

Jonah 4:11

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[0 : 00] Shall we turn now back to the book of Jonah and look especially at the last verse of the book on page 929, chapter 4, verse 11.

Last sentence of this book is a question from the Lord to Jonah and indeed a question to all of us. But should I not be concerned about that great city?

When the Lord speaks here about his concern he is thinking of his compassion and of his mercy and of his grace. Now the Bible is a book which tells us the story of God's dealings with his ancient people and with other peoples too like the Ninevites here.

And in addition to his dealings with peoples we have in the Bible a lot of case studies which tell us of God's dealings with individuals.

And that's why the Bible is a book that resonates with our society today and indeed our individual lives. Because there is so much in it that mirrors where we are and who we are and speaks to us in a very relevant way.

[1 : 29] Now normally when we think of the prophets we think of Isaiah, we think of Ezekiel, we think of Jeremiah. And the work that they have left us in the Bible is largely a collection of their oracles or their prophecies.

But we don't have much prophecy from Jonah. We learn more about him from his life than we do from his sermons.

There is a sense in which the prophets did speak in metaphors and in stories and in parables. But this story here is a story of Jonah and Jonah's interaction with the Lord. It's likely that this event which is focused on here in this book took place late in Jonah's life.

The passage we read from 2 Kings chapter 14 tells us how he had prophesied that Jeroboam II the second of the northern kingdom of Israel would be able to reclaim from Syria a lot of territory that his predecessors had lost.

[2 : 57] And in this way prepare the way for the economic miracle that took place in the northern kingdom of Israel. A miracle which Amos speaks a great deal about in his prophecy.

This would suggest that Jonah was a prophet who was highly regarded in his own country. He had prophesied a period of prosperity which was without peril since the days of David and Jonathan. We see that in the book of Amos very clearly and to some extent also in the book of Hosea. He prophesied a military victory which created the space for the northern kingdom of Israel to develop economically during a power vacuum in the Middle East.

And so Jonah would have been almost certainly regarded as the prophet who prophesied this economic miracle. So he prophesied the prosperity that the people had enjoyed for about 40 years during the reign of Jeroboam II.

But of course this economic miracle took place in the backs of the poor as Amos points out to us. But nevertheless the people who benefited from it would undoubtedly have regarded Jonah as the prophet of the economic miracle.

[4 : 35] But of course Jonah in later life fails the Lord. And although he ultimately obeyed him, the book ends with him having almost an argument with the Lord.

And in many ways the punchline of the book is found in the last sentence of the book. Should I not be concerned about that great city? Should I, surely I have greater reason to have compassion on Nineveh?

It's basically what the Lord is saying here to Jonah. And the Lord is reminding Jonah of his compassion, of his mercy, and of his grace.

But whereas Jonah was happy perhaps to proclaim a message of God's grace to his own people, he was highly reluctant to do it to the Ninevites.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and Assyria had inflicted enormous damage. Upon Jonah's own nation, the nation of Israel.

[5 : 52] He would almost certainly have seen something of the ferocious brutality of the Assyrians. There is some evidence to suggest that Israel experienced its first deportations under the Assyrian emperor Tigla Pileser.

In the NIV study Bible, which some of you may have, various reasons are given in the introduction to the book of Jonah why Jonah should have hated the Assyrians.

And let me share these with you now. First of all, the Assyrian invasion in the 8th century BC, these invasions were the most traumatic political events in the entire history of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Assyria had a brutal war machine. It relied on massive armies, superbly equipped with the world's first-rate siege machines, manipulated by an efficient corps of engineers.

Assyria were able to inflict massive psychological terror upon their enemies. And this terror was ruthlessly applied, with corpses impaled on stakes, severed heads stacked in heaps, and captives skinned alive.

[7 : 20] And the shock of the bloody military sieges on both Israel and Judah was profound. The prophets did not fail to shout out against this horror, while at the same time pleading with the people to see God's hand in history, to recognize the spiritual causes in the present punishment.

