

Debating with God

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[0 : 00] Friends, today I want you to come with me for an imaginary sneak preview of heaven. And I want you to imagine somehow you've been able to see into heaven and to meet some of the people there.

And I guess that like me, you wouldn't be surprised to see certain people there. People like Abraham and Moses, the apostles, some of the great known Christians throughout history. Perhaps some of the people that you know closely and have seen as very significant Christian people in your own life. However, I wonder how you would feel if you found yourself stumbling across the following people.

Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot, Osama bin Laden. And I wonder how you'd feel if you found out that each of these masters of genocide or terrorism were in heaven because they had repented of their sins and trusted in Jesus on their deathbed.

How would you feel? And how would you feel if you were the mother or father of a child who had died in one of the planes that were hijacked and crashed into the Twin Towers? Or the brother or sister of one of the Jewish people who'd been gassed in Hitler's Holocaust?

[1 : 16] How would you feel? Well, perhaps you'd feel something of what Jonah feels in Jonah chapter 4. You see, the nation of Assyria was as cruel and as malicious as any of the people that I have mentioned to you already.

The prophecy of Nahum calls Nineveh the capital of Assyria, the bloody city. And he goes on, he says, it's a city full of lies and plunder with no end of prey.

A place of flashing swords and glittering spears with hosts of slain and heaps of corpses. A city known to betray nations with her whorings and peoples with her charms. And so you see, when Jonah sees God forgive Nineveh as he does in Jonah 3, Jonah is in deep anger.

And it is Jonah's anger that is the focus of the chapter we're looking at today. So I want you to turn with me in your Bibles and let's see what God has to teach us from his word today.

But let's first, let's have a look at Jonah's response. Read Jonah chapter 4 verse 1. But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong and he became angry.

[2 : 29] The original language actually says it was exceedingly evil to Jonah or if you like, exceedingly disgusting to Jonah. In other words, Jonah looked and saw the evil of Nineveh and he hated it.

And he saw God having mercy and changing his mind about destroying the city and he hated that as well. In fact, he was disgusted that God could be so merciful.

In verse 2, we're told that Jonah's anger is actually expressed to God. He prays to God. And look at what he says. He lets us know why it was that he didn't go to Nineveh in the first place, back in chapter 1. He didn't go because he knew that God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

As we've seen in the previous weeks, the words Jonah uses here are not his own. They're part of the words that were spoken to Moses by God himself in Exodus 34. And just prior to that, God had threatened to leave the nation because of their idolatry.

They'd broken the covenant he made with them. And he had every right to walk away from his obligation toward them. However, Moses pleaded with him. And even though there was no repentance by the nation, God changed his mind and acted in surprising grace and mercy toward them.

[3 : 48] He decided he would stay with his people despite their sinfulness. And it's just after this that God reveals himself to Moses. We're told in Exodus 34 verses 6 to 7 that.

He passed in front of Moses proclaiming. The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

He doesn't leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sins of the parents to the third and the fourth generation. So remember what we said? His love and compassion and grace is overwhelming.

Though, of course, he is still just. And he does punish sin. But, you see, Jonah knew how God had treated Israel. He knew that it was God's nature to have mercy.

And he knew that if God had any chance to be merciful, he would show it. He knew that if God could possibly forgive the Ninevites and avert the trouble that was coming to them, he would.

[4 : 54] And these verses say that it was just all too much for Jonah. You see, he can very well accept that God will be merciful to Israel. But it's all too much for him that God would be merciful to this pagan and evil city.

And his disgust at God is so overwhelming that he'd rather die than see Nineveh saved. Look at what he says to God in verse 3. Now, take away my life.

It's better for me to die than to live. In other words, just kill me or something. Because I do not want to see what you're doing. And in verse 4, God responds.

He says, is it right for you to be angry? I might even just slightly put some emphasis somewhere else and put, is it right for you to be angry?

Literally, they are. Do you do well to be angry? In other words, God is asking Jonah, what right do you have for this anger?

[5 : 53] And it's those words that set the context for the verses that follow in verses 5 to 11, where God is going to deal with Jonah's anger. Let's have a look and see what goes on. In verse 5, there's this flashback to when Jonah had finished prophesying to the city.

He apparently came into the city from the west and he traveled through and then he exited the city on the east. And we can easily imagine the scene, can't we? Jonah finds his job finished.

He's preached well. Short sermon though it was. He's seen good repentance. He's not sure what's going to happen to the city. Perhaps he hopes that God will do a Sodom and Gomorrah type of act and just wipe them off the map.

And so he finds a good vantage point. And he builds himself a temporary shelter to wait out what remains of the 40 days prophesied. In those days in Mesopotamia, timber was scarce, expensive, generally imported.

