

An Angry God - An Angry Prophet

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Date: 03 June 2001

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 3rd of June 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled An Angry God, An Angry Prophet and is from Jonah chapter 3 verse 1 through to chapter 4 verse 11.

They say if you don't at first succeed, try, try, try again.

At one level that's what God does here with Jonah. Chapter 3 begins in exactly the same way that chapter 1 began. The word of the Lord came to Jonah.

But this is take two because when the word of the Lord first came to Jonah as we saw last week, Jonah did exactly the opposite of what God said. Instead of going north-east to Nineveh, he went south-west to Joppa, got on a boat and tried to sail as far away from the land as he possibly could.

[1 : 15] Here when God speaks the second time, Jonah having been rescued from the fish and spewed up on the beach by the fish, Jonah is given another chance by God.

He didn't deserve to be saved as we saw last week. God could easily and with justification have left him to drown in the water or be digested by the fish.

But now patiently, God gives him another start for this rebellious prophet of his. A time to start again and again the second time he says, get up and go to Nineveh.

And this time Jonah does what he's told. In verse 3 we read that he set out and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days walk across and Jonah began to go into the city going a day's walk.

And his message was brief and rather blunt. Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown. That is it.

[2 : 27] That's what he said. That's what God had told him to say. Not a long message, not a convoluted one, but just a simple statement. Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

It's a bleak word. It's a word of judgment. Nineveh we know from the beginning of Jonah chapter 1 was a wicked and evil city.

We know from the prophet Nahum that it was still a wicked and evil city a hundred years later.

Nineveh moreover was the enemy. It was one of the major cities of the empire of Assyria.

Not at this stage its capital but later to be so. So it's not just a major city and it's not just a wicked city but it's the enemy city as well.

It's the ancient version of modern Baghdad for example or it's the modern centre for an equivalent of a Gaddafi or a Pol Pot or a Hitler or something like that.

[3 : 32] But the word that Jonah had to preach was also a generous and gracious word. That is, 40 days more and this will happen. Close enough to be imminent and a real threat but nonetheless allowing some time for the people to respond to the word of God through the prophet Jonah.

In 40 days this city will be overthrown, Jonah said. A word that implies inevitable judgement and punishment from God.

It's the same word overthrown that is used in the beginning of the Bible for the very evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But the word overthrown has another connotation which makes it I think deliberately ambiguous here.

40 days more and Nineveh will be overthrown, a threat of judgement, a real threat. But 40 days more and Nineveh will be overthrown in the sense of turned around, changed or reversed.

And that word has a slightly positive connotation as a possibility. That is unexpectedly what happens. The people of Nineveh do reverse their way of thinking.

[4 : 50] They repent of their evil and wickedness. And so the city is not overthrown in the sense of judgement in the end but overthrown in the sense of turned around from being wicked to being

penitent.

This pagan nation, this city of archetypal wickedness and evil, quickly and readily, heeds the word of Jonah.

Astonishingly so really. Surprisingly so. So in verse 5 we read, And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

If only every sermon had that effect. If only every conversion of a pagan was that quick and easy.

Fasting and sackcloth were typical expressions of grief and penitence in the ancient world.

Sackcloth would be an uncomfortable, heavy sort of cloth that people would wear close to their skin as a way of sort of rubbing against them to keep them alert and penitent.

[5 : 58] It was also something that you'd use as an expression of grief. Fasting the same, going without food and in this case also water for some days. Not only do the people, great and small, heed quickly the word of Jonah but the king comes to hear of it.

And so in verse 6, When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, he removed his robe, he covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes which was another additional sign of penitence and grief to rub yourself with burnt ashes and so on.

Moreover, the repentance of the kingdom or of the city is to be enforced by royal decree.

Proclamation is made in verse 7, By the decree of the king and his nobles, no human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything, they shall not feed, nor shall they drink water.

Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth and they, which implies including the animals, shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.