So we have here an enemy, which would put today's Taliban in the shade. Al-Qaeda is nothing on the Assyrians. And this is the kind of situation for Jonah to be sent to the Ninevites.

It's like God sending George Bush to evangelize Osama bin Laden. It's just like that. And naturally, he doesn't want to do it.

He runs in the opposite direction. Many of us perhaps can think of parallel situations in our own lives today.

There are people, or groups of people, that we take to, and others that we don't. And we find it easier to share the gospel with those we like, than with those we don't like.

[8 : 48] And yet the message of the Lord to us, as it was, as to Jonah, is, I have reason to have compassion. Because that's what God is like. God is a God of compassion.

God is a God of mercy. Now Jonah couldn't cope with that. He couldn't cope with the fact that God was willing to forgive the Ninevites.

Just as some people today can't cope with the fact that God is willing to forgive Osama bin Laden. Lots of people find that very difficult to cope with.

And Jonah was like that. Instead of going to Nineveh, he went in the opposite direction. He went to the other end of the known world at that time.

And even when his flight was terminated in hugely dramatic circumstances, and he obeys the Lord's command, he does so with the greatest reluctance. He still cannot face the likelihood that God will forgive the hated imperialists of Nineveh.

[9 : 57] And so what we find Jonah doing is he compensates. He compensates for his reluctance, for his unbelief, for his disobedience.

And he does this in three ways. First of all, he demonizes the enemy. The enemy was for him deserving of God's judgment.

And that undoubtedly was the case. We read that he was greatly displeased in chapter 4 verse 1. And he became angry.

And the word that is used here in the prophecy of Jonah is also used in Nehemiah, the book of Nehemiah, chapter 2 verse 10, about Sanballat and Tobiah being highly indignant when they heard that someone, Nehemiah, had come to work for the good of the people of Israel in Jerusalem.

And what we read here is, what we see here is that Jonah was highly indignant. He was deeply offended by what the Lord was asking him to do.

[11 : 06] It was not simply a question that he didn't want to do. It went right down into his deepest gut. And he hated it. He didn't like it. He was highly offended.

He considered the Ninevites to be beyond redemption. And they deserve to be exterminated, not redeemed. And so he demonizes the enemy by saying that the enemy was beyond redemption. It's very, very easy to find ourselves falling into that trap today. Especially as we live at a time of so-called war and terror.

It's easy for us to demonize those whom we consider our enemies. And to think that there is no place in God's redemptive plan for them.

The book of Jonah is a reminder to us of the fallacy of that way of thinking. There's a sense in which to demonize our enemies is part of what we might call a fundamentalist mentality.

[12:18] We see that not only in the Christian faith, but we see it in other faiths as well. and there's a resurgence of fundamentalism today which believes that the opponents are to be killed, are to be destroyed, are to be judged, and that they are beyond redemption.

It's so easy to find ourselves grouped by this inability to cope with the love of God, with the mercy of God. And yet, Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies just as God has loved us.

And we're reminded in this book and throughout the scriptures that God in his mercy and his grace has saved us in spite of our unattractiveness, in spite of our rebellion.

It's why we were enemies Christ died for us. And if we who were his enemies have today rejoice in his salvation, ought we not to share that salvation, the good use of that salvation, with those who are our enemies also.

Jonah sought to get away from the Lord. He ran away from the Lord, we read in chapter 1 verse 3. And when we demonize our enemies, this tends to be a sign that we're getting away from the Lord.

[13:52] And we're allowing the ethos of the world to mold our thinking and to shape our strategies.

The whole story in the first two chapters of Jonah is a story of Jonah running away from the Lord. And this is emphasized by whoever wrote the story, it may not have been Jonah who wrote it, it may have been someone else, probably was somebody else.

Somebody, this writer is speaking about Jonah going down, he went down to Joppa, he went down into the hold of the ship. And in his prayer from the fish, he speaks about the belly of the fish, he speaks about going down to the very roots of the mountains.

And this focus on descending or going downhill is a motif that runs through the first two chapters of this book.

And we have to be ultra careful, do we not, that we do not find ourselves in a downward slide, perhaps not running away from the Lord, but sliding away from the Lord.