Jonah's shelter would therefore probably have been built from stones and or clay. Perhaps he'd put up this rough roof with some branches, local brush that hadn't been claimed for firewood.

[6 : 59] I think we Australians might call it he made a humpy for himself or something like that.

Anyway, it was probably a very crude dwelling with a little shelter from the hot Middle Eastern sun. And just as God acts toward mercy, sorry, God acts toward mercy toward this prophet, just as he'd appointed a great fish to swallow him up earlier on.

Now he appoints a plant to grow. And the plant grows. And it eases Jonah's discomfort greatly.

Where Jonah was exceedingly angry with God for being merciful to Nineveh, he's now exceedingly glad that God had been merciful to him.

You can see the irony, can't you? Jonah's shade and relief, though, was very short-lived. Because the very next day, God does some more appointing of things. Some rapid plants grow, but this next day, something else happens.

God appoints a worm who's very efficient this particular day. This worm apparently eats away at the stem of the root of the plant, causes it to die. And the shade dies with it. And Jonah's head begins to burn against the hot, you know, under the hot sun.

It's not the end of Jonah's bad day, though, let me tell you. Verse 8 tells us that when the sun had risen, God did some more appointing of nature. He appointed a scorching west wind, east wind.

[8 : 19] And it's possible that this wind was the sort of wind that's now known as a sirocco. And a sirocco is a constant hot air flow that is full of positive ions, and it affects the levels of serotonin and other brain neurotransmitters.

Sirocco is known to cause exhaustion, depression, feelings of unreality, and even occasional bizarre behaviour. Anyway, the wind and the heat must have caused great difficulty for Jonah.

He may have experienced exhaustion and all the anguish and depression that this combination of elements would stimulate. And everything was going wrong for him.

It appears as though God is against him. And so Jonah calls out to God to end his life again. But God says to Jonah, Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?

But there's a slightly different focus here, isn't there? You see, God has now narrowed down the scope of the question of God's anger. Before, it was about God's action toward Nineveh, you know, a whole city.

[9 : 25] Now, it's about God's action toward this tiny little, well, reasonably sized plant. And Jonah responds to God's question in verse 9. Let me paraphrase. He says, In effect, Jonah is saying, This plant was terribly important to me.

It was significant. I delighted in it. And now I'm suffering because of its demise. I'm angry enough at its demise to want to die rather than live without it.

The point Jonah's making is that the plant is worthy of life because it's important to him. The criteria for ongoing life of this plant is its importance to him.

Now, let me tell you that God now has Jonah exactly where he wants him. And so he turns to Jonah and he analyzes his anger.

Let me try and just paraphrase what I think is going on here. What God is saying to Jonah. He's saying something like this. Okay, Jonah, let's just take a good look at your anger.

[10 : 36] You're angry, aren't you, about this plant? But it's your concern for the plant. Is your concern for the plant just genuinely selfish? After all, you've never had the devotion of a gardener for this plant, have you?

If you feel about the plant, sorry, even though you're not the gardener, this about the plant, how do you think a gardener might feel about the plant? How do you think the gardener might feel who's tended it, watched it grow, then seen it wither and die?

If you feel such intense emotions for a plant you had nothing to do with in terms of its growth, then imagine what I feel for Nineveh. I made them the people of Nineveh. I love them as my creation.

They have cost me huge effort. They mean the world to me. Your pain over a plant is nothing beside mine when I contemplate the destruction of this nation or this city. Jonas, you yourself said in the boat, I'm the creator of the world.

I'm God who notices when a sparrow falls to the ground. I'm a God who's concerned about sparrows. And did you notice it in the text, friends? Even about cattle.

[11 : 44] I'm concerned about all of these things. I care for everything I've created. And I particularly care for the people I've created.

And these people of Nineveh had not had all the advantages you Jews have had. For centuries I have been your God and you have been my people and you have come to know that I'm a God who relents from sending disaster.

You know it. You've known my word and you've known my will. And yet you have been sinning as a nation from the very first day I called you.

And I've been changing my mind about judging you ever since then. And what's more, Jonah, I've been personally lenient and forgiving with you. After all, a recalcitrant prophet deserves death.

But I did not kill you. Instead, I rescued you with a great fish. And then I used you again as a prophet rather than throwing you aside on the ash heap, as it were.

[12 : 47] I've been merciful to Israel, Jonah. I've been merciful to you. And you have the gall to be angry at me for being generous with this city and its people who sin without having the advantages you Jews have.

Jonah, your anger is totally, totally, totally unjustified. It's a great story, isn't it? It's a message of this chapter.

The message of this chapter, though, is overwhelming, isn't it? I wonder if in your mind you can perhaps think of some New Testament passages that might take up the themes of this chapter.

Because they are there. Can you think of them? Prodigal son is one, isn't it? Do you remember the context of the prodigal son? The tax collectors and sinners are gathering.