Humans and animals, not only fasting from food but also water which implies a very severe fast and probably one of a short duration and there are to be no exceptions at all.

[7 : 22] That's a fairly unexpected outcome. Not many preachers of God's word could expect to go into a city of great evil and enemies of God's people and God and expect that sort of immediate response.

That is, on the very first day of his preaching, before he'd even got to the centre of the city, people are believing God's word and they're putting on sackcloth and they're fasting and the king's heard about it and he's issued a decree and all Jonah has said is, 40 days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

The speed with which Nineveh repents and turns to penitence is astonishing. We're meant to see it as an amazingly fast response and it is meant also to be in contrast to Jonah himself because Jonah we saw last week in chapters 1 and 2 was rebellious.

He was wicked and evil by rebelling against God's command, by heading in the opposite direction and despite the fact that the boat he was on was in a storm and floundering, despite the fact that it looked as though it was going to sink and despite the prayers of the sailors and their urging him to pray and despite their casting lots which showed that he was the cause of the storm and the threat of death and despite the fact that he was thrown into the water and despite the fact that he was facing drowning and despite the fact that he was swallowed by a fish and stayed in the fish for three days, Jonah did not repent or not pray until after three days in a fish as his life was ebbing away, we saw last week, finally he prayed.

What a contrast with Nineveh. Here is a prophet of God who stubbornly refuses to change his ways and thinking and to pray. But the people of Nineveh, a pagan and wicked city and nation, quickly, very quickly, pray and are penitent for their sin.

[9 : 26] You'd expect it to be the other way round. You'd expect Jonah as a person of God, a great prophet of God, one who's esteemed, we read in the book of Kings, to be quick to be penitent and say sorry to God and go and do what God had commanded.

But no, this is unexpected change from pagan people in contrast to God's own prophet. Sometimes the people of God are put to shame by the actions of the world that is pagan.

Sometimes people are sceptical about this as though how could a city like Nineveh have so quickly responded to God's word? But in the ancient Near East, often kings, when their city or their empire was under some threat or in some threat of turmoil, would be quick to heed or look for words or omens to try and work out how to win the God's favour.

And that's possibly their motivation here. We know from the 750s, 740s BC that Assyria was not quite as strong and united. It was facing some threats of inner turmoil.

We know from a contemporary prophet, Amos, that there was an earthquake in the area in the 740s BC. There could well have been threats of war or famines or floods.

[10:46] We're not certain of those things. But maybe the combination of those sorts of instability or natural threats along with Jonah's word would make the people quick to respond because they say in verse 9, who knows, perhaps that is, God may relent and change his mind.

He may turn from his fierce anger so that we do not perish. So they're quick to receive this word because they think that maybe, yes, their actions have caused these disasters.

They're quick to repent from their evil actions in the hope that maybe, just maybe, God may not punish as he threatens to do. And indeed, God did.

Hold back his hand. He did spare the city. So in verse 10, when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them.

and he did not do it. God changed his mind. What does that mean? Does it mean that he's fickle? Does it mean that he's capricious?

[11:56] Does it mean that he's indecisive? He says one thing and then he changes his mind and does another. Does it therefore mean that he's untrustworthy? I mean, if God is like this, changing his mind here and there, then when he promises us forgiveness through Jesus' death, what if one day he changes his mind?

Does that mean we cannot trust God anymore? And if God promises us assurance of heaven, for example, and then what if he's a God who changes his mind a lot and down the track he might change his mind and say, no, sorry, I've changed my mind.

I'm not going to let you into heaven. Does this mean that God is untrustworthy? No, I don't think so.

God changes his mind because the situation of Nineveh itself changes. God's plan had been to destroy the city because it was pagan and wicked and it's a fair enough thing for God to do.

But now he's not dealing with just simply a pagan wicked city but he's dealing with a pagan wicked city that is penitent. The city has changed.

