

Reading: Jonah 4

Theme: Pleasing self or honouring God?

One of the sad things about growing up is you come to realise that every story does not end "*and they lived happily ever after*". Some learn this reality sooner than others. If this book of Jonah had ended at chapter 3, we may have felt it was abrupt, but we would have been able to say that there was a happy ending, for we would have seen Jonah obedient to God, preaching God's word, the city turning in repentance to God, seeking His mercy and God sparing the city. It would have been a lovely ending, suited to the sentimental part of many. Yet we have chapter 4 which starkly casts a long dark shadow upon Jonah. It seems he is back to square one as we again read of a hard-hearted, rebellious and angry prophet. It seems there is no happy ending; neither are we told if Jonah ever overcame his anger, bitterness, or if he ever changed his attitude. It seems Jonah passes from the scene of history and his last recorded words appear to be bitterness and anger towards God!

Thankfully the book of Jonah does not end on that note; yes, sure it is there, as we see Jonah's anger in v1-3 & 5, but in v6-11, especially v10-11 we learn of God's great goodness, compassion and mercy. The anger of Jonah and the compassion of God are deliberately placed side-by-side to be contrasted. Here we are brought face to face with the central message of this book - God's compassion. Yet like a good novel, it is only unfolded in all its grandeur here in this last chapter. Why would God send Jonah to Nineveh? Why spare the rebellious prophet? Why bring about a humbling and repentance in the people of Nineveh? It was so that God could

show that He was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

Yet incredibly, it is God's compassion, slow anger and abundant love that were the very things that caused Jonah to be angry and sulk! This is nothing less than sin and rebellion against God. We are to keep in mind that this was revealed by Jonah himself - for the details could come from no one else - his words, prayer, feelings, accounts of events, not only in this chapter, but also in the whole book. He didn't minimise, sanitise his feelings, his anger, but opened himself honestly in this book - whether written by him, or by someone he shared these things with to write the book.

Jonah is not a one-off, but is typical of so many Christians. I do not mean that they or we go to a literal Nineveh, but in the way we can so easily harden our hearts to the people around us, to other Christians and can resent God blessing or showing any kindness to them - not openly, but maybe in our innermost beings. I want us to begin to look at Jonah's anger to see what we can learn, be warned by and apply to our own lives and we see:

1. Jonah's resentment (v1)

Why does Jonah have this reaction? It is incredible! He was a man of God, a prophet; he had been greatly dealt with by God and had done great service for the Lord in time past. Even recently in his life he had been greatly humbled, had prayed, been wonderfully spared and restored - not only to life itself, but also to the service of his God. He had been used of God in a revival situation and had seen a whole wicked city turn to

the Lord. Surely that last point alone would have been enough for us to be rejoicing, to contact the Christian press to hold their front pages, write a blog so all could join in with our rejoicing and praise to God!

Yet Jonah showed no such rejoicing, but resented, was angry at what God did in sparing Nineveh. More than that, he had a tantrum, a meltdown, a mega sulk and stormed out of the city, sat down and watched to see if his tantrum would allow him to get his own way (v5). It seems Jonah took no pleasure at all in God's work of grace in and towards Nineveh.

Jonah brooded over things as he saw what had happened; it festered in his heart and mind; he resented it. Yes, God and the angels may have been rejoicing in heaven over those who had repented, but Jonah was not going to; in fact, he was greatly displeased, resentful and angry and may have thought *"How dare God spare them! What does He think he is doing?"* This sparing and delivering of Nineveh were the last things Jonah wanted; he did not want this blessing on Nineveh and its people - he felt they should not have this blessing! Jonah could not accept or see any purpose in such; it caused him great problems, confusion in his heart and mind and these were intermingled:

A. The problem of his reputation: Jonah faced the problem of his being regarded as a false prophet. He had proclaimed God's word, the Ninevehites accepted it as from God and yet it did not happen as he had proclaimed. So, he could be deemed as a false prophet. This was not so much a problem as viewed by the Ninevehites, for they were rejoicing that they

had been spared. The problem came by Jonah possibly feeling he would be regarded as a false prophet by the people of Israel and would have no ministry to continue among them. They would consider him as having gone off on a wild goose chase, to have proclaimed things that did not happen and the rebellious people of Israel could dismiss his ministry, his preaching and continue to live as they pleased. They could even have used the matter as an excuse to stone him as a false prophet and silence his pointed preaching to them.

If only God had honoured his preaching, if Nineveh had been overthrown, he could have gone back and boy would the people have listened to him then! He could well imagine the cause of God among his own people could then have moved forward in leaps and bounds as he called them back to repentance, to walking with their God. It would seem Jonah had a problem with his own reputation and credibility. Some people argue that strongly - I feel it may have been involved, but I feel his primary problem, was:

B. The problem of God's honour: if God's word was not fulfilled, then Jonah would lose credibility, but so would the Lord, whose word he had spoken. The problem with Jonah was that he took his work **too** personally. I had better explain—yes, it had to be personal, he had to feel the message he preached and preach it from his heart, but it was too personal - **he** had to be vindicated, **his** work had to proceed as **he** pictured, as **he** declared, as **he** envisaged it! It had to occur as **he** wanted and desired. It became **his** work and was not seen as the **Lord's** work - in which he was but an instrument.

