

Jonah 3:10 - 4:11

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[0 : 00] Do you love Aberdeen? Do you love this city that you live in? Or if you're not from Aberdeen and you're visiting today, wherever you come from, do you love your city?

That's the question I want us to think about and to ask ourselves as we look at the Word of God this morning. Now, we know the background to Jonah, to this text, because we've just read through four short chapters together.

We know from what we've just read that Jonah was a prophet and he was called by God to go and preach to this great city of Nineveh. Now, he was ultra-reluctant to do this and he fled in the opposite direction.

But, as we know because we've just read, he eventually ended up in Nineveh and he preached there. Now, in its day, Nineveh was a huge city of great international importance.

You know, when you hear Nineveh, think New York or Paris or London or maybe somewhere like New Orleans in the southern states, known locally there as Sin City, it's that kind of a place that we're talking about.

[1 : 23] It's a place where you would find a bit of everything. It was full of the good and the bad and the ugly. Whatever you want to find, art, culture, violence, love, sports, whatever, you could find it in Nineveh.

That's the kind of place that God called him to go and preach to. And once he went and he preached there, as we've just read, the Ninevites repented en masse and asked for God to forgive them.

Now, maybe at this point you're saying, well, okay, but what does that have to do with me? What does it have to do with us? It has everything to do with us.

You see, like Jonah, we are people who find ourselves in a great city. Like Nineveh, Aberdeen is an important international city.

It's full of the good and the bad and the ugly. And like Jonah, we are also faced with this same question. Do you love the city?

[2 : 30] And I know that a lot of us, when we're asked, do you love Aberdeen, would quickly respond with yes. You know, we love the solid granite stone feel of the place.

It feels immovable. We say, oh, well, we love the kind of independent mindedness of the people.

Or, you know, we love the universities and the sense of learning or all of these different things.

And, you know, we hear, do we love Aberdeen? And we say yes, because of these kinds of reasons. But what I want you to see this morning is that the question, do you love Aberdeen?

Or do you love your city? Is one of the deepest and most soul-searching questions that you will ever be asked.

We're going to look at chapter 3, verse 10, through to the end of chapter 4, and take away three points. The first point is this, that it is a great sin not to love the city.

[3 : 39] It's a great sin not to love the city. We're looking at chapter 3, verse 10, into chapter 4, verse 1. Let's look together at Jonah's response to what happened in Nineveh.

They're faced with a stern message, repent or God will judge you. And they repent. And because of that, God relents from the destruction he had warned them with.

And Jonah's response to this, we read, is to be greatly displeased and become angry. Now, this obviously wasn't written first in English.

It was written a long time ago in Hebrew. And in Hebrew, in these two verses, there's a play on words that's really important. It comes across a wee bit in English, but in Hebrew it stares at you.

And it's a play on one word that crops up three times. And it's a word that means evil. It's a word ra'ah, which means evil. You see it first of all in chapter 3, verse 10.

[5 : 00] The Ninevites repented of their evil, of their ra'ah. That's the first place that the word occurs. So, all the negative connotations of evil are with the Ninevites.

You know, they are the evil characters at this point in the verse. So, they repent of their evil. And then we see that God then had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction. That's the same word ra'ah, evil. He didn't bring upon them the dark calamity that he had threatened. So, that's where the word comes up the second time.

And it crops up the third time in the next verse. But Jonah was greatly displeased. Literally, to Jonah it was a great evil.

Ra'ah. It's the same word again. And in two sentences, you have this big turnaround in the story. Because in chapter 3, verse 10, the Ninevites are evil.

[6 : 02] They are ra'ah. All of the negative connotations are with them. And then God forgives them when they repent. And all of a sudden, the negative connotations are shifted across.

And they are attached to Jonah. Because what God did was evil to him. Great evil. Ra'ah. It's an important play on words. Now, remember that Nineveh is the sin city of its day.

Whatever you wanted to find, you could find it in Nineveh. And it was a brutal place as well. It was a place where they would take their enemies, take them back to their cities, skin them alive and wait for them to die.

That's the kind of place you're talking about. It was a place of great cultural development, international significance, but also a morally evil, ethically corrupt place.

And yet, here's what happens. Jonah preaches. The Ninevites repent. God shows them grace. But Jonah doesn't love Nineveh. He becomes angry at their forgiveness.

[7 : 03] And because of this, all of the morally dubious connotations are now attached to Jonah.