[13:10] Their prayers have shown that they've changed. And so God rightly changes the proposed course of action. Not because he's fickle, because he thinks, oh no, I'm going to change my mind and do something different.

But because the situation has changed and because God is consistent and is reliable, then he acts reliably and responsibly to the changed situation. That is, this is now a penitent people.

God tells us exactly what he does through the prophet Jeremiah. Let me read these verses

because they explain very clearly what God is on about here. He said to Jeremiah, at one moment, I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it.

But if that nation concerning which I've spoken turns from its evil, I'll change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment, I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it.

But if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. That's what's happening here.

[14:25] To an evil city, God will destroy. But to a penitent city, he will not. It's not that God is just changing willy-nilly what he thinks, but he's responding rightly to a changed situation.

And do you see then, from the example of the people of Nineveh who were penitent for their sins, how significant our prayers to God are?

Christians, you see, are not fatalists. We don't think that everything is set in concrete for the future and whatever we do, the future is determined down a certain track.

Cannot veer off that because God's sovereign and he's determined the future. So therefore, we really are just pawns. We're really just inconsequential in the affairs of this world. Christians don't believe that.

Lots of people in our world are fatalists. Oh, his time's up. That's why it happened or this is going to happen or it must have happened and fate has decreed it or something like that.

[15:30] It's not Christian thinking. Christians are not fatalists like that. But rather, what the Bible teaches us is that prayer changes God and God's course of action.

Prayer changes the situation. It's not that somehow we can pull the strings with God. But when we pray, the situation changes.

That is, if there's some difficulty that we face and we don't pray, then God will respond in a particular way because that's the situation that deserves that response. But when we pray, the situation itself has changed and so God's response to the situation, which includes us and our prayers, changes because the situation's changed.

God wants us to pray. He wants us, like the Ninevites, to express our penitence and repentance. But more generally, He wants us to pray for ourselves, for this world, for the church and so on. And when we pray, He hears and answers our prayers. And our prayers, therefore, change the way God acts because our prayers change the situation and God responds accordingly.

[16:49] But to put it in a slightly different way, God not only invites but commands that we pray and promises that He will hear our prayers and His invitation to us to pray is an invitation to us as His people to share in His dominion over this world and universe.

and that's what He made us for. Back in the opening chapter of the Bible, when God made humanity, He commanded humanity to have dominion over this world.

Under God, yes, but in a sense shared with God. Mankind made in God's image to have dominion over this world. So when God invites indeed commands us to pray, He's inviting us to share in His sovereignty over this world.

That is, in the control of this world through our prayers to God. So don't think prayer is a waste of time. Don't think prayer is useless.

Don't think everything is just so mapped out in the future, it doesn't matter what we pray, it's all predetermined by God. God commands us to pray and promises to hear our prayers and also to heed them and the sparing of Nineveh is a good illustration of His faithfulness to that.

[18:15] Most preachers rejoice when people listen to their sermons and when they heed the words from God but not Jonah here. Most preachers would have marveled at the power of God's word to convert this pagan city but not Jonah here.

Indeed, Jonah, when he sees the response of penitence of the wicked people of Nineveh, leaves the city in a sulk and he goes to sit outside and survey it, sulking.

Unlike God who turns from his anger, Jonah becomes infuriated. So chapter 4 begins that God sparing the city was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry.

Very strong language. He was burning with anger, infuriated that God should have mercy on this pagan city Nineveh that deserves surely to be obliterated like Sodom and Gomorrah had been centuries before.

So infuriated and burned up and hot with anger is literally the idea that Jonah wants to die, he says in verse 3, O Lord, please take my life from me for it's better for me to die than to live.

[19:27] So angry is he. And yet astonishingly, Jonah had expected the people of Nineveh to find mercy from God. In verse 2 he prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is not this what I said while I was still in my own country?

That's why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning as we saw last week. For I knew that you're a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing.