Jonah had forgotten he was just a frail man, with limited understanding. His past experiences of God, indeed his great experience recently of God's compassion did not give him leave to do as he pleased; to do and expect all to be as he imagined or desired. Jonah still had lessons to learn and we see the lesson he needed was about God's compassion in v6-11. At that point of time Jonah could not understand how God could forgive the people of Nineveh. They were a wicked, cruel, heartless people who threatened the very existence of Israel. Jonah felt strongly about this. Yes, he was a man of passion, **but he was not a man of compassion!** He did not honour God, His compassion and ways, as Jonah could not grasp how God could be honoured by having compassion on the Ninevehites.

“Ah!” says someone *“It means his repentance and prayer earlier was a sham.”* No, it doesn't. There is no need to doubt his change of heart after his disobedience and restoration. It was no light thing he vowed, nor was his commitment to the renewed task false, nor his proclamation of God's word to be doubted. With some people, they may regard sin as such a light thing and repentance as a casual thing and we may have reasons to doubt their sincerity; but this was not so with Jonah. The heart of the reason why Jonah was angry was that he was not wholly committed in heart to whatever **God** might do in Nineveh as a result of his preaching. Jonah had **his own agenda and ideas** for Nineveh as a result of his preaching and Jonah did not honour God, His ways and purposes - as he imagined, felt what had happened did not serve the end of God's honour and glory. Jonah's own ideas were deeply imbedded and were unaffected by his knowledge of God's

graciousness and compassion. Here we see Jonah's unwillingness to go against his deep-seated ideas when they were confronted by God's way of mercy to Nineveh and they boil over at this point! There was no way Jonah was going to give up his own will and ideas – even for God! He was headstrong in his zeal and ideas and it caused him to be angry and displeased with God.

Let's move away from Jonah for a short time as it would be so easy to consider him a one off, a unique case, but I suspect that he is typical, is a representative of even the greatest Christian. All of us can have our lapses, our areas of weakness, our prejudices and our blind spots. There are things in our lives, our backgrounds and our personalities that will cause us to either ignore or play down parts of God's word, that would cause us to question someone else's stance on a matter, because it does not suit us! In Jonah's case it was his exclusive nationalistic idea that God **must only** be merciful to the people of Israel. What in our lives would cause us to put self, our ideas before God, His honour and glory?

Each one of us has to beware of sin, for sin is so deceitful as well as sinful! It can cause us to be snared and we will not know it! It will cause a pride and arrogance in our lives and hearts (e.g. Samson) and even cause us to question God as to how and why He could bless others; this can lead us to the same sin as Jonah and we become displeased and angry with God! We could feel we are justified in resenting His blessing of others, whether they are individuals, churches or even saving souls who should not, in our minds and estimation, be saved!

Jonah left this area in his life untouched by God. This was a no-go area for God in his life. Sadly, Jonah's hopes, desires etc were dominated by his own understanding, feelings and plans. These areas were not handed over to the Lord, into His hands, ways and working. That meant that when things did not go as he planned or wanted, his resentment and anger flared up and he felt right in reproaching God.

Jonah had a darling sin – nationalistic pride that was not touched even by his deliverance from the belly of the fish. Should it surprise us if we find that we have not been made exempt from all of our own creaturely failings? None of us are immune! We all have our own areas of weakness and different situations in our life will expose those! Realise the devil will attack us in our areas of weakness. For some it will be drink, or money, or lust, or temper, or pride, or cruel words, or wrong and resentful thoughts, or indifference and many more areas – simple or complicated! Yet realise the devil will also attack and overcome us in areas where we are or feel so strong...

We need to face up and realise the facts that none of us will ever arrive at perfection or be perfect while on earth, we will all get to heaven spiritually limping or maimed in some way. Yes, we are to aim to be perfect, but be aware that sin will be in us and can cause us, like Jonah, to fly off the handle whenever the stronghold of surviving, unkilld, unmortified sin is attacked or assailed by the holy demands of God as He works out His purposes for our lives. Realise and own that Jonah is no worse or different from us and we are all Jonahs

when we sin against that which we know to be right; let alone those times when we sin through ignorance.

Jonah's anger is shown first here in his resentment against God's mercy to the people of Nineveh and he dishonours God. Are we resentful against God or others for their blessings, gifts or standing? If so, then God asks us with Jonah in v4 "*Have you any right to be angry?*" Tonight, all of us should examine our hearts and lives. Sin, resentment, scheming and bitterness can so easily take root in our hearts and lives and will be so hard to get rid of. I pray we all would seek God – to seek God to be right with Him even as believers, but especially if we are not believers, for our sin is complete rebellion against God as we will not have this One rule over us at all! If we are not a believer then we need to seek His forgiveness and have a personal relationship with Him as our Saviour.

As believers we are not to have no go areas for God in our lives, but we are to bring every thought and desire into captivity to Christ, having His mind and ways be in us and affect our lives in every part so that we honour and please Him in all we desire, think, say and do.