

The Work of God: Sermons from Jonah
Jonah 4
God's Compassion – Is It Right For You To Be Angry?
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Introduction

Because of the grace of God, if Vladimir Putin repents and believes, he will go to heaven. That is uncomfortable to hear, and it is this same discomfort Jonah faces in chapter 4 today. God's love can forgive the worst people, and that's not always comfortable, but the salvation of sinners is always a good thing!

Chapter 3 recap

Let's recap where Jonah is before we dive into chapter 4. In chapter 3, God commands his prophet Jonah a second time to go to the evil city of Nineveh and exhort them to repent, or they will face judgement. Where Jonah once disobeyed, he now obeys and preaches to the city diligently. Amazingly, the Ninevites believe God's words and every single person in this unbelieving city is miraculously converted.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 starts immediately after we left off in chapter 3 with Jonah reacting to the mercy God has shown Nineveh. Despite the wonderful conversion of a whole city, we find Jonah fuming. And, in verse 2, he admits God's mercy is the reason he ran away in the first place in chapter 1. He knows God is abundantly loving so he tried to take Nineveh's judgment into his own hands by running away from God's plan.

We'll explore the thought process behind Jonah's anger later, but it's clearly an attitude that is twisted tight around his heart. Jonah's death wish in verse 3 is not suicidal, it is a denial of the reality in front of him. In chapter 1, Jonah could not conceive of a world in which God is merciful to Nineveh and didn't want to, so he ran away, hoping he would never see that day. So now, in chapter 4, that he is experiencing his fear first hand, he refuses to accept it. He does not want to live in a world where God is merciful to Nineveh.

Despite Jonah's fury, God is amazingly gracious. In verse 4, he gently but firmly replies with a simple question: *"Is it right for you to be angry?"* It's a fantastic real-life example of Proverbs 15:1 which says, *"A gentle answer turns away wrath."* God silences Jonah with a sentence.

So, Jonah storms off and sets up camp in the hot sun, seemingly to wait for the judgement he has self-imposed on the city, and this is the perfect moment for God to teach Jonah a lesson. God creates a leafy plant to shade Jonah from the sun, and Jonah is very happy with this plant, it brings him great comfort from the heat. But Jonah's happiness doesn't last long as God sends a worm to cut down the plant and then he sends a scorching east wind to put Jonah in a physically exhausting position. His new death wish in verse 8 is a cry for relief from his pain. God is not punishing Jonah here, nor will he harshly keep him in this position any longer than necessary, but he uses this momentary pain for long term gain; to get to the core of Jonah's incorrect attitude and deal with it. God asks, *"Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"* and Jonah falls right into God's trap as he replies, *"It is."*

With Jonah admitting to his misplaced concern over the plant, God lands the sucker punch in verses 10-11. *"You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"* There's some debate about what the 120,000 refers to, whether it's just the city of Nineveh or includes the surrounding villages as well, but the inclusion of animals suggests the subtext of God's statement is the expanse of his love, not specific details. If Jonah is allowed to get angry about a plant that he had nothing to do with, should God not care for his beautiful creation? More importantly, should God not have compassion on the many people in Nineveh who were spiritually in the dark?

The challenge

And the book of Jonah just ends there with this open-ended question, seemingly left unfinished, but, no, it's designed that way. The book of Jonah begins and ends with the word of God. This book isn't about Jonah. It's about God, it's about the work of God to restore mankind to himself, and it's about our attitude towards taking part in that work. This climactic question forces the reader to answer God's challenge for themselves.

The book of Jonah went, first and foremost, to Jonah's spiritually lifeless generation of Israel. It then gets highlighted by Jesus to confront the lifelessness of his generation. And it is still relevant for all followers of Christ up to us today. "Am I right to be angry at repentance?" And "Should God not have concern for the ungodly?" This morning, we're going to make these challenges our challenges. Challenge 1 is Jonah's unrighteous anger and challenge 2 is God's righteous compassion.