In this story, which is about a big pagan city, it's Jonah who becomes the guilty character. And, you know, it's just not what we would expect, is it?

It's not how you would predict the story to go along. It's a story involving sin city and a prophet of God. And if someone was to say to you, well, which one do you think will be the morally negative character?

Wouldn't you expect it to be Nineveh? This big pagan city. But no, it's actually Jonah. He's the one with all the negative connotations of wrath, of evil, attached to him.

And that's all because fundamentally, he doesn't love the city that God has sent him to. Now, you might well be thinking, well, that's definitely not me, because I love Aberdeen, and when good things happen to Aberdeen, I think it's great.

[8 : 10] And if you're a Christian, you might say, well, in fact, if Aberdeen was to suddenly do an about turn and repent and accept God, I'd be delighted and not furious. And in that sense, we instinctively try and distance ourselves from Jonah.

And maybe we also try and distance ourselves from him by saying, well, he was probably reacting in some kind of a racist, nationalistic way, because the Ninevites and the Israelites were enemies, and I'm not at war with Aberdeen like he was at war with Nineveh.

And we try and put some distance in that way. But remember what we were saying at the beginning, that this question, do you love Aberdeen, is a question that proves you at a far deeper level than that.

And we're going to see that as we go through the rest of chapter four. So that's what we've seen. Point number one, it's a great sin not to love the city. Point number two is that you can have sound beliefs, but still not love the city.

You can have sound beliefs, but still not love the city. We're looking at verses two to five in chapter four. He prayed to the Lord, Oh Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home?

[9 : 30] That's why I was so quick to flee to Tarsus. The really strange thing about the story of Jonah, about this book, the thing that we would never really expect to happen if we were trying to predict how it will go, is that it was a story of whether a big, pagan, God-rejecting city will be saved or destroyed.

And in that story, you have God as the one arguing for the city to be saved, for this corrupt place to be redeemed. So he's the one arguing for the city.

Now, who do you expect to be the antagonist, the person arguing against God? Wouldn't you think, well, probably it'll be the big city because it's a big, God-rejecting city anyway.

But, no, it's not the Ninevites who are arguing against God in Jonah. The antagonist of the story is Jonah himself.

It's the prophet, the religious moralist. And because he doesn't love the city, he is the one who is diametrically opposed.

[10 : 45] He's in direct opposition to God and to God's plans to show grace to this big city. Now, my point here is this, that when we hear the question, do you love the city?

And we see that Jonah didn't love the city. When we hear that question, isn't one of our first responses to say, well, I've got good theology.

You know, I've read the Bible and I believe it's true. You know, God so loved the world drips off our tongues really easily. Maybe, you know, we've read the Westminster Confession of Faith and agree with all of that as well.

and you think that simply because you believe good doctrine that you're safe, therefore, from this sin of not loving your city.

Look at verse 2. He prayed to the Lord, O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? Remember what had already happened to Jonah. God called him to preach to Nineveh, but instead he goes in the opposite direction.

[11 : 52] And he tells us here why he did this. This is what I said when I was at home. It's a rhetorical question. This is exactly what I said when I was at home. The first time that God called Jonah to preach to the great city of Nineveh, look at what Jonah knew.

That God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Jonah knew this, and yet he still didn't love the city.

If you're trying to mark what Jonah says here for theological correctness and orthodoxy, you can't fault him. He's repeating exactly what the Bible has already said in Joel and in Exodus.

He knows that God is gracious and forgiving, and it's because of that that Jonah refuses to go to Nineveh because he's far less willing to love and to forgive Nineveh than God himself.

You see, the fact is God does love the city. He loved Nineveh. He loves Aberdeen. But the thing is, even though Jonah knew this, even though Jonah himself had a good theology of who God is, Jonah himself still did not love the city.

[13 : 19] I think that Jonah here, he's struggling with, well, he can't fit God into the kind of pigeonholes that he was working in. You see, on one hand, in the story of Jonah, God would seem to Jonah like a very, would seem very moral and upright in that sense.

He tells Jonah, go and preach against Nineveh because his wickedness has come up before me. So Jonah preaches against them. We know his message because we read it. Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed.

God's calling Nineveh wicked and evil and telling them you have to repent. So, from Jonah's perspective, God looks very conservative in Jonah's eyes, doesn't he?

He's what our society would regard and Jonah would regard as having traditional values in that sense. And Jonah can handle that. But then, Jonah then sees God forgiving them at the slightest sign of repentance.

