

Jonah IV – Where Anger Meets Compassion

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>4</sup> And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?”

<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> 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.” <sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> 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?”

Intro

In the recent movie Whiplash, a Jazz teacher Terence Fletcher is driven by the need to make a success out of the young drummer Andrew Neiman, but in doing so completely lacked compassion towards him. Fletcher pushed him far too hard and bullied him severely. Why? Under the surface Fletcher was driven by needing to produce the next great jazz musician so that he could feel validated as a teacher. Eventually he loses his job over his treatment of the students. His need for validation made him miss the great music that was going on in front of him, and the talented young musicians he had, and count them as nothing. He was blind to it because he was ultimately self-centered.

And something similar is happening to Jonah here in chapter four. He's so caught up in himself he is unable to see the amazing work of God that is going on in Nineveh because it doesn't line up with his own goals and ambitions, so much so that it causes an extreme reaction in him. And we'll see what happens when this anger of Jonah's meets God's compassion.

**Trans.** *Think about it: you'd think Jonah would be overjoyed at the success of his mission: he's just preached to the hardest and potentially least receptive audience of his life, and they've repented in an astounding fashion! But instead he's furious. He is extremely angry. And in his fury we are shown...*

**I. The offense of compassion (v.1-4)**

- a. Look at the language that's being used to describe Jonah's anger:
  - i. In the ESV we're told that Jonah was “exceedingly angry” and the NIV says that it “seemed very wrong” to Jonah, which is a very polite way of rendering what the Hebrew says.
  - ii. Actually, the Hebrew tells us that God's turning from his course of disaster for Nineveh was a “great evil” to Jonah, and that he “burned with anger”. Now this

word rendered “evil” is the same word used throughout the book to describe Nineveh’s wickedness. Do you see what is being said here? God’s compassion is as outrageous to Jonah as the evil of the Ninevites is to God. Jonah is as angered by God’s compassion as he is disgusted by Nineveh’s sin. The irony is that as God turns away from his fierce wrath, Jonah begins to burn with anger!

- b. And after this brief description we get Jonah’s second prayer in the book. Except this one is very different in character than what we found in chapter two! We’re actually let in on the argument that Jonah’s been having with God all along; the reason that he fled in the opposite direction from God in the beginning.
  - i. And the reason? He knew God would be compassionate. Jonah’s complaining, “Didn’t I say this would happen? I knew you would do this”.
  - ii. And in his anger, he quotes God’s own words from Exodus 34 back at him. This is probably the most famous declaration of who God is in the bible. Let me read them to you:
    1. “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Exodus 34:6-7)
    2. Now look down at Jonah’s words at the end of verse two. Which part from Exodus is missing there? The part about God by no means clearing the guilty.
  - iii. Jonah is using scripture selectively to accuse God and justify himself in his self-righteous anger. He is characterizing God as benign love and conveniently forgetting the part about God’s justice, driving a wedge between the two of God’s attributes we’ve seen in the last few weeks must be held together.
  - iv. Notice also how he’s using God’s covenant name here. The capital LORD in our bibles is how the Hebrew name for God ‘Yahweh’ is rendered. It’s his covenant name that he revealed to Israel. And there’s a barb in Jonah’s use of this name in his complaint. He’s emphasising the fact that God was promise-bound to preserve his people. How can he do that when he’s forgiving the enemies who would just as soon destroy them as look at them?
    1. The special word for God’s loyal covenant love towards his people, the word *hesed*, appears here as well. Jonah is astounded and scandalised that such steadfast love could be on offer to Israel’s enemies who wished to do them harm. Jonah is objecting to grace being available to the people outside of his own tribe.
- c. And at the end of Jonah’s prayer we get his shocking final verdict: “take my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” Jonah would rather die than see Nineveh forgiven by God. He wants to die because God has let Nineveh live. God should be the thing that makes Jonah’s life worth carrying on, but this reaction shows that there’s something he values more.
  - i. And though it’s easy to distance ourselves from Jonah in looking at what’s poisoning his heart we’ll be able to see how there are oftentimes other than God ruling our hearts as well.

