

Sermon:Jonah - The Angry Prophet

Jonah 4

Preached at 8.15, C@10 and C@6 on 18th September 2016

If I Were God (1-4)

Chapter 3 ended with the great city of Nineveh repenting of their sin.

And the final verse says that God saw their repentance and had compassion on them.

And he spared them the destruction that he'd threatened.

Jonah's response at the beginning of chapter 4 seems unbelievable.

He wasn't just a little bit miffed — he was greatly displeased and angry.

This is the only other prayer of Jonah that we hear in the book apart from chapter 2 — and it's to tell God how angry he is for being the gracious and compassionate God that he is.

Jonah resented the fact that God had acted exactly in accordance with his nature.

How strange, we might think.

What would make someone angry at God treating people with grace and compassion?

Some context will help us a bit.

Jonah and other eighth century BC prophets preached about the Day of The Lord...

“See, the day of the Lord is coming —a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger— to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.” (Isaiah 13:9)

“For the day is near, the day of the Lord is near— a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations.” (Ezekiel 30:3)

“Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.” (Joel 1:15)

The Day of the Lord is the coming of the final judgment of God.

That's what Jonah preached in Nineveh — the coming of God's judgment.

And he's angry that God's judgment hasn't come down on the Ninevites in fulfillment of his preaching.

In his angry prayer he vents at God that he suspected all along that God would spare people.

The Scriptures — Exodus 34:6 in particular — show God clearly as full of grace and compassion.

Jonah's problem is that he doesn't understand what grace and compassion are.

And so he's completely blind to the fact that God is treating him with the same grace and compassion.

If God was to exercise his judgment right there and then, Jonah would cop exactly what the Ninevites got.

But he's so bitter and angry that things didn't go the way he thought they should have gone that he thinks he'd be better off dead.

And that reveals a huge hole in his understanding.

Jonah thinks that death will put an end to his suffering.

But death is the ultimate judgment of God on sinners.

And he remains an unrepentant sinner.

Death will cement his eternal future in God's judgment unless he does what the sailors and the Ninevites have done and repents.

Jonah wants to see immediate judgment on sinners — not grace and compassion.

I remember walking across Hyde Park with two friends on the way home from work one day and seeing two gay guys lying on the grass in an embrace.

And I'm ashamed that I said to my friends that I wished God would strike them right there and then.

Just that attitude as it tumbled out of my mouth was a sign of just how much more I had to learn about God's compassion at that time.

I still look back on that day with shame for what I said, and for what a poor witness I was to my two unbelieving friends.

My wanting to see God 'give them what-for' was the absolute opposite of the compassion that he wants to show them through the gospel that Christians like me should be sharing with them.

Maybe that's the way you feel sometimes about people who've hurt you or done the wrong thing by you... that you wish God would give them what's coming to them... wishing them to be cursed rather than blessed.

But God's question to Jonah in v4 "have you any right to be angry?" is a question to uncover the wrongness of Jonah's attitude, and ours.

Have we any right to be angry that God acts in grace and compassion towards even our enemies?

Dig into that a little bit...

Have we any right to be angry that God doesn't do to people what we think he should do to them?

Or let me put it another way — angry that God doesn't do what we would do if we were him!

That's the heart of Jonah's issue.

God shouldn't be like he is — he should be more like Jonah... more like us... people who know how those who hurt and offend us should be treated.

Jonah, and we, put ourselves in God's judgment seat.

And that is sin.

Only God has the right to be the judge of people.

We neither have the right or the capability to judge others.

We are not God.

So we neither have the right or the capability to sit over God's shoulder approving or disapproving of how he treats others.

Great Compassion and Small Worlds

When we bought our house at East Hills the previous owners left us lots of plants in ferneries and pots all over the back yard.

With our gardening skills most of them died before too long.

One of the things they had things planted in was an old concrete double wash tub from the original laundry.

For years it just sat there full of soil and weeds until one day this beautiful orchid just started to grow out of it.

I have no idea how it happened and I didn't do anything to make it happen.

But it grew and flowered and we got to enjoy it for a while before it died.

And it never grew again.

We weren't as concerned about what happened to that orchid as Jonah was with the vine in the next few verses.

Perhaps Jonah understood God's question to be suggesting the possibility that he might yet see the judgment he preached against Nineveh happen.

In v5 Jonah leaves Nineveh and goes to sit out in the desert under a shelter he built while he waits for the fire and brimstone to fall.

As he sat there, God had compassion on him by causing a leafy vine to spring up (where a vine would never grow) to give him some shade and protection from the scorching desert sun.