Challenge 1: Jonah's unrighteous anger

To understand Jonah's unrighteous anger, we need to gather a little bit of context. In verse 1, we see Jonah is angry because he thinks God got something wrong. But how can Jonah think that God's mercy is wrong? Clearly he doesn't disagree with the concept of mercy, as evidenced by his understanding of God's character in verse 2, so his disagreement must be to do with the subject of God's mercy, the city of Nineveh.

It would make sense then that Jonah is angry at God for being merciful to Israel's enemies. Assyria is an extremely cruel nation, whose growing empire has already threatened Israel's existence, and would likely do so again. And in that light, we can be sympathetic with Jonah's anger.

But there's more to the picture because God's lesson at the end of the chapter isn't simply about loving your enemies. It's about God's love and care for all of his creation. Jonah probably is angry that Israel's enemies have been forgiven, but he is also angry that God's compassion has gone further than Jonah thinks is right.

Jonah is guilty of Jewish exclusivism. You don't need to remember that phrase. Basically, the Jews took extreme pride in their special relationship with God. They arrogantly believed God's blessings were exclusive to them.

Picture two sons. The eldest has been an only child for 6 years and been the sole focus of his parents' love. Now the younger son comes along, and the parent's love is equally divided. Rather than rejoice at the new addition to the family, and share in web of loving relationships, the Jews, being the older child, wish the second son had not been born and behave as though he hadn't, even though God never said he wouldn't bless those outside his chosen people.

Exclusivism was particularly rife in Jonah's day. You may remember from a month ago when Pete started this series that Israel are in a prosperous time. Jonah correctly predicted the expansion of their borders. Meanwhile, whilst the Assyrians are a threat, they are not so great an empire as they once were. Internal disputes are keeping them vulnerable. So, Israel are enjoying sitting on their high horse. "Look at us. God has given us our old borders back and our enemies are struggling. Look at all these blessings."

God's compassion on Nineveh has exposed this ugly heart issue in Jonah. Jonah and Israel would have believed Nineveh should receive punishment, not salvation. Yes, because deserved it, but also simply because they are Gentiles, they are not Jews, they are not the right sort of people to receive God's goodness.

My brothers and sisters, we must be very careful. We cannot think we are immune to this sort of attitude. If Jonah can go from his remarkable obedience in chapter 3 to spouting injustice here, then none of us are safe. Anger at God's compassion is far more common today than we think it is, and I want to highlight 3 areas this morning.

The first is in evangelism. Do we truly believe drug dealers should be saved? Do we truly hope the LGBT community will find Christ? Would I get angry at the repentance of a murderer? Would we ignore God's command to share his word with unbelievers, because we do not want a certain type of person being saved? We need to carefully assess if we hold conscious or subconscious biases against certain people groups.

The second area is our application of justice. By excluding Gentiles from God's blessings, Jonah is condemning them to his own system of justice. Do we likewise take the judgement seat from God, and wear the judge's robes ourselves? When I say I want Putin to receive justice, do I mean justice by Christ or justice by hell? Do I allow God to be the kind-hearted and just judge?

Thirdly, we can act like Jonah in our prejudice towards other churches. Other churches and other Christians may do things differently than us. Their service might look different, they might use different instruments, their pastor might even wear skinny jeans. But as long as they are a faithful, Bible-believing church, they will receive spiritual blessings, and we should not harden our hearts against that. Even if we are uncomfortable with how they do things, it doesn't mean they are wrong, and it definitely doesn't mean they don't deserve to experience and enjoy God's goodness.

Do we get angry when someone who has wronged us repents, or another church receives spiritual blessing, and we don't? In those moments, we must ask ourselves, "Is it right for me to be angry?" To which the answer, under God's grace, is no. Why should I be allowed to undeservedly enjoy God's blessing, and someone else can't?

But I will finish this point with a qualifier. Whilst God is tough in his rebuke, he is also restorative with Jonah. If you do suffer from this sin, God still loves you, he has lots of patience to allow us to grow, and this attitude does not define us, our identity in Christ overcomes all unrighteousness.

Challenge 2: God's righteous compassion

Now we come to our second challenge, as God asks Jonah, "Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?"

How wonderful is the expansive love of God. His grace knows no human boundary. His compassion reaches even the vilest of sinners. Where we struggle to forgive a single wrong against us, God covers the world's multitude of offences against him through the death of Jesus who paid the penalty of our wrongdoing on the cross. *'Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.'* (Romans 5:20).

