

Jonah 4

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 July 2011

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] I want us to consider together the chapter that we read in the book of Jonah, where we discover Jonah as the original Mr. Angry. As we join the narrative, we find him as it is clearly described for us in a truly foul mood. The words that are used there that we read in verse 1 of chapter 4 is that Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. Indeed, as the narrative proceeds, the language that Jonah himself uses to describe his mood becomes even darker and more intense.

I am angry enough to die. Now that is seriously angry. And the question that I think inevitably rears its head in the face of Jonah's mood as it is presented to us is, well, why? Why was Jonah so angry? The story of Jonah is a familiar one, but we can just very swiftly remind ourselves of the events that preceded this final chapter, this conclusion to the account. Jonah, as we know, was a prophet in Israel, and he was sent by God to Nineveh in Assyria. Jonah has no desire to go to such a place to preach repentance to these people, and so he disobeys, and he goes in the opposite direction. And then, of course, the central part of the story, the most well-known, when a great storm is, begins there in the sea, and Noah is thrown into the sea and swallowed by this great big fish, and then is, finds himself spewed up by the fish onto a Mediterranean beach. And then, he is resent.

God, once again, reminds him of his commission, and on this occasion, reluctantly, but obediently, nonetheless, he makes his way to Nineveh to preach, and that is what he does. And then what happens?

Well, we picked up the story at that point, and we read the decree of the king of Nineveh calling all of the residents of the city to repentance, and the people responded, and they did indeed recognize their evil ways, and repented of them. And God responds by relenting from the judgment that he had declared upon them. And this is where we find Jonah so very, very angry. And in fact, what we want to do is really answer two questions. The first one we've already suggested or hinted at, and it is this, why was Jonah quick to anger? That's the first question. But the second question is a similar one, and it is, why is God slow to anger? Because this contrast is very much at the heart of this account, the contrast between Jonah, who is quick to anger, and God, who is slow to anger. And so, we want to ask the question of both. Why is it that Jonah was so quick to anger? And why is God slow to anger?

We'll begin with the first one. Why was Jonah quick to anger? Certainly, it would appear to us as if he is quick to anger in the circumstances he finds himself. And as we pose the question, and as we consider the possible answers, we might wonder if what is at stake here, or what is the driving force, the motivation for his anger, petty pride at his prophecy that he had declared, as God had instructed him, remaining unfulfilled. In chapter 3 and verse 4, we read that the message that Jonah proclaimed, certainly a summary of it, but a very clear summary all the same. On the first day, Jonah started into the city, he proclaimed, 40 more days, and Nineveh will be overturned.

[4 : 2 4] Nineveh will be destroyed. It was a very clear message. It was easy to understand. It was very specific in the judgment that was announced. There was a time scale to it. In 40 days, Nineveh will be overturned.

It's so specific. It kind of reminds us of these prophecies you hear from time to time about the end of the world. There was one recently, wasn't there? Some preacher in America, and he told us, I don't know when it was meant to be, that the world would end. And of course, the day came and went, and nothing happened.

Well, here, Jonah is proclaiming this message, and it's so specific, in 40 days. And then what happens? Well, the 40 days come and go, and Nineveh is not overturned. Now, we know the reason. The reason is because this announcement of judgment was conditional. It had the opportunity. There was a window of opportunity. These 40 days were an opportunity for Nineveh to repent. And in the light of their repentance, God relents from carrying out the judgment that had been declared. But from the perspective of Jonah, perhaps, he was hurt by this. His pride was affected, or so it might seem. It's one possibility. And yet, such a conclusion, a very harsh conclusion, a very ungenerous conclusion concerning Jonah would seem to be at odds with the testimony that we have concerning Jonah from

Jesus Himself. Jesus speaks of Jonah. And let's just notice what Jesus says about him in Matthew's Gospel and chapter 12. And our purpose in reading this is to, I suppose, question this initial suggestion that the reason for Jonah's anger is simply petty pride. He's in a strop because his prophecy is not fulfilled. Such a conclusion would seem to be at odds with what Jesus says concerning Jonah. And let's just read what he does say in Matthew chapter 12 and verse 39. We read, He answered, A wicked and adulterous generation asked for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. Very particularly these last words of Jesus in describing Himself, He says, One greater than Jonah is here. Now, that statement concerning

Himself would carry no weight would carry no weight. If Jonah was a man of no repute, if he was a man to be cast aside as a hopeless prophet, then it would mean very little for Jesus to say, Well, I'm greater than Jonah. But when Jesus says that one greater than Jonah is here, He is in making that statement, speaking very highly of Jonah, commending Jonah as one that He compares Himself to, certainly, as greater than. So, this testimony of Jesus, I think, would make us careful in coming to too harsh a conclusion concerning Jonah and the reason for his anger. And I think we would have to dismiss that the reason is simply that Jonah is in a straw, that Jonah is upset because his prophecy has not been fulfilled. As we further consider the question and seek to come to some kind of answer as to why Jonah was quick to anger, it's important for us to remember, indeed critical for us to remember, who Jonah was and what his mission was. Jonah was a prophet, and he was a prophet in Israel, and as far as he was concerned, a prophet to Israel. That was how he would have understood his calling.

