

## **Reading:** Jonah 4

**Theme:** The vine and the city.

I do not know how you are feeling this evening. You may be happy or sad; you may view life with joy or with apprehension and fear. You may be optimistic for the future, or you may be pessimistic. It could be that everything in the garden of life seems to be coming up roses and the sun is shining on your life. On the other hand, there may be dark clouds sweeping across your sky and your life seems full of thistles and thorns.

As we have looked at Jonah, we have seen he was a man of passions, of moods - happy, but then downcast and wishing for his life to end. We left him feeling like this last time. He was happy one day as God had provided a vine, a plant to shade him, give him some relief from the sun. The next day he's wishing to die; all because God had caused the vine to wither. Jonah's happiness was bound up with the vine and when it died and withered, so did his happiness. What a foolish thing to do, to base one's happiness on a frail plant! Yet we can so easily do the same, but our vines may seem more substantial - our health, abilities, wealth, bank balance, jobs, possessions, loved ones, families, even our favourite sports team or pop star. Yet these too can be so easily removed and what are we left with? It is so easy for our hearts to become entwined in such, our happiness and security rests in and on them. We, like Jonah, can be very happy about such - even when we are out of sorts with God, we can be the happier with these things.

We saw how God dealt so gently with Jonah in both sending and removing the vine. It shows God's gracious and gentle

love. God cared enough for Jonah, not just to dump him, but to gently use this vine as an object lesson. The Lord wasn't acting callously, in a cold, hard hearted way, but was using this vine - its giving and removal, as a means to an end. Even as God did so, Jonah came out with suicidal mutterings, he was again hot and bothered - not just physically, but emotionally and he wished to die (v8). Jonah was in the doldrums; desperately fed up and suffering from heatstroke, dehydration and exhaustion as well as being mentally and spiritually out of sorts with God.

What do we do when we come to the point when we cannot and should not put our trust in earthly things? At such times we can find we get so little, if any, comfort from all that has been so precious to us. In such times God wants us to look to Him, to learn to delight in Him. He told the people of Judah through the prophet Isaiah (26:3 ESV) *"You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you."* This is where God's dealings and God's goodness should bring us - to a deeper trust in Him, for He gives us so much and even if He should remove things, we are still to trust Him. He may remove the basis of our trust in earthly things to show us, remind us that we are just frail creatures who should seek our eternal wellbeing first and foremost and not to build our nests as if they are going to last forever, for even the forest in which we build will one day disappear. See 3 things:

### **1. God's persistent probing.**

The Lord not only took the vine away, but to make sure the lesson was not lost, He probed Jonah's mind and conscience -

as we see in v9. Jonah is asked if he had any right to be angry about the vine. It was just a little plant that grew up overnight, and then it perished; yet Jonah was really upset by that. The Lord could have asked Jonah why on earth he was sitting out there in the sun in the first place! But Jonah wasn't listening and he told God that he had every right to be angry. It would seem he was attached to the vine; it was a great comfort to him and it made him very happy.

The Lord probed Jonah a bit more in v10 and reminded him that the vine hadn't been there when Jonah settled down there; Jonah had not asked for it; hadn't planted it; Jonah had not cared for it at all. It grew up overnight and suddenly it had withered and died. Was the death of a little plant the cause of so much anger and suicidal mutterings? Amazingly it seemed it was! As God probed, He was gently showing Jonah the folly of such an attachment to the vine and the folly of wanting his own death. Jonah was a seething mixture of anger, resentment, bitterness, brooding and frustration. The matter of the plant dying sent him over the top, even wishing he could die!

Are there times when we are like Jonah? I suspect there could be. When a seemingly little, insignificant thing can at times bring us to despair, hopelessness, depression and even tears. For some it can even result in a death wish, or an escape route. How often have we, in such situations, lashed out - blaming circumstances, blaming others - even those nearest and dearest to us, even blaming God. Our passions, our tempers get the better of us - all because of a little incident that becomes the last straw to us in our out-of-sorts attitude and

we just blow up and someone, somewhere catches the force of it! This can be true of us all whether or not we are Christians. Even as Christians, this shows us the ugliness of sin in our lives; also, it underlines that no one is perfect this side of heaven.

Here the Lord probed Jonah to show him the unreasonableness of his anger over the vine, so He then drew out the lesson that Jonah and we are to learn from. Jonah was concerned over this little plant; it grew, flourished and died without his care or attention. Jonah's anger delivered him into God's hands and God taught Jonah about His free grace and His concern for the lost. Let's look at those 2 points now:

## **2. God's free grace.**

Jonah had to realise the vine was a free gift from God's love to him. God gave it when He wanted, and God could remove it when He wanted. Yet Jonah acted as if God owed him the vine, but it was not so. At that point Jonah deserved nothing good from God, yet it was given because of God's goodness and love. We read in the book of Job - who had been given many, many good things, he had been greatly blessed, but he had his "vines" removed. As that happened Job saw the hand of God in it and said of all he had lost and had taken away (1:21 & 2:10 AV) *"the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD...What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"*

Do we realise that we deserve no good thing from God? Naturally we are His enemies - we made the choice; we go

against Him and His ways; we so often do not desire to have God in our hearts, minds and lives. Yet He gives us so many good things. How do we react to such - not only when they are given, but when they are removed? It is so easy to worship our vines more than God; they can become our idols and they have a higher place in our affections than God Himself. It is easy to end up loving the gifts more than the Giver.

