

## **Reading:** Jonah 4

**Theme:** Gentle and gracious words.

Jonah! How would we have reacted to him? He was an angry prophet, one who would complain against his God because his God was gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, the God who relents from sending calamity. We saw Jonah's "praying" and part of it was wanting God to take his life as he felt it was better to die than to live. I looked at that at some length last time, reminding us to remember that even the greatest of people can be brought low and wish for death. Yet neither we, nor anyone must take it upon ourselves to end our own or another's life, not even as an act of mercy. We are not to play God. Jonah felt useless, washed up, had no hope for the future and prayed for death. We can count it a blessing God answers prayers according to His wisdom, and not to our desires, whims or our little wisdom. One day we will truly and genuinely thank God for the prayers **He did not answer**, which we wrongly and foolishly prayed. We left Jonah with that startling attitude of prayer, wishing for his life to end. This evening I want us to start looking at **God's gentle dealing with Jonah**.

Jonah the moaner, was bellyaching, complaining, justifying his sin, almost telling God He had things wrong regarding Nineveh. He is bitter, displeased and angry. He does not deserve to be noticed, for God to pay any attention to him. He is throwing a tantrum, a hissy fit to get his own way, to get the attention that he craves and demands. Just like Violet Elizabeth Bott in the Just William books who would scream and scream to make herself sick to get her own way, so Jonah is trying it on with God. He again rebels against God. We may

well have felt like saying "*That's it Jonah, I've had enough. Listen and listen well while I read you the riot act...*" We may have felt we'd get rid of him as he is a waste of time and was going against what we planned.

Thankfully the Lord does not do this. In fact, the Lord deals ever so gently with Jonah - first of all by speaking gently and then secondly by means of an object lesson. We start to look at God's gentle dealings with Jonah to learn from them to help and encourage us. This week we will look at:

**Gentle and gracious words:** God does not pounce on Jonah with harsh words, rebuking and dismissing him out of hand. No, here God shows His gentleness as He rebuked Jonah in v4. (AV "*Doest thou well to be angry?*") Jonah had prayed in anger and arrogance. We may have heard it said often God only answers humble and holy prayers, but here God answers Jonah's second prayer when it was prayed in a spirit and attitude far removed from what we would consider right. We are to be careful in case we put any merit on our "rightness", our "orthodox" approaches to God. We are to realise that even our goodness and tears of repentance need to be repented of as well as our right praying. God is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and demonstrates it clearly here to Jonah in graciously, kindly gently answering and dealing with him. Thankfully our God does that for us and our prayers are most often answered in far better ways than we ever prayed.

God's words, which here came to Jonah in the light of many provocations, show God's gentle patience with Jonah and all

His children. This God is our God and our Father, He puts up with and endures our sin, coldness and failings, even polluting our highest achievements for Him, as well as our best approaches to Him. Jonah had much stacked up against him at this time - he had justified his wrong, almost slandered God's character, had a hot bitter temper in prayer and yet incredibly his God, our God, comes gently and reasons with this same angry, rebellious, arrogant and hot-headed prophet! God could so easily have told Jonah he was wrong, condemned him utterly and this would probably have crushed him completely under a sense of guilt and despair. There are times when we must tell people hard things, but hopefully gently. God doesn't pander to Jonah and say "*There, there, all these problems; go on get them out of your system.*" The Lord gently and wisely calls Jonah to consider his anger and why he is angry. The Lord calls on Jonah to think about what he's doing and feeling.

Jonah needed to answer a number of questions - Was the repentance of sinners a good or bad thing? Was God's mercy being shown to a great number of men and women, boys and girls a good or bad thing? Was his temper tantrum going to change any of the good and right circumstances that provoked his anger? Did he have any right or did he do well to be angry?

If Jonah was honest before God, he would have owned he had no right, no justifiable grounds for his behaviour or attitude, but own that really there were grounds for joy and gladness, for rejoicing as people had turned to God and God had shown mercy on them; that no doubt angels rejoiced in heaven. God's character, His being compassionate, gracious, slow to anger

and abounding in love had been shown. Jonah should have owned these were reasons to rejoice, to then question why he was angry and displeased. Jonah had seen things in the wrong way, He saw distant and imaginary problems; he viewed things through prejudiced, proud sinful eyes. He was not viewing things through rose tinted glasses, but prejudiced and resentful glasses. God's question really was relevant and pointed - *"Have you any right to be angry?"* Here the Lord gently chastises and corrects Jonah's complaining anger and resentment and brought him up short making him consider that actually he was angry at the good hand and good pleasure of the Lord.

God knew Jonah should not be angry. I feel deep down that Jonah knew the same, for he doesn't answer God, but went off to sulk and keep his anger warm as he watches to see what would happen to Nineveh. There were reasons why Jonah's anger was foolish. The same reasons apply to us when we feel angry towards God - such anger is not good, but also foolish for us!

**a. Anger does not alter the situation.**

Thankfully God had more regard for the city of Nineveh than to give up its eternal welfare and His demonstration of His goodness to Gentiles on the whim, the temper tantrum of a disappointed and frustrated angry prophet. Jonah was like a child throwing a tantrum and he imagined he could alter the situation by doing so. Yet he could not, but only show himself up! Many in society do this – throw a wobbly, lose control of their temper and rant and rave if they do not get their own way. It is not right to use the rod of our passion, temper, anger

to get our own way; if we do, then that rod soon is in charge of us and instead of us wielding it; it drives and misuses us.

