, that you are gracious and merciful to us and even to Jonah as well. Dear God, we pray that we would live for your gospel, that we would not be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We thank you that he gave his life. He said that he was the living bread, that he gave his life for the life of the world.

And so, Father, we pray that we would live for the gospel of your son and for the life of the world. Make us prayerful for nations around the world, cities that do not know you.

[31 : 04] Make us generous in our giving of time and money toward those who have gone to preach the gospel around the world. And use us, Father, to share the gospel with those we know and as we travel around and even send us into all the world to share the gospel of your son.

Amen.