Jonah was to learn that though his vine died, his God had not! We also are to learn that "*all may change but Jesus never, glory to His name*" Jonah's God was the God of grace, even giving good things to rebels like Jonah! Grace means things undeserved and unmerited are given to us. They cannot be earned, or worked for. If God is the God of all grace, then not one of us can object if God shows that grace to others too. Jonah had no right to challenge God's grace being shown to Nineveh in sparing the city and blessing its inhabitants with life. In fact, he should have rejoiced.

Nineveh was a great city, with 120,000 who could not tell their right hand from their left (*could this possibly be children under a certain age, or those with no learning or understanding*) - there were also many cattle in the city. Wasn't it right that God should show concern over them? If Jonah was concerned over a little plant, shouldn't God be concerned for that great city? Surely Jonah had to answer "*Yes!*" Those who didn't know right from left (*the children?*) and the cattle were mentioned to remind Jonah that these ones were not guilty of the wickedness that had come up before the Lord and these had caused pity in Him. Jonah was daring the Lord to destroy this city, but he had not considered the young

or ignorant ones, the animals who would have perished. Yet Jonah had so much concern over a little plant, but what about those innocent, ignorant and unlearned ones in the city of Nineveh?

Jonah was reminded of God's free grace, in sparing the city, which like him, deserved destruction, but undeservedly, both received forgiveness and were spared. The Lord went on to teach Jonah of:

### **3. God's concern for the lost.**

Jonah was reprovved because he was so concerned over the vine, but could not understand God's concern for the lost in Nineveh. Have we noted the contrast between v10 and v11? "*BUT Nineveh...*" - that great city with possibly up to half a million people in it! God showed Jonah that his priorities, his view of all things was wrong. Jonah didn't want the vine destroyed, should God want Nineveh destroyed? Jonah had to think on that and consider it well!

The Lord reminded Jonah he had done nothing towards the vine, it was only a plant, it would grow up and soon die anyway; but Nineveh was an ancient city, was full of people, and all these had immortal souls. God had every right to be concerned for it, to spare it and show His mercy and grace to it.

We are to realise that as men and women, boys and girls, we can so easily be taken up with temporal things, the things of here and now. They are not unimportant and we are to be concerned for our bodies, their health, well-being, feeding,

clothing and comfort; but these are not to be our exclusive, our primary concerns for ourselves and our families? The Puritans pictured our bodies as wonderful jewel boxes and were to be appreciated and cared for, but that which is of real worth, is the jewel inside - our immortal soul. Do we concern ourselves with the well-being of our own soul? God is very concerned for it, so concerned He did an amazing thing for our souls - He sent His Son, the Lord Jesus to die so our precious souls could be eternally spared; not just spared, but enjoy His glorious home and realm of existence i.e. heaven, as well as knowing great joys and pleasures here on earth.

None of us deserve or can earn this, but it is of God's grace alone and it is of His love, compassion and undeserved free grace. Do we personally know this love of God revealed by the Lord Jesus? I'm not asking if we go to church, or if we are religious, but do we know that God has forgiven us personally, our wrong (sin), is transferred and punishment we deserved for it onto His Son the Lord Jesus and He has shown us this in NT. Has He come to us and made us His child as we have personally trusted the Lord Jesus as our own Saviour?

God has this concern for us. We were naturally lost, away from God and heading to hell as His rebellious enemies, only by trusting the Lord Jesus, can we be spared from what we deserve; we can know God's love and grace in our lives. If we don't know these things, then we can know them personally even this evening. If we do know them, then we are to not only rejoice in such, but tell others of it. We're not to get the Jonah syndrome and be looking for judgement on others when we are alright. We should want to show and tell the good news

of the Lord Jesus to all. We are to have a concern for those who do not know the Lord Jesus - for God's word, the Bible says they are lost and He is serious! We may have all kinds of excuses why we do not tell others, but none of them takes away from us the responsibility to try to tell people of our Lord and even before we do so, we are to be praying for them.

Jonah had to learn of God's concern for the lost - even those who were, to his heart and mind, lower than the lowest. Jonah was to learn that the Gentiles (non-Jews) were to know God's salvation. In so doing he foreshadows the gospel as it has gone into the entire world - that whosoever believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved. This is the note that the book of Jonah ends on - God's love and compassion being given to Jew (Jonah) and non-Jew (the Ninevites) and this all of His grace. This is the God of salvation, who would have all people everywhere to repent, trust the Lord Jesus and know eternal life. I ask again, do we know the Lord Jesus as our God and Saviour? If we do, then we are to live for Him, be like Him and have a concern for those who are lost and need this Saviour God has provided. In this Saviour is one greater than Jonah and we will look at Him who is greater than Jonah in more detail next time.