It says in v6 that Jonah was very happy about the vine — with about the same intensity as his unhappiness about God's compassion on Nineveh.

But the next day, God causes the vine to die, and sends a scorching desert wind into the bargain.

And Jonah's back to his misery — convinced he'd be better off dead than to be going through this disgrace and pain.

The episode is an object lesson that shows Jonah that he's more concerned about a plant than he is about 120,000 people facing God's terrible judgment.

Jonah's big issue is “what am I supposed to do for shade now?”

It's all about him.

I wouldn't get that carried away about a plant dying!

Maybe you would.

I might get angry about someone scratching my car... or ringing me in the middle of dinner time... or turning up late... or not cleaning up like I would have done it...

What hasn't God done the way you would have liked? Who hasn't he made the way you think they should be?

Have you any right to be angry about the vine?

Have you any right to be angry that life doesn't fall into the neat way you want it to be?

Jonah thought he had a right to the comfort God had given him in his grace and compassion.

So when it was taken away he was bitter — angry enough to die.

Jonah didn't get that God owes us nothing.

Any good thing we have is only because he is being gracious to us.

But when we take that for granted, we have no ability to deal with suffering, pain and disappointment when they come.

And the result is bitterness that we might not verbally express to God but will show up in our attitudes and actions towards others over things that aren't the end of the world.

You'll hear it in words like "I can't believe so-and-so thinks this is what tidy means"... "how much effort does it take to just do the lawn properly"... and plenty of others like that that I've heard come out of my mouth and out of some of yours.

Everything about our little world that isn't exactly the way we'd like will eventually consume us with bitterness that destroys relationships.

But the bigger picture here is the enormous gap between Jonah's concern about himself and his non-existent concern for the people God is concerned for.

Jonah, Compassion, Gospel and Us

The story of Jonah has been showing us the heart of God in action.

God, in his grace and compassion, warned the Ninevites and when they repented they were spared his judgment.

But they clearly deserved his judgment, as Jonah and other eighth century prophets were preaching.

So the question is how God can be acting justly when he relents from bringing the judgment he says must come.

Prophets spoke about the day of the LORD when God would come in judgment against all sin.

That day has arrived in the first coming of Jesus.

Through Jesus' death on the cross God has made it possible for all sinners to be spared his just judgment.

The judgment that we all deserve was taken by Jesus in our place.

In Jonah's day people were spared God's judgment as they trusted in the God of Israel who had shown himself gracious and compassionate to everyone who listened to him and believed his word.

They were saved as they believed in the God who would do something to put their sin right.

Now the announcement of what God *has done* in the gospel is God's gracious word of warning to sinners to repent, turning from their evil and trusting in what he has done.

In God's grace, the Day of the LORD *has come* for all who have trusted him.

And in his grace and compassion, he is still holding back his judgment on unbelievers — those who don't know their right hand from their left — so that they can hear the gospel and be saved.

But that day of God's final judgment is still to come when Jesus returns... as Peter preaches in Acts 2...

"The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord." (Acts 2:20)

Friends for us who are believers, that means that every day is a day for thankfulness, and repentance, and fresh faith in the gospel.

Don't be like Jonah.

Accept what God gives you each day with thankfulness and faith.

Instead of critical words about someone, pray a prayer of thanksgiving for them... and if they're not a believer pray that God will give you an opportunity to share about Jesus with them.

Life's not all about you.

It's about Jesus.

He didn't whinge and complain about what God sent him to do.

He willingly gave up, not just his comfort, but his life for us, and for all people.

Friends, our greatest concern shouldn't be our lives and our comfort.

It should be the eternal destiny of people facing God's judgment.

And when Jesus calls his followers to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him, he calls us to give up all claim to life the way we'd like it here and now to work to bring others into eternal life.

Should not God be concerned for the people of Morgan Street?

Shouldn't we be as concerned as him about them?

Or are we more concerned about what God should be doing for me, and about my problems?

Think about what you pray about.

In our Growth Groups we can become so used to praying about our ailments and asking God to put this world right that we don't pray for mission — whether our own opportunities to share the gospel or mission elsewhere.

Friends, gospel ministry is the most important thing we can be doing until Jesus returns.

When he does, the Day of the LORD will conclude with the final judgment falling on everyone who hasn't believed in Jesus.

In the meantime, God is graciously holding that final judgment back, while he sends us to preach the message that can save people.

Let's not run away like Jonah. Let's not be self-obsessed and unrepentant like Jonah.

Let's use the lives God has given us to preach the gospel of grace to ourselves, teach others and to the world on behalf of our compassionate God.