See, Jonah knows what God is like. Jonah knows the character of God. Indeed, Jonah knows his Bible because his words in verse 2 that I've just read are a quote from the book of Exodus which is also quoted in the Psalms and in other places in the Old Testament as well.

In the book of Exodus where those words about God being gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love come from. God is forgiving undeservedly the terrible sin of his own people Israel when they build a golden calf and worship it at Mount Sinai and that's why Jonah refused to go to Nineveh.

Not because he was afraid of their wickedness and afraid of being turned out of the city but he didn't want them to be pardoned and find forgiveness and mercy from God. They deserve to be punished is what he's saying here.

[20:48] I don't want to be the agent of them being spared. They're our enemy. They're baddies. I want them to be obliterated by you God. That's why I refused to go in the first place. Now we can understand his point of view.

There are people in our world or in our lives that we don't want really to see God's mercy. People who've wronged us, deceived us. People who've pulled the plug on us at work.

Enemies of our country that maybe we've fought against in the past. But God is teaching Jonah and us here a lesson. He says to Jonah in verse 4, is it right for you to be angry?

The question that demands the answer, no it's not right for you to be angry. But Jonah just ignores the question and goes off in a huff. Verse 5, he went out of the city and sat down east of the city. It's just like the interview on the radio the other night with Tony Abbott, one of the ministers of the federal parliament. The ABC radio reporter kept asking him a question and in the end he'd just hang up.

[21 : 50] And there on the interview on the radio all of a sudden you've got the beeping of the engaged phone signal as he just refused to answer the question. Jonah's a bit like that here. Is it right for you to be angry?

And Jonah hangs up on God in effect. He went out of the city, he sat down east of the city, he made a booth for himself there, he sat under it in the shade waiting to see what would become of the city. Not because he's looking forward to seeing the city spared, he's sulking because he knows God will spare it.

What follows then is a practical lesson for Jonah. God provides a fast growing plant like the beanstalk in Jack and the Beanstalk, something that grows very quickly overnight it seems, possibly a castor oil plant people suggest, a sort of vine type bush that has got big wide leaves that provide plenty of shade.

Jonah's already built himself a little booth but there's probably not much by way of vegetation there so he's probably just sitting beside a sort of lean-to or something like that so this is very welcome. Jonah, we're told in verse 6, is very happy about this bush. The idea is almost of overjoying delight, not just, oh this is quite fortuitous that there's this bush but a real excitement and joy that this plant has suddenly grown up and given him a lot of shade but next morning God having appointed a bush to grow now appoints a worm or a weevil something like that that will eat away at it so that it kills it quickly.

[23 : 23] So all of a sudden this plant has grown, Jonah's very happy, all of a sudden now the plant is dying and withering and not only that, verse 8 tells us that when the sun rose God prepared a sultry east wind, a Sirocco heat and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint with sunstroke and asked that he might die, it's better for me to die than to live.

From being overjoyed the night before at this bush that's given him shade, now again he's ready to die. And now comes the point of the exercise. Jonah is angry that the bush has withered and died and therefore he's facing the heat and the wind of the sun.

And God asks him again in verse 9, is it right for you to be angry about the bush? Now we expect the answer no. But Jonah who is stubborn to the very end says yes it is right, yes I am angry enough to die, he says full of self-justification.

And then God makes his point. Jonah is just concerned about a plant, a plant that only lived for a day. A plant that he didn't plant and he didn't water, he didn't tend, it just happened to grow up there and then wither.

Pretty trivial plant really, not a significant tree. If Jonah could be concerned about such a trivial little plant, hasn't God got a right to be concerned about Nineveh?

[24 : 58] A city of 120,000 people he says. And people are more important than plants. And these are people who do not know their right hand from their left. It doesn't mean that they're blind or stupid, it's an idiom for expressing their helplessness.

It's the sort of thing that is picked up by Jesus' statement on the cross. Forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they do. That, I think, is the thrust of the idea that they don't know their right hand from their left.