[15:09] And one of the features of, or one of the fruits of such a slide and such a descent is that we are unable to forgive our enemies, that we are unable to forgive others.

And we find ourselves demonizing people and saying that there is no salvation for them and we are unwilling to share the good news with them. And so Jonah is here demonstrating his slide away from the Lord by the fact that he is demonizing his enemies and he has lost, temporarily at least, lost the concept of God's mercy and of God's grace for sinners.

But Jonah not only demonizes the enemy, there is a sense in which he canonizes himself. He says in chapter 4 verse 3, Now Lord, let me die, I am better off dead than alive.

Now some commentators think that Jonah is here alluding to Elijah echoing his prayer when he fled from Jezebel after she had taken an oath to have killed him within 24 hours.

It is too much, Lord, said Elijah, take away my life, I might as well be dead. Now let me remind you that Jonah probably had been a popular prophet during his period of life.

[16:40] he was highly regarded, almost certainly. And this seems to have gone to his head and he is here comparing himself probably with Elijah. And he has got this sense of self-importance.

He thinks of himself as a mighty man of God. He sees himself as a tragic, heroic figure. He sees himself as a magnificent martyr. I am willing to die, he says.

As one commentator said, there is no nobility in Jonah. His grand words delude only himself. In fact, in this story, Jonah is not a hero but an anti-hero.

From the start to the finish, he does nothing right. And even one thing he does do right, he does it reluctantly when he goes with the message of God's mercy to Nineveh.

God's love. Now here we have another sign I believe of sliding away from the Lord. As a result of that, we find ourselves having an undue sense of our own importance.

[17:52] And we think that the kingdom of God almost depends upon us. And we tend to lose our focus on the power of God to change the situation.

and think that it is us, it is we ourselves who are going to make the difference. Sometimes in church history one can see this.

One can see Christian leaders who may once like Jonah have been used in the service of God and perhaps continue to use in spite of themselves but having an undue sense of that own importance. I remember in Peru many years ago hearing about a well-known evangelical leader from America at that time. He's dead many years ago now.

And there had been a breakup in his denomination which had some missionaries in Peru. And he came down to try to prevent the Peruvian missionaries from leaving.

[19 : 00] and they pointed out to him that he was in total control of the denomination. He was the only moderator they ever had.

He took all the decisions. The General Assembly just rubber stamped his decisions. And they pointed all this out to him and his reply was he just banged the table and he said I'm God's man for the job.

this massive sort of sense of ego just as Jonah appears to have here. He thinks he's as great as Elijah.

And it's so easy to become deluded when we slide away from the Lord. And it's so easy to become a victim of our own sinful selfish nature.

And Jonah is a warning I think to all of us against that. Even preaching can become an ego trip.

[20 : 03] It's possible for us who preach the gospel to enjoy preaching as an end in itself rather than as a means of glorifying God.

I remember hearing the story of a minister, a free church minister, who spoke a great length to a ladies meeting in church of Scotland congregation.

And after the meeting of the minister's wife felt that probably most of it went over the heads of the ladies and she said to one, she said, how did you like that?

And she said, oh, I didn't understand a word of it, but I didn't like to show it because the minister was so enjoying herself. And it's possible, it's possible even for us in the pulpit to make preaching an ego trip rather than a means of serving the Lord, promoting ourselves rather than promoting the glory of God and the goodness of God.

So, this is, I think, the second way in which Jonah compensates for his unbelief. First of all, he demonizes the enemy.

[21 : 18] Secondly, he canonizes himself. But thirdly, and perhaps more significantly, he marginalizes God. He marginalizes God right through this story, right through this narrative.

He ran away trying to go to Spain. And even in his prayer from deep within the depths of the fish, he expresses no regret for what he has done.

His focus in his prayer is perhaps understandably on his own survival. When his Nineveh mission was at the peak of success, he walks out and sulks in the desert because the Lord challenges his right to be angry at the repentance of the Ninevehs.