The Nineveh's repentance is very vague. It's a, well, let's put on sackcloth and ashes and who knows? Maybe God will forgive us. And you can see in history that the Ninevites when they repented did so in a very short-lived way.

[14 : 40] Nineveh wasn't turned around for the glory of God for a long time. It repented in this very vague, woolly way and then went back to their old ways quite soon after.

And yet, in the midst of it all, you know, that kind of vague level of repentance, God is still willing to show grace. And that's the fact that Jonah can't handle.

How can God be both? How can he warn them of destruction and yet be willing to show grace at the slightest sign of, you know, maybe give me a second chance and who knows, you might forgive me.

That's what Jonah can't handle. Because God doesn't fit into Jonah's socially conservative, socially liberal pigeonholes.

And Jonah doesn't know what to do with him. You see, Jonah knows theologically who God is. He's got that spot on. The fault here isn't with who God is, it's with who Jonah is.

[15 : 46] Jonah is a lot more judgmental and a lot less gracious than God. and that is what stops him from loving this city.

Jonah has a lot of the right doctrine in his head that God is gracious and forgiving. But the problem is that Jonah refuses to copy God in those respects.

And when we see it like that, isn't Jonah's basic problem ungodliness? If God is willing to forgive and to show love, but Jonah isn't, isn't that his problem?

That he's not being like God. He's being ungodly. And the challenge for all of us as we ask ourselves, do we love the city?

The challenge for us is that if we're not, we are at a very basic level being ungodly. So, whatever we do, we shouldn't think that just because our theology is good, because we know the right answers and beliefs, that that's some kind of automatic safeguard against the sin of not loving the city.

[16:58] Jonah could recite his creed about God perfectly, and yet, look at what he did. He actually wanted to die rather than live. But God doesn't even dignify this with a direct reply.

Jonah goes off in a furious drop and he leaves the city and he waits outside it to see if God maybe will change his mind and destroy them after all. Do what I want him to do.

Now, the story at this point is really dramatic. Our lives are probably far more mundane than Jonah's. Most of us probably don't have these massive furious arguments with God about the destruction of pagan cities.

And when we see it like that, we're tempted to think, well, this doesn't really have any direct challenge to me because my life is nowhere near as extreme. You know, I have a nine-to-five desk job.

You know, I don't preach to cities that might kill me and skin me alive and then want to see them destroyed. But here's the thing. What I was saying before, is that the question of do you love the city is one that profoundly stretches and challenges every single one of us.

[18:16] Even though our lives are in a very different context to Jonah's. So we've seen point number one, it's a great sin not to love the city. Point number two, we've then seen, then we've gone to point number three, which is the real test of whether we love the city.

The real test of whether we love the city. We're looking at verses six to eleven. What God wants Jonah to see is that he is profoundly wrong in not loving the city of Nineveh.

So, to do this, God gives him an object lesson. Jonah's sitting away from the city. If it was Aberdeen in the city in the story, Jonah would maybe have gone out to Stonehaven or somewhere and, you know, he's sitting there in a wee botty that he's made for himself and he's looking at the sky above Aberdeen hoping to see flames shooting up for lightning from heaven to destroy it.

And he's sitting there enraged in his little hut and God then intervenes and he causes a vine to grow up rapidly to give him shade because he's in the sun.

And look at Jonah's reaction to this. We read, it made him very happy. It's in verse six. And Jonah was very happy about the vine. Now, for a contrast to Jonah's reaction to Nineveh's repentance and forgiveness in verse one, he was greatly displeased.

[19:49] There's actually no stronger way in Hebrew to express that you're angry. It's not that he was a little bit, you know, disappointed with what had happened. He was as furious as their language will allow.

You know, people from a kind of Middle Eastern background, if you've ever been among them in their culture, you know, they're not as emotionally reserved as we are. You know, they're passionate and they're that kind of a people.

And that kind of a background, this is the strongest turn of phrase you can use to say someone is angry. And that was his reaction to something good happening to the Ninevites.

But then, God does something really small, like make a vine grow up over him. And whereas he was very angry before about the Ninevites, he is very happy about this vine.

But within a day, God provides a worm that makes the vine die. And then God provides a scorching wind that gives him sunstroke. And again, he's so miserable that he says, I want to die.

[20:54] So God questions him. Basically saying, do you think that a plant withering is such a bad thing to happen to you, that it makes you want to die? And Jonah says a resounding yes.

And this is where we see the real test of whether or not we love the city that we live in. This is where we start to see just how deep we have to dig to answer that question.