And they're repenting. And they're being accepted by Jesus. And the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are muttering to themselves. This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Can you hear what's going on?

[13:50] They're like Jonah relived. And Jesus tells them a story. He tells them a story. Well, he tells them a number of stories.

But the one that really stands out is the tale of two sons. And the younger says to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. That is, I can't wait for you to die, Dad. Why not give it to me now? So the father divides the property between the sons. The son then goes and lives a terrible life in a distant country and squanders the wealth of his father.

And then when he reaches rock bottom, he thinks, Oh, look, my dad was a good man. I could just go back to him and even just offer myself as a hired servant.

I'd be doing better than I'm doing here. Do you remember the story? And I'll go back to him and I'll say, I've sinned against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

[14:49] Make me like one of your hired servants. And he goes off to his father. And do you remember the story that while he's still a long way, his father sees him and is filled with compassion. And it was undignified in those days for men, older men to run.

And he probably hitched up, you know, his skirts, as it were, and ran. And ran to greet his son so that the village and everyone else knew, my son's welcome home.

And he kissed him. And do you remember the other son? His father threw a party for the younger son.

The older son, he was out in the field. And he hears the dancing and the partying. And he says, what's going on? And he's angry. And the father goes out and pleads with him.

But the son says, look, all these years I've been slaving for you. I've never disobeyed your orders yet. You never gave me even a young goat that I could celebrate with my friends. And with this son of yours, he squandered your property with prostitutes.

[15:50] When he comes home, you kill the fattened calf. Can you hear Jonah? Except Jonah was sinful as well. Do you remember the other story in the New Testament?

Remember Peter comes to Jesus and he says, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times. And do you remember the story Jesus tells?

He tells the story of a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And he found this man who owed him huge, huge, huge amounts of money.

He couldn't pay it back. So the master said, all right, wife and children and you. It'll be sold to pay back the debt. The servant falls on his knees and he says, I'll be patient with me.

I'll pay back everything. And the master takes pity on the servant. But then the servant goes and cancels the debt and let him go. But then do you remember what happened?

[16:51] The servant went out. And he went and found one of the fellow servants who owed him a hundred coins. The difference is intended to be astronomic, you know. Tens, hundreds, thousands of times the difference.

And he chokes him. He says, give back what you owe me. The fellow servant does exactly what this servant had done. Falls on his knees and says, be patient with me. I'll pay you back. But he refused.

The servant had been forgiven this massive debt by his master. Could not forgive this tiny debt from this fellow servant. So he just threw him into prison. And the master called the servant in and said, you wicked servant.

I cancel the debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on this fellow servant just as I had on you? And in anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back what he owed.

And that, says Jesus, is how my heavenly father will treat each one of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from the heart. You see, friends, there is in us a disposition to love the mercy of God when it applies to us.

[18:02] But not when it's applied to people we think don't think it should be applied to. Well, God thinks it should be applied to all of us. It's a very serious warning, that last one, isn't it?

I mean, it is really potent. We, you see, have experienced God's great mercy in Jesus through the death of him for our sins. And Jesus calls on us to reflect it in the way that we treat others.

If we don't, God threatens, Jesus threatens us that God will act towards us as we've acted toward others. You see, friends, we need to ask ourselves the question that God asked Jonah. What right do we have to be angry with God being merciful?

To not respond to others like God does. That is by accepting them, forgiving them, welcoming them. What right do we have to be unforgiving of others when God has forgiven us so much? What right do we have to be critical of God being merciful? You see, God loves mercy. He loves forgiveness. And his forgiveness stretches out.

[19 : 10] He loves welcoming the alien and the stranger. He rejoices when one sinner repents. He will leave 99 sheep to go in search of one who has strayed and that might be brought back.

He is the Lord, the Lord, the God of steadfast love, grace, compassion and mercy. So, friends, if you have forgotten these things, if you are unforgiving, if you are not merciful as God is merciful, then I urge you to return to the cross today and to refresh your mind and your heart with the truths there.

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, friends, perhaps I might say to you today, if you are unforgiving of a Christian brother or sister or even someone who is not Christian, don't come to the Lord's Supper and ask for God's forgiveness if you cannot forgive yourself.

Because you are saying then, I love God being forgiving towards me. I don't like him being forgiving towards others. I'm not. Well, in fact, I don't like being forgiving as he is to me. My friends, it would be a lie.

Bask in God's mercy and grace and determine that you'll have a heart like his, full of mercy, full of grace, full of patience, full of kindness, full of love.

[20 : 43] Be like him, the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Oh, acting justly and rightly, but being overwhelming in love and compassion.

My friends, it would transform churches and it would transform families and it would transform the world and has where that message has come. So let's pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.