[8 : 31] Yes, God had called him as a prophet to declare God's counsel to the people of Israel. That is how he understood who he was and what his mission was. And so, as we grasp his own understanding of who he was, and as he has to handle and deal with this, this very peculiar turn of events, that in Nineveh, in this pagan city, in this city of those who were the sworn enemies of Israel, of a violent and brutal population, that these people who were not part of God's people, that these people should be shown the favor of God, was something that he would find so very difficult to come to terms with. I wonder if Jonah was even concerned that in the light of Israel's own faithlessness, that God's center of gravity was shifting, and such a prospect would have been an appalling one for Jonah. Was he concerned in that regard? Was there perhaps in Jonah as a prophet concerned for his own people? A fear that the mercy that God was showing to such a evil people as the Ninevites would perhaps engender complacency back home? If the folks in Israel were discovered that God was merciful to Nineveh, then they might say, well, all is well with us. Doesn't matter how we live, for surely he will be merciful to us. If he is merciful to them, then we who are his special people, we have nothing to fear. Perhaps Jonah was concerned that back home that might be the conclusion that some would come to. But as we consider pondering on this question, and as we would want to move forward to an answer, why Jonah was quick to anger, why was Jonah quick to anger, I would suggest a threefold answer, three reasons that are intertwined that I think helpfully or reasonably answer the question, why was

Jonah quick to anger? The first thing that I want to suggest is that Jonah had mercy, but not enough. Jonah did have mercy, but not enough. When we read the chapter that we have before us, it would seem that he was a man with no mercy. No mercy certainly for the Ninevites, but I think Jonah was a man who knew of mercy, who had mercy, but not enough. You see, the mercy that Jonah had, which was genuine and sincere, was a mercy for his own. There was mercy for his own family, for his own tribe, for his own people, but not enough to extend to the Ninevites. There was somewhere where he had to draw the line, and certainly it was drawn before the Ninevites. Jonah was not a cold, heartless man. He had mercy, but it didn't extend far enough. And as we reach that conclusion concerning Jonah, we immediately think of ourselves. And I ask you the question, what about you? We live in a world that is full of men and women without hope and without God. On whom do we have mercy? On whom do we have mercy? Does our mercy extend only to our immediate family? Does our mercy extend only to those who we would consider our friends? Does our mercy extend only to our own circle of acquaintances? What about our neighbors who live around this church building in Rosemont? What about the young people, the children of our city, many of whom are growing up not even knowing about Jonah? Never mind so much that they could learn and discover in the Word of God. How far does our mercy extend? What about the Ninevites of today, these great cities that know very little of God and of the Gospel, even as we cast our eyes to that part of the world and we think of Damascus or of Kabul or of Baghdad and great cities with many, many people and so few who know who Jesus is and who have been given the opportunity even to hear what He has done for them. How far does our mercy extend? Jonah had mercy, but not enough. Hence, he was angry at the mercy of God towards Nineveh. But secondly, we can say that Jonah had knowledge, but it was not applied. We notice there in the chapter in Jonah chapter 4, and if we read in verse 2 of the chapter, notice what Jonah says concerning God. We'll notice there the knowledge that Jonah had, and we'll read again that verse.

He prayed to the Lord, O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew, and especially what he goes on to say. Jonah is declaring what he knows about God. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Jonah had a great deal of knowledge concerning God.

This, I'm sure, is not an exhaustive presentation of what he knew, but even in these words, we discover that Jonah knew a great deal about God. He was very orthodox in his theology. His doctrine of God was faultless, impeccable. And indeed, the reason it is so impeccable is that this is not something that Jonah has discovered for himself as a result of great investigation. What Jonah is doing is simply quoting the words of Scripture, the very words of God himself, as he had revealed them previously to his people. These words that he uses in addressing God, words that we find God using of himself in the chapter that we read in Exodus, following the occasion of the golden calf, and Moses once again receiving the tablets of the law. And there God reveals himself and describes himself in the very language that we find Jonah using. And so, so Jonah knows about God. He has a biblical, thorough understanding of who God is. He knew about God's mercy, very particularly indeed. This is what he highlights. He says,

I knew. I knew what you're like. I knew that you're merciful. I knew that you were slow to anger. He knows. He has knowledge. But that knowledge is not applied. He knows what God is like. He knows about God's mercy, but he doesn't appreciate it. And he doesn't, importantly, demonstrate it in his own attitude towards the men and women of Nineveh. He had knowledge, but that knowledge was not applied.

