

Notes from Pastor Tim's am Sermon on 4th July 2021

Series Jonah, the runaway servant

Part 9 "The God who weeps"

All scripture references are from the ESV

Jonah 3:10 – 4:10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

⁴ But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ² And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

³ Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?" ⁵ Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. ⁶ Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." ⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." ¹⁰ And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should not I pity 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 much cattle?"

Jonah rightly describes God as gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster (v2 above). We (and Jonah) are glad to have a God who:

- is gracious in giving us what we don't deserve – eternal life in his presence, forgiveness of sin and friendship with him

- is merciful in not giving us what we do deserve – eternal death, condemnation and separation from him
- is slow to anger – not flying into a rage every time we get something wrong, but patiently disciplining us for our eternal good
- commits himself to us with an eternal love – promising that we will be his people and he will be our God forever
- promises to turn from the judgement he must bring on us – when we turn from our sin and turn to him

Jonah had tested God's patience, disobeying him and going in the opposite direction to where God had commanded him to go. Effectively, he had told God he was not going to let God rule over him and tell him what he should or shouldn't do. In the storm, when the pagan sailors urged him to pray to his God, Jonah wouldn't even talk to God. Only after God has saved his life by means of the fish did Jonah start to pray. That prayer shows Jonah's deep gratitude to God for his grace and mercy.

How do we respond when God is gracious and merciful to people we don't like or think are beyond God's mercy?

- Are we glad that people who, in our estimation, are completely godless can also experience God's mercy?
- Are we glad to have our comfort turned upside down for the sake of seeing lost sinners come to faith?

Jonah wasn't! When God showed grace and mercy to the Ninevites he hated, Jonah responded with anger (4:1).

Jonah may have benefited from God's grace himself but he didn't have God's heart of grace for other people.

In his grace and mercy, God was not prepared to leave Jonah in that place of hypocrisy, and nor will he leave us there. God dealt with Jonah for his good a second time, to show him the mercy and grace that he needed to show to others.

- a) God asked Jonah a question (v4)** This question was designed by God to get him to think about what was going on in his heart. Was Jonah right to be angry and was that a good response to God's actions? Jonah didn't even answer (v5).

Having said what he felt to God (**vv2-3**), he just wanted to sit outside the city and sulk, presumably hoping that God might yet change his mind and destroy the Ninevites.

However, the Ninevites were busy repenting and God, in his mercy and justice, was definitely going to spare them.

Instead of afflicting the Ninevites, God was going to afflict Jonah.

b) God appoints discomfort for Jonah (vv6-8). God gave Jonah an object lesson to help expose his heart. We see another truth about God here. Three times in this passage, we are told that **God appointed** something (as previously we were told that he appointed the fish (**1:17** see p4)). The God who created this universe acts with sovereign, kingly authority over fish, plants, worms and winds. The events described in these verses could be seen as natural events, but we are told very clearly that God did it all.

The sovereign God, who has absolute power over everything in creation, can use it all to accomplish his purposes.

His purpose this time was to get Jonah talking about the anger in his heart. God asked him the same question again, but this time with reference to the plant (**v9**). The same verse gives Jonah's answer. Jonah had now been brought to a place where God could speak into his life.

c) God instructs Jonah's heart (vv10-11). Jonah pitied a plant. It was not even a plant that he had planted himself, or done anything to make it grow. His only connection with it was that it gave him shade from the sun so that he could be comfortable. **Jonah pitied the plant but God pitied the people** who:

- He created in his own image, and formed into a nation
- He cared for and had kept alive
- were spiritually blind. Not knowing their right hand from their left, they had no moral compass to guide them.

Jonah loved his plant more than he loved the Ninevites. He was angry when God destroyed the plant, and angry when God didn't destroy the Ninevites.

Jonah would rather God had spared the plant than spared the people of Nineveh.

God was bringing Jonah to see the vast difference between him and Jonah (and us). God is truly the God of **4:2**. In contrast, Jonah was full of anger and hatred, longing for disaster to strike the people he hated.

We see the difference even more acutely when we compare Jesus to Jonah. In **Matthew 12:41** (see p4), Jesus describes himself as greater than Jonah, and we see that greatness in three ways.