Look at verses 10 and 11, God's response to Jonah. But the Lord said, you have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.

But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. Many cackle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?

The key issue is whether we love the city, whether we love Aberdeen or wherever else you live, is concern. Jonah was so concerned about a vine.

[22 : 01] He didn't make it grow. It wasn't worth anything. It only lived for a day, but it brought him great joy, and he was concerned about it.

But he didn't care at all about Nineveh. But then God says to Jonah, if you're so concerned about a tiny vine, it's worth nothing. Should I not be concerned about the great city of Nineveh?

And those are God's words, not mine or Jonah's. He called that city great, even though it was a big, you know, pagan place that rejected God for so long.

And yet he called it great, you know, a word that has connotations of both size and significance.

And God says that there are more than 120,000 people there and they're spiritually clueless.

They don't know their right hand from their left. And God says it has many cattle as well. It was a place of huge economic significance. Many cattle there means great wealth.

[23 : 11] And it was the centre of the local economy. So if you can change Nineveh for the glory of God, if you can make Nineveh turn and repent, it's the centre of everything in the Syrian nation.

And if Nineveh changes, you then change the whole of Assyria. You've got the whole nation. And it's because of all these things, God wants to show his concern to Nineveh.

Simply because a lot of people repenting and turning to him glorifies him greatly. And in God's estimations, Nineveh is worthy of so much more compassion and concern than the vine.

love Edinburgh to love Edinburgh, the city that I live in, as I should.

having a coffee. And as I was there, I took my mobile phone out and left it on the table because I had a phone call from someone. But as I got up and I walked out, I didn't remember to pick my phone back up.

[24 : 19] And the only other people who were there were just a group of teenagers, got some something at the next table. And as I left, I realised quite quickly, I don't have my phone with me. So I went straight back, you know, just a couple of minutes later.

And the place was empty, the teenagers were gone, and so was my phone. I phoned it from a friend's phone and it rung for a second and then it turned off and that was it. Never saw it again.

And at that point, to use the words of Jonah, it was great evil to me. I was greatly displeased and became angry, using Jonah's words. I was furious, in fact, that my phone had been stolen by these teenagers and I had no good will towards them at all.

My thoughts about them were angry. If I could have caught them, I would have given them a piece of my mind. And it actually took me a couple of days to stop being really annoyed about it.

You know, I was simmering. And can't you see where this would fit into the book of Jonah? It would fit in exactly. It would be, you have been very concerned about this phone.

[25 : 31] And you got it for free, you know, you would upgrade it soon anyway. But the great city of Edinburgh has more than 450,000 people who don't know the right hand from their left.

They're spiritually clueless. And it's the centre of the nation in so many ways. It's the capital. And yet all you're angry about is this phone. And you don't care two hoots for the teenagers that stole it.

That is exactly where I would fit in. And it's to my shame. It's hard to love the city that you live in. It's hard to love Edinburgh for me in the deepest sense, in a godly sense.

It's hard for you to love Aberdeen. Because that is our fallen sinful perspective on things. A mobile phone, a vine, small things make us furious.

And yet we have such an unbalanced concern for trivial things when the great good of the cities we live in is so much more important. It's hard to love the city.

[26 : 42] When we heard the question at the start of the sermon, do you love Aberdeen? I'm sure that most of us have said yes. But then when we're looking at it in a godly way of defining love, in a kind of redeeming love, in a gospel love, in a gracious love, in a loving your enemies love, it's not so easy to just say yes, I do love the city.

But love the city is what we must do. Now when you look at Jonah himself, you don't see a good example in Jonah of how to love the city.

But what you do see in Jonah is God and his example of how to love the city, how to be so concerned about its redemption, about saving the city, how to have this attitude of gracious, loving forgiveness for the city.

And I think even more fully than in the book of Jonah, in Jesus Christ himself, you see the greatest example of someone who did properly, fully love the city in this way.

His city was Jerusalem. When they rejected him there, he wept. He went outside the city, instead of looking for it to be destroyed from above, he went outside it and wept over it and said, I've wanted so much to gather you to myself under my wings like a hen and its chicks.

[28 : 17] all Jesus' compassion was for the city. And if we want to love Aberdeen, the city that we're in, we need to look to Jesus, we need to spend time looking at him in the Gospels, look at how he loved the city he was amongst.

Who loves Aberdeen? God does. Who loves this city? Christ does. And the question for us in closing is, do we?

Amen.