[15 : 54] And again, we ask of ourselves, how often can we be like Jonah in this regard? What do you know that remains unapplied? As we think of the great task of sharing the good news about Jesus in this world, in this city, we know the promises that we have in the Scriptures, that God will be with us and God will bless and God will prosper, the words that we share. And we know these things. We know them very well. We know them off by heart. And yet, do we apply the knowledge that we have? We know of God's great power and how for God it is a simple thing to melt the hardest heart. And we know that's true.

And if we had to answer a test with questions that were posed in this matter, we would no doubt get a very good mark. We know. We have great knowledge concerning who God is. We have the Scriptures.

We study them. We read them. We hear what they say to us. We know. But do we apply that knowledge in our own life, in our own witness to others? See, Jonah had knowledge, but that knowledge was not applied. Hence, he was so quick to anger. But then thirdly, as we respond to the question, why was Jonah quick to anger, we can say that Jonah was taught, but he didn't learn. And here we refer specifically to the way God teaches him right here and now in Nineveh. Not all that he had learned previously, though that was considerable, but how God teaches him in this very chapter or on this very occasion. The whole incident that we've read of concerning the vine begins with God asking Jonah a question there in verse 4, a question that relates to the very matter we're considering. But the Lord replied to Jonah, have you any right to be angry? It's clear that Jonah is angry. There's no debate there. Jonah knows he's angry. God knows he's angry. But God asks him the question, why? Why are you angry?

Do you have any right to be angry? Now, we're not told that Jonah gave any reply to that question, because immediately we are given an account of what happened next. The question is hanging in the air, as it were. Jonah is unable or unwilling to answer it, and so the account moves on. And what we have in what follows, this incident of the vine that provides him shade from the scorching sun, and how it's provided, and then it's taken from him, and how he is so angry about it being taken from him, all of this, of course, is God as the master teacher, the pedagogue par excellence, who is seeking graciously to teach Jonah. Jonah knows so much about him, but God gives him another opportunity to learn to realize his mistake, that he would be encouraged to have mercy as his God has mercy. And of course, the whole idea of the vine is to demonstrate to Jonah how ridiculous it is, how foolish it is, how irrational it is that he should be so angry, so angry about a vine, so concerned about a vine, and yet be unconcerned for this great city of Nineveh and all its population.

So, Jonah is very, in a very privileged position, is taught. He has, God has his personal tutor there on the outskirts of Nineveh. And yet, what is the outcome of this precious opportunity that he has given?

[19 : 42] What is the outcome? Well, God repeats the question with which he began. Again, a very effective teaching, a technique that God uses. He began by asking him, do you have any right to be angry? And how does he close the lesson? Well, there in verse 9, God said to Jonah, do you have a right to be angry about the vine? Has Jonah learned his lesson? He's been taught. He's been taught by a master professor, but what is his reply? I do. I do have a right. He has learned nothing. He was taught, but he didn't learn.

What about us? How often is that true of us? We are taught. We are taught concerning our responsibilities before God. We are taught concerning how God would have us live. We are taught in so many ways. We have God's Word before us, and yet we are taught, but so often, like Jonah, we fail to learn.

So, I think there we have, at least in a measure, an answer to our question, or our first question, why was Jonah quick to anger? Because he had mercy, but not enough. He had knowledge, but it was not applied. He was taught, but he did not learn. But then it takes us on to the second question that we posed at the beginning. Why is God, in dramatic contrast, slow to anger? I think we can answer that in two ways, and they're very connected. The first answer we would give to the question, why is God slow to anger, is a very simple, but a very beautiful one in many ways. And it is this, that that's just the way he is. Why is God slow to anger? That's just the way he is. We've read in verse 2 how Jonah himself describes God very accurately. And it's very accurate, because all he is doing is quoting God himself, who has revealed himself in this way. That's just the way God is. What did Jonah say concerning God? Well, he said, rightly, that God was a gracious God, a God who loves to give, a giving

God, a God who loves to forgive, a God whose mercy is extended to the undeserving. That's the kind of God he is. A God who is merciful, a God of compassion, a God of love, a God who is concerned for those who are in need. A God, we read there in verse 2, who very explicitly is described as slow to anger.