Our God gave up his only Son that we may be reunited to him. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we can enter a relationship full of gracious gifts that culminates in an eternity of glory. And it is God's desire that every single human soul joins him on that glorious day, despite our constant rejection of him. Though we were blind to our sin, and wandering aimlessly through life, God graciously convicted and covered our sinfulness. *'You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.'* (Romans 5:6)

Unlike a CEO who squeezes his company for every last penny, God even handles the physical needs of all his creation with the utmost care. He holds the universe in balance, he feeds the wildlife, he commands the weather and seasons to sustain life, there is no creature that is not known to him and no creature that is beyond the bounds of his provision. *"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"* (Matthew 6:26).

I could go on and on because words will never fully describe God's love until we have an eternity to sing his praises. God speaks such a simple sentence to Jonah, but it shouts of an eternal creator's love for his creation, and his desire to see them saved.

I praise the Lord that the two ladies in our wider church family who passed were believers. We will not neglect the sorrow, but we can take great comfort that *'to live is Christ but to die is gain.'* (Phil 1:21). We will see them again, and they are enjoying God's dwelling place. But that is not everyone's eternal destiny. God's love is extremely challenging. In our hearts of hearts, do we truly share God's concern to see all humanity saved? In a world full of spiritual blindness, do our hearts burn for unbelievers?

So, how can we love more extensively like God? The first step is to assess our priorities. God's lesson with the plant deals so precisely with Jonah's failure. He knows we are prone to caring more about plants or three-legged dogs or tiny kittens than the destiny of millions of souls. We need to transfer the same level of care we may have over a plant we've grown in our garden, or a cute animal in need of surgery, over to people as well.

The next step is to cultivate that concern. I love this story of pastor Alex Montoya from California. Whenever he is feeling indifferent towards the world, he sits in a busy place in and he watches people, and says to himself, “I will not move until I feel for these people again.”

The final step is to put our new priority and cultivated concern into action. Don't be alarmed, I am not going to suggest that our concern for all humanity means we need to take sole responsibility for the salvation of every person we come across. That's just not feasible. Instead, let me encourage us in our commission to share God's love.

Jesus says in the great commission, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*”. We are to play our part but ultimately it is the miraculous work of God that saves sinners. It is not our charisma or skills that save people, so we must add and spotlight prayer in our evangelism, that God will do what he says he will.

We also know that we are not expected to convert hundreds or thousands. Jesus only had 12 disciples. And he's not expecting those 12 men to reach all the nations. It is estimated there are 2 billion Christians in the world today. I don't know if that's true, but if every one of them worked hard at sharing the gospel with just 1 person, and by God's grace they were saved, 2 billion would become 4 billion.

Jesus' ministry was also full of preaching to crowds. A really good way to share the gospel with the world is to get them into church. There is a time for 1-to-1 conversation but one of the best tools we have at our disposal is the preparation of a preacher. Let's be more intentional about inviting people to what we do. We have 2 gospel services this term, we have 2 outreach evenings – a science talk and a quiz, and obviously Christmas come December. Let's start thinking now about who we can invite.

And don't worry if you the idea of a gospel conversation terrifies you. Jesus says something really striking in Matthew 5: “*let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds **and glorify your Father in heaven.***” Jesus says here that unbelievers will **glorify God** because they have seen his love through us. Gordon Keddie writes, ‘The practical love that Christians – whether individually or as churches – show to others, as they speak and live the Word of God towards them, is the heart and soul of true evangelism.’

Conclusion

The scope of God's love and mission will take us out of our comfort zone. But if I don't allow God to save sinners like them, why should he save a sinner like me? *'But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'* (Romans 5:8).

'The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.'

Prayer

Father, thank you that you love us. No one on this earth comes close to meeting your standard and yet you made a way for lowly sinners like us to come to you. Help us to empathise with unbelievers, to remember the penalty due their sin, and to guide them into your kingdom by your power. Remove our biases, may we never exclude anyone from hearing your word. And encourage us in our evangelism whatever form it may take. Amen.