

## **Reading:** Jonah 4

**Theme:** The Lord gives and takes away!

What a state to be in! Out of sorts with God - and everyone else; angry, bitter, displeased, wanting life to end, even resenting God's blessing of others who do not, in our estimation, deserve to be blessed. It is incredible how so often we are like Jonah – for he was feeling the same things! Jonah is representative of us when we are resentful of God because of His dealings not only with us or our loved ones, but we, like Jonah, can be angry at God for showing good to others when we feel they should not have it!

Jonah was out of sorts with God, resented Him and His kindness to Nineveh and Jonah told God so! Yet God doesn't blow His top, lose His temper and punish Jonah, but, as we saw last week, the Lord dealt ever so gently with Jonah. The first way God dealt gently with him was verbally – gracious and gentle words. He asked Jonah to consider whether he was doing well to be angry. God urged Jonah to think about what was going on – if His sparing a great number of people, showing His gracious and compassionate character, His caring for the eternal well-being of many and working in them so that they would turn to Him in repentance was a good or bad thing! Surely Jonah should have recognised this was to be a time of rejoicing, of pleasure, delight and not a time of anger and bitterness. In asking such a question of Jonah, the Lord was gently, but clearly rebuking him and his anger and showing that he was wrong and foolish to be angry in this way!

The Lord did not end His dealings with Jonah here. True Jonah did not answer, but God went further and dealt gently with Jonah by giving him **an object lesson**. Here an object is used to teach a great truth, or series of truths or facts. God does not just drop on Jonah and tell him off, or tell him *"Look here Jonah, don't you know... and that is why I am doing this."* No, God allows Jonah to go his own sweet way and then to show him the folly of his ways and the rightness of the Lord's ways and dealings with Nineveh. All this is done so that Jonah would not only be convinced, but be in sympathy, in harmony with God's working. So often we too are short-sighted and can feel God has got things wrong in our lives, in the lives of others or in the life of the church. Yet He has not - and never will get things wrong. We have such short-sighted and distorted views of God's wise working and we are too ready to complain, when He really does know what He is doing!

Jonah, unable to answer the Lord regarding his anger, storms off and goes out of Nineveh. At some nice convenient point, he made himself a little shelter, probably out of sticks and branches with leaves on them to give a bit of shade from the sun. He sat there, waiting to see if his temper tantrum had any sway with God. Probably he went out of the city because he expected it to be destroyed and he didn't want to be there when that happened - even though he wanted the Lord to end his life! I wonder what was going through Jonah's heart and mind as he sat there. Perhaps one thought could have filled his heart and mind *"What will happen to the city?"* Jonah was almost willing, daring God to destroy the city. His only care was to see what happened, yet for a time he was distracted and made himself a little shelter.

Yet even as Jonah sat stewing in the juices of his own anger and displeasure; challenging God's goodness and kindness to Nineveh, the Lord shows that same goodness and kindness to Jonah in His provision and gentle dealings with him. God doesn't drop Jonah, leave him to stew in his own juices, nor does He deal harshly and cruelly with him, although he well deserved such! No, the Lord does Jonah good! He gives a gift to Jonah even in return for his bad attitude. Let's see two things about this gift:

### **1. The Lord provides the vine** (v6)

Imagine we were Jonah. We have stamped our feet; demanded things go our way. We are out in the country, things are pretty bad on the whole and we wake up one morning and there is this fully grown vine, gourd, plant that has sprung up - whether it's freestanding, or intertwined into our shelter and it gives us protection from the sun. We would feel fine, or at least better. It is cooler in the shade. Surely, we could think, imagine this means God is for us. The circumstances were now more favourable, surely God is going to grant the end we wanted and expected for Nineveh.

We are told Jonah was glad of the gourd, the vine; was very happy for it. It eased his bodily discomfort – physically, possibly mentally and spiritually as he probably took it as a sign that God was with him. Yet God intended this vine, this plant not to be an end in and of itself, but as a means to an end... Jonah may have enjoyed it too much, derived too much comfort from it, read too much into what it was saying. We are to beware of reading too much into our temporal blessings.

Yes, the Lord provides such things for us richly and freely. Yes, there may be much to encourage us, but we are not to dare presume to take our assurance for spiritual realities and eternal life from these. God has given us His word and if we do not obey it, no matter how we prosper, we are in a dreadful state. Many people ignore the Lord Jesus Christ, they live a life with no thought or care of Him, break His laws, break mankind's laws derived from God's laws and yet they may prosper greatly, even die at an old age and in peaceful circumstances. Yet even if they gain the whole world and lose their eternal souls, then they are the greatest losers and fools!

Yes, God does give to His and all people these times of temporal comfort and encouragements, but these are not to be the focus or foundation of our desires, hope and assurance. Such blessings can all be suddenly removed - health, prosperity, jobs, success, friends and even family. As young Christians, the Lord may indeed encourage us on in such ways, but as we mature, such things should not be our focus. Sadly, we often still walk by sight and not by faith, yet our loving God encourages us still because He knows what we are like!