Why is God slow to anger? That's just the way he is. God is slow to anger. Notice and remind ourselves when those words were first pronounced, certainly as we would go through the revelation there in the Old Testament, there in the passage we read in Exodus, when God was being provoked in such a heinous and a vulgar way with the golden calf. And yet even in those circumstances, perhaps especially in those circumstances, God comes to Moses and says, but be assured of this, Moses, I am slow to anger. And so there is hope for this stiff-necked people as Moses would describe them. Abounding in steadfast love, we are told, Jonah reminds us. A God who relents from sending calamity again as we simply go through all that is said concerning God there in verse 2. This pronouncement of judgment that Jonah had declared in fulfilling the message or in giving the message that he had received from God. This pronouncement of judgment, conditional. Why was it conditional? Because God was eager to forgive, delighted to forgive, we might say at the least provocation. There rather leaves us with a slight concern when we think of this willingness of God to relent from sending calamity. Perhaps the question could be posed, well, what about the sin of the Ninevites? What about the sin that remains unpunished?

[23 : 59] These people who deserve to be punished and they're not punished. What happens to their sin? Is their sin unpunished? Well, in the light of the gospel presentation that we have, in the light of the full revelation of Scripture, we know, of course, that the sin of the Ninevites was not unpunished. There is no such thing as unpunished sin. Jesus came and He paid the price. He paid the price of all forgiven sin, of my forgiven sin and your forgiven sin. Our sin must be punished. No sin remains unpunished. And God's capacity, if you want to describe it in that way, His ability to relent from sending calamity is grounded in what Jesus has done in paying the price of a forgiven sin. God is able, if we can put it in this way, God is able to be slow to anger because He chose that His anger should rest on His Son, Jesus. Why is God slow to anger? Well, that's just the way He is. And then if we can say a second thing, and it really ties in with what we've just said and confirms or further develops some of what we've already said. But the second thing we could say and distinguish from the first is that

He is slow to anger because He loves people. And this comes out very clearly in the final verse of the book, of the chapter and of the book. Then in verse 11, again, as He is dealing with Jonah and trying to demonstrate to Jonah how foolish it is that he should be concerned for this vine and yet not concerned for this great city. And what does God say? But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city? What is God saying here? Well, He is saying, in other words, I love people. How would I not be concerned for this city? It's full of people. I love people. I wonder if that is true of us. I wonder if our unwillingness or the fact that we are so slow often to share the gospel with others as we simply don't love people enough. I've heard it, I've heard just in jest, I imagine, you know, it said, and I give the example of teachers in a school, but no doubt we could give other examples so if you're a teacher, don't feel that I'm getting at you. But you know, you hear a teacher in jest saying, oh, school would be great if it weren't for the pupils. You know, maybe a minister could say church would be great if it weren't for the people. Or we could multiply the examples. And I wonder if there's not sometimes a grain of truth in that perspective we have. People are just such a pain. They're so difficult. Life would be so much simpler if there weren't so many people getting in the way. And yet,

God here reveals Himself as a God who loves people. Why is He concerned for Nineveh? Because it's full of people. People that He cares for. People that He is compassionate towards. People that He loves.

People that He wishes and delights in forgiving. Why is God slow to anger? Because He loves people. But as we draw things to a close, let us just ponder on for a moment this truth concerning God that we've been highlighting, that He is slow to anger. And remind ourselves that though that is indeed wonderfully true, there is in this description of God also a necessary and solemn implication of this description. He is slow to anger. But one who is slow to anger is one who does, when the time comes, show His anger. He is not a God who knows nothing of anger. He is slow to anger.

But there is in God a righteous and a holy anger. And the day of His anger will come. He is a God who gives ample opportunity. He is a God who is patient with sinners. He is a God who seeks to give every opportunity for repentance. But the time comes when His anger is revealed and demonstrated. We read the passage in Exodus where God describes Himself as slow to anger. And yet, on those who built that golden calf, His anger was terribly and solemnly poured out. And that is true also today. We live in an age of grace. We live in an age of opportunity. But there is a day coming when God will show His anger to all those who refuse to repent. And so, as we recognize that truth, there is a message of warning to anybody here who as yet is not a Christian. Anybody here who is not yet one who has put his trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

[29 : 05] I would urge you that you would make use of the opportunity, this gracious opportunity that is given to you to repent of your sin, to put your trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Experience God's forgiveness that is freely offered to you. Yes, God is slow to anger. And that is why you are here. That is why you have the opportunity even tonight, because He is slow to anger. But a God who is slow to anger is a God who will, in due course and in the right and proper time, come to demonstrate His anger to those who will not repent. But there is also a message, surely, for those of us who are Christians, who by grace have placed our trust in Jesus. We are, and I say it again, surrounded by multitudes who are bound for a lost eternity. And will we make use of this day of opportunity? Will we recognize that our God who is slow to anger, yet as one who is slow to anger, the day will come, that great and solemn day, when all who have not taken the opportunity will be cast from His presence for all eternity? And will we make use of the opportunity we have to, in the words of Jude, to pull from the fire those who are bound to such a solemn and terrible destiny? So there is, I think, a word of challenge to us also.

Let us ponder on that as we close our sermon, our message this evening. Let us pray.
Thank you.