

Jonah's Apostasy

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[0 : 00] Just before we begin, I'd like you just to bow your heads and we'll just pray. Father, we come from very different circumstances and we don't know each other very well.

And we're in the midst of this city in which there's a lot going on, there's a lot happening. And we thank you for this time.

We can share food together. Thank you for those who have prepared it. We thank you for a chance to look at your word.

And just ask that you, by your Holy Spirit, will instruct us as we turn our minds and hearts to your word.

We ask in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Now I've got to get all these things sorted out.

[1 : 11] Well, this is the fourth chapter of Jonah. I received a little inspiration last week about what to do after this is over. And I think that what we'll do is just have somebody point at a piece of scripture with their eyes closed, print it, and then we'll start from there next.

No, actually, there is a series of things. You remember the wonderful story of the man who was like this, in that he was the Pharisee who said to God, I thank God that I am not like other men.

I fast twice in a week. I give tithes of all that I possess, and I'm grateful not to be like this fellow over here. And this fellow over here was the publican who said, God be merciful to me, a sinner.

Now, Robert Capon has written a book about the parables, and in that book he conjectures what happened the following week.

That this fellow came back to the temple the following week and said, I thank God that I am not as other men are. And that's really what, that's the kind of picture that is what Jonah chapter 4 is about.

[2 : 33] What happens to you after you come into some kind of relationship with God? And the first thing that happens is, in the expectation of the world in which we live, the very first thing that happens is that once you put your faith in Christ, once you are born anew of the Holy Spirit, you become a paragon of moral perfection.

And that's the way it happens. And everybody knows that it happens, and that expectation begins to surround you, so that if people expect you to behave in a highly moral way, and then you expect yourself to behave in a highly moral way, and when you succeed in doing that, if in fact you ever do, you're rather pleased with the results.

And tend to think of yourself as, well, somewhat better than the general run. Well, that's basically what happens to Jonah. You'll see that at the end of the last chapter, God repented and refused to bring the punishment on Nineveh that Jonah had prophesied.

Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed. And the time went by, and Jonah expected it to happen. And the king repented, and all the people repented, and the nobles repented, and nobody ate, and nobody drank, and they wore sackcloth, and they repented in such a profound way.

And Jonah was getting more agitated all the time, and he was saying, give it to them like you promised you would. And the Lord didn't do it. And Jonah became extremely angry.

[4 : 27] He had expectations that weren't fulfilled. And so he turns to God in great indignation, and I said, I pray thee, Lord, is not this I said what would happen when I was still in my own country?

I have left my home. I have been to sea. I've been thrown overboard. I've been swallowed by a whale. I've been vomited up. I've traveled to this God-forsaken city.

I've preached as you told me to do. And what have you done? You've forgiven. Now why did I ever leave home? And that was the indignation that Jonah had.

Why am I not back home sitting under my own vine and being nurtured and nurturing my own family? He became quite suicidal.

He said, it's better for me to die. It was as though he had gone there and preached fire and brimstone, and it hadn't happened.

[5 : 46] And that's a great disappointment to preachers generally, you know. And they begin to feel a little frustrated by it.

He said, I've given my whole life to you and you have made me into a religious idiot. You might at least have provided a little earthquake one night or something.

And Jonah hadn't done it. And the Lord hadn't done it. And Jonah was very indignant.

He said, you know, that I mean, here he was out on the streets of Nineveh preaching this hellfire and brimstone sermon, telling them that Nineveh was to be destroyed and it didn't happen.

And so what happens to Jonah then is what's really interesting. And that is that he goes back on all that's happened to him and he starts to become a fairly pompous and sort of self-justifying kind of person.

[6 : 59] like that. And he says, God, I knew better in the first place. I knew what you were going to do. And he began to feel very sorry for himself the way God had used him.

He became very indignant that God had used him in that way. He started this massive exercise of self-justification.

You know, the way when, as I suggested to you earlier, when you begin to feel that you've done quite a lot and Jonah began to feel that he'd done quite a lot and that God was somewhat his debtor and that therefore God should recognize that.

And he said to God, you are weak. I knew from the beginning that you were merciful, that you were slow to anger, that you were abounding in steadfast patience, and you repent of the evil.

So I knew that you were going to save everybody in the first place. So why did you bother me? I would be better off in sunny Spain, in Tarsus, where I headed to on that lovely boat.

[8 : 26] I would be better off at home. But here I am in this city and you have let me down. And he quotes scripture to show that he's right and that God is wrong and that God should have done what he said he would do.