1. Jesus is the God who weeps for sinners

If God had destroyed Nineveh, Jonah would have shed no tears, but God pitied (the meaning conveys wept over) that great city and those who were in spiritual darkness. When Jesus was on earth, he too wept over those who were so spiritually blind that they didn't recognise him to be their Messiah and Saviour, and failed to put their trust in him. The gospels tell us that Jesus lamented over those who were lost – **Matthew 23:37** (see p4).

Clothed in human flesh, he looked at the city of Jerusalem and all the people who were rejecting him, and he wept.

2. Jesus is the God who suffers disapproval for sinners

Jonah went outside the city to see if God would still destroy it. Too full of his own self-righteousness, he didn't want to identify with the people who were sinners. In contrast, Jesus 'suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood' (**Hebrews 13:12**). To Jews, Jerusalem was the Holy City and nothing unclean was allowed to enter.

For Jesus to suffer outside the gate meant that he suffered as a sinner. Unlike Jonah, he is willing to go outside the gate to people who are outcasts in order to purify them from sin and bring them into the holy presence of God.

3. Jesus is the God who dies for sinners

Jonah almost died in order to save the lives of the sailors. When the sailors threw him overboard to quieten the storm, (**Jonah 1:11-15** see p4) God spared Jonah's life.

Yet God the Father did not spare his son from death on a cross.

Jesus had to die to secure our forgiveness with God the Father, to atone for our sin and to pay the price that our sin deserves. Jonah nearly died – Jesus did die.

What God has done in his dealings with Jonah is to show Jonah, and us, the vast difference between Jesus and Jonah. Jesus is 'a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.' (4:2 above). He invites us to come to him for forgiveness and cleansing from sin so that we can inherit eternal life and escape the judgement of God that is coming on those who reject Jesus.

As we come to the end of the book that bears Jonah's name, we see that the hero of the book of Jonah is Jesus, not Jonah.

However, the narrative ends with an unanswered question (v11 above). Jonah does not answer God.

- We don't know if Jonah's heart was changed so that he had compassion on the Ninevites, and went back into the city to tell them about this gracious and merciful God.
- We don't know if Jonah submitted to God's sovereignty and agreed that God is free to have pity on whom he chooses, even the Ninevites, and then use them to bring judgement on his own people later.

Why don't we know? Could it be because **God means us to answer his question to Jonah?**

Is God free to have pity on the Ninevites? We may glibly say yes, of course he is but if we do that then we need to ask some searching questions of ourselves.

Who are our Ninevites? The actual Ninevites were the enemies of God's people, who did not worship God.

- Who do we consider to be our enemies? Perhaps people from other faiths or people with vile sexual ethics or people who verbally attack Christians on social media or persecute them? Maybe even our neighbours who do things we don't like?

Of course, sin is not to be tolerated. God does not tolerate sin, but burns with righteous anger against all sin, including the sin his people commit, as we have seen

in Jonah. At the same time, we see a God who turns away his wrath when people repent. This God challenges us to love the people we think are beyond loving.

Will you pray for those people, even if you consider them to be your enemies? Will you risk going into their world

to tell them there is judgement coming but God is willing to save those who turn to him and put their trust in Jesus?

Will you put yourself out for the sake of the lost?

Are you prepared to deal with the plants that in your own life? Our plants (like Jonah's plant) are things that make life comfortable for us, things that we don't want God to take away from us. We love them more than we love the lost people around us (as Jonah did), and therefore more than we love God. Being absorbed with our comforts may stop us from praying for lost sinners and telling them about Jesus.

Are we more concerned to lead a comfortable life than we are concerned about those who are eternally lost?

God leaves us with a question:

Should not I, the sovereign God who is free to show mercy to whoever I wish, pity the Ninevehs in your life?

He asks because

He is a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

Jonah 1:17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Matthew 12:41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Matthew 23:37 ³⁷ "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Jonah 1:11-15 ¹¹ Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them,

“Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” ¹³ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard^[b] to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ Therefore they called out to the LORD, “O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.