- d. Jonah's problem is love. That may surprise you. His problem is that he loves something so much it is twisting his priorities and values completely out of shape. For Jonah it's love for his race and nation which has become twisted into hatred for foreigners.
  - i. Let me put it this way: Nineveh's repentance is pleasing to God but threatening to Israel. The Assyrian empire will eventually destroy the northern kingdom of Israel, so Jonah's unease is partly understandable, but throughout the whole book of Jonah God has been facing the prophet with a choice: the security of Israel on the one hand and the will of God to see the wicked repent and be delivered on the other.
  - ii. One commentary I read put it this way: "Love for your country is a good thing, but if it leads you to root for an entire class of people to be spiritually lost, then you love your nation more than God. That is idolatry..."
  - iii. Every nation has experienced this at one point or another in its history. But this is just one of an infinite number of things it could be. Jonah's reaction helps us diagnose what these are.
    - 1. Because everybody worships what you worship owns you, controlling your emotions. Jonah is clearly volatile and fragile, which indicates that there's a deep idolatry in his life. I wonder, what is it that causes you to "blow up" or become extremely anxious beyond reason? What is the one thing that, if taken away from you, would make your life not worth living? That is a sure sign of idolatry in your life. How you respond to these things reveals whether you are dealing with a normal love, or if something has become an idol.

*Trans. Can you see how Jonah's extreme reaction to God's mercy reveals what he ultimately values? How his offense over God's compassion shows his true motives? It works the same way for us: when we have out of proportion reactions to something it means our real god is being threatened. But as we're about to see God actually brings circumstances about to help Jonah look himself in the eye. He teaches Jonah...*

## **II. The lesson of compassion (v.5-8)**

- a. After Jonah's prayer God asks the gentle yet pointed question, "Do you do well to be angry?" but the prophet simply walks out of the city and sets up to the East of it waiting to see what will happen. Any missionary in Jonah's place would be overjoyed that the Ninevites were taking the first steps towards relationship with the living God! They'd be on hand and ready to teach and assist them as they grew. Instead he is furious they even responded to his preaching and leaves the city.
- b. At this point God is well within his rights to leave Jonah here in the desert. He could wash his hands of this rebellious, angry prophet. But instead God mercifully teaches him an object lesson by appointing first a plant, then a worm, then a scorching east wind.
- c. And notice that the reason God causes the plant to grow up over Jonah is so that he'd be saved from his discomfort. Again, the word for discomfort in Hebrew is literally that word for "evil" we found in verse one. God is taking pity on Jonah, which he does not deserve. And this is very ironic: Jonah is exceedingly glad to receive compassion, but he becomes angry when the Ninevites receive it. But realise that God's patient heart towards Jonah who is so lost in his hatred and self-righteousness is that he might be saved not just from the discomfort of the heat, but from the evil of his sinful heart.
- d. And he does this by bringing about a severe mercy. As soon as the plant sprung up and shaded Jonah, it is destroyed by the worm.

- i. This is just one in a whole deluge of disappointments God has brought into Jonah's life. From the initial mission and the emotional turmoil that caused for Jonah, to the raging storm, to the great fish, to Nineveh's repentance, God has been pursuing Jonah through disappointment. And here, for God to reach Jonah's heart something he loves has to wither and die.
- ii. Every one of us here has faced disappointments in our lives. Every one of us has experienced the death of a dream, where something or someone we love has been taken away from us, or a future we hoped for has slipped away either suddenly or gradually. And just like for Jonah these things are actually signs of God doing spiritual surgery on the idols of our hearts.
  - 1. There's a hymn written by the famous 17<sup>th</sup> century English Christian John Newton called *I Asked the Lord that I Might Grow* that picks up on this part of Jonah, where the thing he delights in is withered and taken away. The story of the hymn follows a Christian who prays to grow in faith, love, and grace, and expects that "in some favoured hour" God would immediately answer his request and give him rest.
  - 2. But what he experiences instead is God allowing him to feel the "hidden evils" of his heart, ruining his carefully laid plans, and ultimately laying him low. Then he cries out to God and asks him, "why are you doing this? I asked for faith and growth in grace and you've just given me trials and disappointment."
  - 3. And here's God's answer: "These inward trials I employ, from self and pride to set you free; and break your plans of earthly joy, that you may find your all in me."
- iii. See, through these trials God was actually *answering* Newton's prayers for grace and faith. He was setting him free from what was enslaving him and controlling him. He was teaching Newton that the freedom and peace he yearned for would only be found in loving God supremely, finding his "all" in him.
- iv. Why is this necessary for Jonah and for us? It's because idolatry is actually a function of our hearts more than our mind: what the heart loves, the will enacts, and the mind justifies. The protestant reformer John Calvin described our hearts as "idol factories", and the church father Augustine said that our problem was deeper than just doing wrong things but that we loved the wrong things. So, what is needed is not necessarily a change of mind, but of heart. And sometimes the best way for God to achieve that is to break the hold our idols have over our hearts, and often break our hearts in the process, so that he might claim them more fully. Sometimes a bone twisted out of shape has to be broken to be re-set. Just so with our hearts, which become so interwoven with idols that they must be broken to be healed.