And God seems to have failed to do it. And you see, what happens to people like this, like Jonah, is once they become religious, once they, in a sense, become Christians, they can't get away from the insidious thought that the reason that God has blessed me is essentially because I am categorically a better person than most.

And God was right to have chosen me. And I am just a kind of superior person.

It's exactly the way, you know, the danger of becoming wealthy is that you think you deserve it. You know, the danger of being educated is that you think you're a better person.

And what the gospel is all about and what Jonah couldn't get hold of was that he was the object of the grace of God entirely and utterly.

[10 : 18] Paul knew the problem when he wrote Romans chapter 7 and he said, you know what it is, you know, I know what it is to do good, but to do evil is always present with me.

He knew what was right, but he couldn't do it. And he knew that he was totally dependent for his relationship to God on the grace that God had shown to him.

And that the whole life into which we are called through faith in Jesus Christ is a life which is totally dependent upon the grace of God and nothing else.

But the human nature that we have constantly, we see ourselves as somehow a little bit better, a sort of better class of person, a morally superior person, an intellectually, a person whose intellect is more profound.

We see all that happening and we begin the process that Jonah begins of self-justification until we do what Jonah did and said, God, you didn't need to bother me in the first place.

[11 : 37] Well, that was how the story went and that's how Jonah complained and he wished that he would die. And then you get to verse 6 and it says, the Lord appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah that it might be a shade over his head to save him from discomfort.

And so when Jonah did one other thing before he did that, I want to show you what it was. Before that happened, here was the city here and here was a hill up here and over here was a little booth and on the little booth was Jonah sitting there.

And he, in a sense, said to the Lord, I'm giving you one more chance. I'm going out there to that hill and I'm going to build myself a little booth and I'm going to sit in that booth and watch you do it.

I'm going to look down on the city from up there and I'm just going to wait for your judgment to fall. Now, Jacques Ellul says, that's generally how the church relates to the city, that it's waiting for the judgment to fall.

And that's how Christians feel generally, is that they become the spokespersons for announcing the judgment of God on the careless, indifferent, healthy, wealthy, happy pagans that their city is full of. [13:12] And that their job as a church is to sit over on one side and to say, you're going to get it in spades. The way you're living, the way you're behaving, you're going to get it.

And so that's what Jonah did. And he was still of the opinion that God should do what he promised to do. Well, up came this plant like this and it protected Jonah.

It came up in a night and it protected Jonah from the fierce heat of the sun. And Jonah thought, isn't that wonderful?

This is a wonderful sign of God's grace to me. And God has got it right again. That his business is to respond to me because I am a very special person and he owes me one.

So God gave him one. He gave him one plant to keep him in the shade against the sun. And then you have that lovely line which I'd love to preach at an ordination service, particularly in the Jerusalem Bible when it says, and God ordained a worm.

[14:39] There it is. You have those sort of three examples in the book of Jonah.

You know that God ordained a whale, God ordained a plant, and God ordained a worm. That's the way it's translated in the Jerusalem Bible.

And the result of that was that the plant went flat. immediately and the sun beat down on Jonah again and Jonah took up his cry.

Lord, it would be better for me to be dead than to be in this situation. Jonah wants to die again. Now the plant had been a token of God's grace in his life.

But the function of a token of God's grace is not that you learn to depend on the tokens, but you learn to depend on the God who gives them so that God didn't want Jonah relating to the plant.

[15:47] He wanted Jonah relating to him. And so he showed this to Jonah and told him, there it is. You can see this gift of my grace and now you can accept it as being a gift to you, but I want you to come back and to put your faith and trust in me.

And Jonah responded very badly by saying, it's better for me to die. And God said to Jonah, do you do well to be angry for the plant?

Now, you know, that's a very classical biblical statement because you may remember that when Cain, when in Genesis chapter 4, when the offering of Abel was accepted and the offering of Cain was not accepted, the Lord turned to Cain and said, do you do well to be angry?

And there's lots and lots of us who basically are angry with God. And that anger is nurtured and sustained for long periods of time.

And that you don't have to talk in any depth to a lot of people to discover that basically they are angry with God because God hasn't recognized them for being who they are.

[17:28] They've worked hard, they've tried hard, they've given themselves, they've committed themselves, they've done this, they've done that, they've done the other thing. And it's time God recognized it in some way and God, instead of recognizing it, seems to have ignored it and to have ignored me and I don't want to have anything more to do with it.

Now, the difficulty and this is why it's dangerous to become a Christian, you know, is that the difficulty is while you are still a healthy pagan, you can live your life to the full knowing that if you get into trouble, you could repent and become a Christian.

but once you've become a Christian, there's no place else to go. There's nobody else to go to.