It would be so easy to condemn Jonah, but we need to pause and ask how we react when things do not go as we imagine or plan. Do we blow up, flare up and lash out? People can easily do this against God. *"Why? I don't... Why don't you...?"* People, we even, can threaten to take or actually take our proverbial bat and ball home. This is what Jonah does as he went out of Nineveh and there, stubbornly, it would be no more prophesying or preaching from him! Yet the situation wasn't affected at all - God's plans and God's purposes would be worked out in God's right, perfect and pleasing will.

### **b. An angry spirit robs us of peace and rest.**

We have glimpsed Jonah at peace and rest, he had a degree of peace and rest as he told the sailors they had to cast him overboard and he appeared at peace and rest as he prayed from within the fish and then on dry land. But here we see Jonah in a temper and far from ease, peace and rest - with himself, others or with God. Jonah did not do well to be angry; it made him speak unadvisedly and unthinkingly. In a hot moment, with a rush of blood to the head, it is best to say or do nothing, else we could say much and do much that would cause regret and shame later. Proverbs 15:1 says *"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."* Yet if we are in a temper or angry, a gentle, soft word or answer is very hard to speak!

By saying or doing things in the heat of the moment, we can have regrets and also store up trouble and problems for

ourselves in the future. If we have done or said anything unwisely in a temper, then we should go and try and sort things out as soon as possible. It will mean we will have to humble ourselves, to own our wrong, even to take back our words and if needs be, to sort out the wrong that we have done. If we do not, then our hearts and minds can be ill at ease and it can undermine our peace and rest. What is worse, it could fester within us and also in the injured or offended party and could spill over into all sorts of problems and divisions within a family, a workplace, neighbourhood or a church. In heated moments, we are to pray the Lord would grant us the grace of a cool head and heart, that He would give us a bridle on our tongues and restrain us from doing or saying wrong things.

### **c. Anger shows weaknesses.**

Jonah shows his weakness when he is angry and he does not do well in being angry. His self-centred desires came to the forefront. If the people of Nineveh who had respected the word he preached could have seen him here, what a different light they would have seen him in! Many people in a moment of weakness, rashness, have destroyed their reputation, especially Christians. Many people in business, industry, politics, the Armed Forces have blown their chances and reputation as they have not controlled their tempers.

Jonah here blew his top; God was not pleased with him. The Bible tells us that Moses was the meekest man in the whole earth and yet in a moment of temper, anger, he struck the rock when God told him to speak to it. Yes, he had the desired result as water flowed out, but Moses suffered the punishment

of not entering the Promised Land because he did not sanctify God before the people of Israel. See how cunning the devil is, for he can cause us to fall in the area of our greatest strength! That is why we need to be on our guard and to ask the Lord not to lead us into temptation.

God had every reason to drop Jonah like a hot potato. Surely if we had been in the belly of the fish for three days and nights, then had been spared, restored to office, seen a great revival in our ministry, we would never sin again or have hard thoughts against God, would we? Doesn't that show the depth and subtlety of sin if such a reaction occurs in this man of God! If Jonah can sin in this way; I don't think any of us can say we would be immune.

I can identify with Jonah as I see, know my own nature, my desires for my own way, my grievance when things don't go as I planned. I see so often I don't deserve any of God's continued goodness to me, but I also see that Jonah's God is my God and I know and have experienced His gentle dealings with me in countless ways. I'm amazed at His love to me, His erring, stubborn child and at times I find my stubborn heart filled afresh with the desire expressed by Charles Wesley expressed in the hymn "Jesus! The Name high over all" *"O that the world might taste and see the riches of His grace; the arms of love that compass me would all mankind embrace."*

This evening if someone here feels isolated, away from the Lord, away from other Christians, maybe knowing they have never trusted the Lord Jesus; then you are to take comfort. For God isn't out to destroy you, crush you, or quench your light

and life, but He would have you know His love, His compassion, His long-suffering and He would have you restored to Him, even come to Him for the first time. There is an old chorus, which some feel is over sentimental, but it expresses the truth of the Saviour's love, compassion and understanding. *"Standing somewhere in the shadows you'll find Jesus; He's the only one who cares and understands. Standing somewhere in the shadows you will find Him, and you'll know Him by the nail prints in His hands"*

If there are shadows in our life - shadows of sin, of resentment, of hurt or fear or a host of other things, then I would encourage us to seek the Lord and we will find He will deal gently, tenderly with us. Yes, it may not be a pleasant process, but He will be patient and gentle; He will deal with situations, hurts, fear and grief in our life. He will cause us to examine our life – which will not be pleasant, but He will draw us again to Him, to His love, to His death and resurrection - to save us or to restore us. It is quite extraordinary the lengths to which He will go to save and to restore someone like us. Yet He will do it because He cares, has compassion and is abounding in love. He did that here with Jonah as He dealt with him using gracious and gentle words, but He didn't stop there; for He also dealt practically by means of an object lesson - as we will go on to see next time.