He made a shelter for himself but a vantage point in the desert from where he could view the divine display of fire and brimstone. He so desperately wanted and still hoped, even after having preached to the people of Nineveh, and even after having seen them repenting, he still hoped that the Lord would judge his enemies.

enemies. And so we find that in chapter 4, Jonah seems to become emotionally unstable. He moves from being angry in verse 1 to being very happy in verse 6 and back to angry again in verse 9.

[22 : 46] As one commentator says, his emotions go up and down rapidly like a life controlled by a berserk computer. So we find, as a result of marginalizing God, Jonah's internal control of his life seems to go to pieces.

The plant that the Lord provided withered after a day and the Sirocco blew from the mountains of Iran bringing horrendous heat. Bearing in mind that Jonah perhaps was relatively old, quite an old man by this time.

Some people think he could have been as old as 75. And then he was exposed to the burning heat of the Sirocco and to the desert.

And in this situation he feels sorry for the plant. I'm even prepared to die for it is a possible rendering of verse 9. But he is not an ounce of pity for the thousands of Ninevites.

Jonah may have been deadly serious in his views but that he marginalised God and he marginalised God's purposes. He was concerned that his own agenda might be fulfilled and his agenda was that the Ninevites should pay for what they did.

[24 : 09] That they should be punished for the atrocities that they had committed against his people and against other peoples as well.

and it's so easy for us is it not to marginalise God in our lives. And one example or one evidence of this is that we fail to share God's concerns.

See Jonah had his own concerns, his own agenda and God's concerns were away in the margin. He went and he did go to Nineveh but he went very reluctantly. And so often we find ourselves in that situation do we not?

Rather than keeping God in the centre of our lives we put him to the side and we allow other things, other people, other issues whether it's our career, whether it's our property, whether it's our stocks and shares or whatever to take the primary place.

God is out on the margins. That's what secularisation is. It is marginalising God. Taking God away from the centre of society, from the centre of our lives and moving him towards the margins.

[25 : 40] Now the captain who sought to carry Jonah to Tarshish no doubt had a course plotted. In these days the course would have been plotted by the stars.

Today courses are plotted by GPS and the GPS equipment you set the course and you keep the needle on the course.

And the wind may blow the ship this way or the tide may move it that way that is brought back again. You've got to keep to the course and keep the arrow on the course.

And there's a parable there, is there not? For us to keep the arrow of the course of our lives fixed upon God. To keep him in the centre.

Otherwise we're blown this way and that way. And eventually we'll find ourselves like Jonah marginalising God. God is right on the margins.

[26 : 47] And perhaps this story of Jonah has been written and recorded in the scriptures and the content of our meditation today because someone here has allowed God to be marginalised.

And God wants to speak to you just as he wanted to speak to Jonah in the desert and earlier. And he is reminding you of his compassion and of his grace and of his purpose of salvation, his kingdom.

And he's asking you to put that kingdom first just as Jesus says, seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. goodness. And all these other things will be added.

These other things will take care of themselves if you put God first, his kingdom and his kingship, the kingship of God. God is he the captain of your life.

Is he the king of your soul? He is the one who comes to us today as he came to Jonah and he challenges us to put him at the centre of our lives.

[28 : 03] Because that's why we have been created, to focus upon him, to glorify him. And it is as we focus on him, and glorify him that we will be able to enjoy him.

So Jonah here rationalises his disobedience and later his reluctance to obey. First of all by demonising the enemy, secondly by canonising himself and thirdly by marginalising God.

What a tragedy that this man who probably was a very highly respected prophet in his generation because of that early prophecy that he had made should apparently towards the end of his life become so confused spiritually.

God's journey. And this is a challenge to all of us who are older as well as younger, to recognise that we can go astray, to recognise that it is so easy to slide down as Jonah slid down.

And we need to ask God to constantly to bring us back into the centre of his will and to enable us to keep the needle of our compass, of our instrumentation focused on him, keep him in the centre.

[29 : 33] Seek first the kingship of God and all these other things will be added to you.

Let's pray. And one one one one one one one one one one or or one one one one one two one one one one one two