And that's, you know, that's why I think a lot of people stay away from Christian faith because if what you expected of the Christian faith, if what you expected in terms of your service of God is not realized, you find yourself in a Jonah-like situation saying, it would be better for me to die because God doesn't give you the signs of his grace, often the kind of signs which you had at the beginning when you first became a Christian.

Wonderful story of a great man that I met in England who came to Canada in the early days of the inter-varsity as a student, just graduated from Cambridge University and he came to Canada and he traveled to the universities right across Canada and this wasn't Howard Guinness, it was the fellow that followed him.

[19 : 23] But he had a wonderful time because he went from Toronto to Halifax to Winnipeg and Montreal and all those places and wherever he went, people met him, people put him up, people provided for him, he didn't have any money, he didn't have anything but the bag he was carrying and he was wonderfully provided for for about six or eight weeks during this travel in which he was doing a wonderful work for God.

And he told me this when he was an old man and he went back to England and people gathered around and they were delighted to hear of the wonderful way that God had showered him with every provision of grace that could be imagined in every terrible situation in which he found himself not knowing where he was going to sleep that night, not knowing where his next meal was coming from and God had provided him in a wonderful way and he told everybody about it and everybody was very excited about it except back in the corner was an old fellow called Bishop Taylor Smith and when it was all over Bishop Taylor Smith who was fairly wise these things went up to him and said it's a wonderful story you've told it'll probably never happen to you again and this man who was now an old man said to me and it hasn't because God does give the signs of grace in our life but what he calls us to is to trust him and that what he called Jonah to was to trust him and the thing that he called Jonah to even more than that was to recognize that God himself the Lord had made himself responsible for Jonah and was going to care for him and the only claim that Jonah could ever make was that God in his grace had reached out to him when he didn't deserve anything when he was in rebellion and disobedience

God had reached out to him and he had accepted the grace of God the grace of God had brought him through the experience of death the grace of God had brought him to Nineveh the grace of God provided for him and that was all he was ever going to have and you see Christians who think that they have more than that Christians who think that they've built up a little anti you know that they have something to depend on in terms of what they've done for God are seriously mistaken and Jonah chapter 4 is to tell us that now Jonah the Lord tells Jonah this he says to Jonah you pity the plant for which you did not labor nor did you make it grow it came into being in a night and it perished in a night and Jonah your heart goes out to that poor plant but he said

I care for this city and I long that this city should not come under my condemnation but should know the reality of my love and that's you know that's what it's about it's people you know the function of the church the ministry of a Christian is not to tell people primarily about the condemnation of God except as it served to make them aware of the grace of God and the love of God which is in Christ and you see this why this story ever appears in the Old Testament is is a wonder because this was an outright condemnation of the people of Israel because God had told called them and made them his own people and had blessed them and provided for them and given them a land he had given them everything he said the reason

I've done that is so that you can tell the rest of the nations about me you will be an example to the rest of the nations and they got all mixed up and they said God chose us because we are a better people than the rest of the nations and if only the rest of the nations knew that what a much better world it would be and you see the church falls into the same trap the only function of the church is in order to tell other people about the love of God in Christ no matter who they are whether they are the citizens of Nineveh or worse the function of the church is to be the vehicle by which the love of God is demonstrated to the whole world a lot of people think that it's very foolish not very foolish but very selfish of anybody to profess to call themselves a Christian because that means in the minds of most people that you're saying to me that you are morally superior and you have to say no I am not

[25 : 06] I'm saying to you that God has broken into my life in order that I may make known through my life the reality of the love of God in Christ that's why God has called me in order to tell you that's why Jonah was taken through the belly of the whale to get him to Nineveh in order to tell Nineveh about the love of God in Christ and that's what the church exists for and that's what the church forgets it falls into the ancient trap of feeling that we are essentially superior people and any outsider can come and visit a church and can see immediately that that simply isn't true even though you know that and that what needs to happen what Jonah had to learn in this awkward way was that the function of those who have experienced the grace of God in their lives is to tell other people about it to be the vehicle by which the love of God is made known to the people who already know in their hearts that they are under the condemnation of God and need to know his grace that's what

Jonah 4 is about it's an amazing story let me pray our God thank you very much for your grace and mercy thank you that you have taken responsibility and that you have called us not to pronounce your condemnation to a world that you have loved but to make known to you by our lives and through our lives the reality of your love and grace and mercy Jonah rebelled against it and our hearts sometimes rebel against it change our hearts we ask in Christ's name Amen Amen