**Trans.** *But this is not the only thing Jonah can learn from the plant and its withering. Not only does God use it to expose Jonah's heart, he also poses a question with it: the question of compassion.*

### III. The question of compassion (v.9-12)

- a. After the plant withers and the sun beats down on Jonah's head, we get the same bitter request from verse three. Jonah wants to die. But in response God returns to the question he asked of Jonah in verse four: "do you do well to be angry about the plant?". And then comes Jonah's almost comical response, "Yes, angry enough to die."

- b. But after this God has his final lesson for Jonah:
- i. And we find the reason for his compassion in his turning a question around on Jonah. The prophet's whole attitude has been: "how can you have compassion on Nineveh?" But God is saying here, "how can you *not* have compassion on her? You care for an insignificant little plant more than you care for a city full of human beings made in my image who, without a prophet declaring my word to them, would be hurtling towards judgment and destruction because of their sin. That I cannot allow."
  - ii. And when our translation say "persons" or "people" in verse eleven that's God using the special Hebrew word *adam* here, referring to human beings. It's the word used back in Genesis 1 when God makes mankind in his image, male and female. Do you see? God's appeal to Jonah is based on the people's bearing of his image rather than any worthiness on their part. Jonah is using the wrong yardstick with which to measure them, and he has his priorities in completely the wrong order. He is measuring them by their threat to his idol of nationalism, God measures them by their bearing of his image. And here's the key: there are no gradations in the image of God. All people great and small, rich and poor, good and evil, bear his image, regardless of where they come from, or whether they are part of your tribe or not. God is saying, "If you can have compassion on plants, shouldn't I have compassion on people?"
  - iii. God even numbers the amount of people in the city and reminds us of what you could call the 'mathematics of compassion': the city has more of the image of God per square inch than any other place on earth. That's not to say that rural areas and suburbs are any less needy of the gospel, but let that thought sink in for a moment.
    1. Last week a friend in the church took my parents and I to the Yodogawa fireworks display, which was absolutely spectacular. But I have never seen so many people packed into one area! By some accounts there were 600,000 people on the banks of the river that night. There are just under 2.7m in this city alone. And how do you think God feels about those people?
    2. It was recently Obon in Japan, and all across the country millions of people were going through religious rituals many don't understand or even believe. They don't know their right hand from their left, spiritually speaking. They have no idea how to relate to the Living God or how they should live their lives, and should we not have compassion on them to befriend and teach them of our great God and saviour? We were once like them! But God had compassion on us. Are you joining yourself to people outside of the family of God? How many meaningful connections do you have with people who don't yet share your faith?
  - iv. Because compassion needs a connection. The word used for compassion here means. **It means something like having your eyes filled with tears of pity concerning someone. The word compassion literally means to "suffer with" someone.** This is the language of attachment! God needs nothing and no-one, but he sovereignly, voluntarily joins his heart to people choosing to feel grief with them.
    1. We see this astounding compassion for the multitudes displayed in the person of Jesus. He sat and looked out over another wicked city that

kills the prophets and stones those sent to it, Jerusalem, and instead of being filled with burning anger he wept over it and then went to the cross for it praying even as they crucified him, “ Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 19:41-42; Matthew 23:37; Luke 23:34). Don't you see? Jesus is the true and greater Jonah! God's compassion connected him to us in the incarnation, in the person of Jesus the “man of sorrows” who was so because he took on our grief and our sorrows. He moved into the neighborhood. He got close enough to catch our disease.

***Trans.** So we've seen how our idols prevent us from feeling God's compassion, but he pursues us with trials and disappointments to expose what they are, and shows his compassionate attachment to us ultimately in Jesus.*

### Conclusion

And the book of Jonah ends on a cliffhanger. It feels as if there might be a missing page or a couple of paragraphs that were lost to really round out the story. Instead we're left with God's question ringing at the end of this remarkable book of the bible. The question God asks is aimed originally at Jonah, but at the end of the book Jonah disappears and we realise the question is ultimately aimed at us. So, what will your answer be?