Yes, they're wicked and they're evil, but really they do not know what they do. And moreover, he says, there are also animals galore. There's no comparison.

Jonah, you're really upset to buy a little plant, but compare that to this major city. 120,000 people, lots and lots of animals, that's more important than a plant.

If you can be angry about the plant, am I not right to be concerned about Nineveh, is what God is saying. Now, the message of this book of Jonah, I think, is actually a very important one for us to learn.

[26 : 04] It is easy to have a smug prejudice about being Christian. Self-righteousness breeds within us very quickly. Jonah had received a gift of a fish to save him, a gift of a tree, things that he did not deserve.

God's gift of salvation to us is likewise undeserved. And we must never forget that we do not deserve God's mercy to us.

we do not deserve the grace of salvation. We do not deserve the opportunity of repentance and finding forgiveness. We do not deserve Jesus' death to bring us salvation.

It was while we were enemies, remember, that Jesus died for us. so then the grace of mercy is meant to make us humble.

It is also meant to prod us to be gracious in response. For if we do not deserve God's grace, nor do other people, but if we've received God's grace, we ought to delight that others receive it as well.

[27 : 19] Jonah's not a model of Christian mission, though he's sometimes used for that purpose. But nonetheless, the book of Jonah is meant to motivate us to spread the message and possibility of the grace of God to others.

It challenges our view of this world. It's to challenge our view of other people. It's to challenge our view of our enemies, of sinners, of wicked people in our world.

world. You see, the issue of extending God's grace to others is sharpened when we remember that Nineveh was the archetypal wicked enemy. Would we behave any differently from Jonah?

I doubt it. Who of us would want to welcome with open arms a Pol Pot finding God's mercy? or a Hitler?

Or a Saddam Hussein? Or a Christopher Scase for that matter? Or a Timothy McVeigh? Most of us probably have a reaction to those sorts of people that wants to see them find justice and punishment, not mercy.

[28 : 32] When I was in Cambodia a few weeks ago and saw the horrors of Pol Pot's prison, far worse than anything I've seen in German concentration camp or the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, there was part of me that was angry that Pol Pot had just died a natural death and not ever come to justice.

There was part of me that was angry that his henchmen are still alive in Cambodia, many of them carrying on business, maybe wealthy, maybe even in government. There was part of me that wanted them to be brought to justice and punished.

Jonah, I suspect, had the same sort of response to the people of Nineveh. I don't want them to have mercy, is what he said to God in verse 2 of chapter 4.

I want them to have punishment, which they deserve. But God's message to Jonah and to us is that wicked and evil people, our own enemies, the people perhaps who have deceived us at work, people who tried to kill us in previous wars, family members who tell us lies, people who destroy our careers, people who promise us something but then renege on their promise.

They are people to whom God's mercy is meant to go and we are to be the agents of offering God's mercy and forgiveness.

[30 : 04] forgiveness. This is not the only place in the Bible where this lesson of begrudging grace is taught.

Micah, a prophet who is a contemporary of Jonah, urged Israel to do three key things, one of which was to love mercy. And Jesus taught this same lesson, often in parables, about those who wrongly were begrudging in their gift of grace to others.

There were labourers in a vineyard who'd worked for an agreed wage. They begrudged the fact that others came in later in the day and for the same amount but less work but got the same pay at the end of the day.

There was a servant who'd been forgiven debts, vast, but begrudged the fact to another person who owed him a little. There was an elder son who begrudged the fact that his prodigal brother had come back and been welcomed with such lavish response by his father.

And wished that he could be punished and not shown mercy. This is an important lesson for us to get right. We do not deserve God's mercy.

[31 : 16] It is easy to forget that. And when we do, we begrudge mercy going to other people. This comes to the heart of our relationships with other people, both Christian and non-Christian.

Because in the end it gets to the heart of forgiveness. And that's God's own heart. If God can forgive people like the people of Nineveh, so ought we, so must we.

Thank you.