We are to note from this verse that it was God who provided the vine. It was a special and gracious act of God, to care for this rebellious prophet. What a wonderful God we have - He cares for this rebellious prophet, even for his physical comfort. When Jonah seemed to have forfeited every right, God has a superabundance of love and care for Him! Yes, we can see God's gentle dealings with Jonah in providing the vine, but we are to see and note God's gentle care and dealings

with us in so many, many ways and through so many blessings He has sent our way. The goodness of God should bring us to repentance and go always in His ways. Now we move on and see how God continues to gently and graciously deal with Jonah to do him good:

## **2. The Lord removes the vine** (v7 & 8)

Jonah had delighted in the vine, had become attached to it! There he was in his shelter with his vine and was in relative ease and comfort. Then suddenly it dies and withers. If that wasn't bad enough, not only was he upset, but the sun blazed down, a hot dry wind blew and poor Jonah was soon suffering heatstroke, dehydration and exhaustion. That which had been Jonah's trust, now caused him to be angry and dismayed again (v8b-9) and once more he wanted to die - all because this vine had died!

God wants us all to realise there is nothing reliable in this world - our health, strength, goodness, character, family, friends, society, governments, royalty, possessions, wisdom or learning. We build on these things to our own peril. What we need is something that is forever firm, true and reliable. God has provided that - it is His word and this points us wonderfully to the Truth - the Lord Jesus. All else is sinking quicksand. We would be fools to build on sand, sinking sand, but so many do. They ignore the Lord Jesus, ignore what God's word has to say for living life and ignore the solid rock and build upon sinking sand. If we do that, then all will seem fine, until the storms come - troubles, sickness, disasters, especially the great storm of death. Without the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ in our life, all we have done will be

swept away, remembered as of no consequence. No matter our achievements, comforts, qualifications, successes, prosperity or lack of these, none of them will stand, but will all be swept away.

We must all base our lives on the word of God, especially on the Saviour it gloriously proclaims and centres upon. Even as Christians we are not to base our assurance on physical blessings and encouragements, but lean on what Christ has done for and in us, on what His word says and promises to all who have Him as their Saviour.

If we do not, then we can be like Jonah and our happiness depends on our outward circumstances alone. Jonah was very happy one day, wanting to die the next. Why? All because of a little plant! Here was the source of Jonah's comfort - a plant that grew up overnight. What do we base our comfort and assurance on? Is it on our church attendance, our religion, our praying, our goodness, our wealth and health, our abilities? We are not to look to any of these, not even to our husbands or wives, parents or children. We are not to look at a church, any church, to the church officers or the pastor as the basis of our strength and comfort. We are to seek God and we are to make Him, His salvation and His promises our comfort alone. As a church we have much to encourage us as we hold out the gospel, as we seek to teach and preach God's word, but even if these comforts and encouragements dry up, we must still hold onto God's word and must proclaim it. We are to always look to the Giver and not only at His gifts.

We are to look ever to the Lord Jesus - Hebrews 12:2 *"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."* All our hopes and encouragements are to be centred on Jesus. We are to consciously try to develop a right appreciation of all that our Saviour sends to encourage and bless us. These are to be seen as tokens of good to us, but we are to be careful not to become preoccupied with them alone, but we are to recognise that He gives us all things richly to enjoy. If we are not right with Him and yet know great blessings in our lives, then the goodness of God should lead us to repentance - to seek Him for the greatest of blessings and wealth - that which is eternal, that which will never fade or perish, will never rot or rust, nor be taken from us, but will be kept safe for us. Yes, we will also enjoy it even while here on earth and then one day it will be fully and wonderfully made known.

This hope is based on the solid rock of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that even in dark times, we have a hope, a firm foundation, a strong anchorage that will keep us safe and secure in all the storms of life, and in the storm of death. God dealt gently with Jonah in sending this worm. For it made him take his eyes off the vine, for it died, and he had to put his eyes onto God who does not. We need to realise God deals with us wisely and gently in both sending vines into our lives and removing them, so that we come to rely on God and Him alone. In our lives there will be blessings, and there will be things that seem to take away from or spoil those blessings, but we are to look beyond these passing fancies and see the God who is eternally our God in Christ Jesus, that we are safe and secure in His

hands, no matter what those hands allow to come our way and whether we value those things as blessings or not. In all things we can know the work of God the Holy Spirit, who is called the Comforter, the Helper and He can bring comfort and help to us in our darkest and most confusing situations.

Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5:7 (NKJV) "*casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.*" It is quite amazing that the God of heaven would have us cast our cares and concerns upon Him, because He really and truly cares for us. David going through times of trouble wrote of all the various troubles and opposition he had and then he encouraged himself and others with these words Psalm 55:22 (NKJV) "*Cast your burden on the LORD, And He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved.*" The NIV translates "*burden*" as "*cares*". Our God is a great big God, who cares for us, He is bigger than our cares and burdens and is able to keep us in all that He blesses us with, keep us even when He removes those blessings. One thing we as Christians have known through the years, is our God can be trusted and He will not let us down. I pray we would know His help, care and comfort in the situations of life we go through, as He wisely and lovingly allows seeming good or bad providences to come our way.