

Jonah 4

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Date: 04 November 2018

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[0 : 00] I know if I can invite David to come and open up God's Word for us this evening. Well, I want to finish this evening where we began.

On Friday evening, the book of Jonah is a whole book about one word. Now the Word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it.

But, but, Jonah ran away from the Lord. Jonah is a book about how when you run from God, you one day will eventually find yourself running into God.

It is always what happens. When God speaks, and our first response to God is, but then a world of trouble awaits, always.

And so we come full circle this evening. Chapter 3, verse 10. When God saw what the people of Nineveh did, how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened.

[1 : 30] But, but, Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. One of the greatest problems God has in the world is His people.

Not His enemies. No, enemies are easy for God to deal with. But His children, His people, His prophets.

Here we are this evening with an angry prophet in the hands of a compassionate God, showing us the lengths He will go to, to bring us, His people, out of the shadows into the light.

Isn't chapter 4 so strange as David read it for us? It's so bizarre, isn't it? Isn't chapter 3, verse 10, the ending we've all been waiting for, everything that Jonah was working for, surely?

I told you Friday evening, chapter 4 is so strange that one of my children's Bibles doesn't know what to do with it. The Bible, my daughter reads, says, Jonah ran, bad man.

[2 : 39] God rescued him. Jonah obeyed. Nineveh repented. Good man. The end. No. No.

Here is a man, a servant of God, God entering into and acting out for us in his self-pity, the dark night of the soul.

This is a man having a personal, public, spiritual meltdown. And it comes from the kind of person you would expect to be on the mountaintops of success.

He's made it. His ministry, he's achieved. And instead, God takes the lid off and we find under the surface a venomous pit of self-interest, pride, and hard-heartedness.

And it all comes out in a stinking strop. Friends, let me say again, this very evening, God is being merciful to us, to all of us, to allow us to watch him at work.

[3 : 51] For some of us here this evening are like Jonah. I don't know you, but you have served God long and hard, and we are angry and we're lost.

Some of us are like the Ninevites. We've ignored God long and hard, and we're lost. But to all of us, whoever we are, wherever we are with God, the message comes to us again.

Jonah says to us, we have no idea just how merciful God is. No idea. We think we know.

And then we come into contact with his mercy. We have our noses pressed right up against it, and we realize we hadn't the first clue. You are this compassionate, Lord?

This kind? No. No, it cannot be true. Well, can I show you again? You've been very patient this weekend.

[4 : 59] I'm going to show you again, one last time from Jonah, three things. Here's the first one this evening. God's horizons are always bigger than ours. God's horizons are always bigger than ours.

Look at chapter 4, verse 1. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 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 that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live. There are some clues there in those verses that Jonah has, well, he has what I'm going to call horizon-itis.

He can only see so far to the front row. God can see to the back. To the ends of the earth are God's horizons.

[6 : 07] Jonah sees Israel, his people, and God sees the world. It's incredible, isn't it?

After fleeing from God, and God humbling Jonah in the sea, and saving him in the fish, and using him in revival, when Jonah actually sees the mercy of God in action, he is so upset about it that he's, do you notice what he does?

He's willing to kind of undo his repentance that we looked at this morning. He goes back to his first disobedience, and he defends it. Look, Lord, this is why I ran.

That's why I was sinful. You see that? Verse 2, he's defending his earlier rebellious behavior. I ran then because I just had this sneaking suspicion that you were going to break the borders of your compassion beyond Israel.

I just knew it. I just knew you'd be like this, Lord. And do you know what, God? Verse 3, over my dead body. Over my dead body.

[7 : 22] Now, here are the clues in the text to this narrow nationalistic horizon. Verse 2, Is this not what I said while I was still at home?

At home, in my country, when I was in Israel, where I belong, when I was there, Lord, I saw this coming. If you look at the book of 2 Kings, chapter 14, you discover Jonah had a successful ministry.

Jonah was a hit in Israel. He was a star. His Twitter followers were through the roof. He was everywhere, in every shop, in every gospel media outlet.

Jonah was the man in town, the prophet, the man restoring the people. His ministry saw great success. And now God is asking him to take the gospel somewhere new, somewhere tough.

And more than this, look what he actually says in verse 2. For I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love.

[8 : 43] Do you know those words come directly from Exodus, chapter 34? The people of Israel have rebelled. They're about to be destroyed and God relents.

He has compassion. Those are God's own words about himself, to Moses, to Israel, after the golden calf incident. It is God saying to his people, you deserve judgment, but I love mercy.

God's mercy. So look what Jonah's doing. He takes those words from the Bible about God's mercy to Israel and he spits them back in God's face.

I just knew it, Lord. I just knew that you were going to take what you've given to us and give it to others and I will not have it.

I just knew it. I just knew it. I was going to take it over my dead body. Friends, I'm sure you know this evening, if you ever find yourself in the position of quoting the Bible back to God against God or quoting the Bible to defend your sinful behavior, you know you've taken a wrong turn somewhere.

[10 : 03] It's what Jonah does, isn't it? And do you know what's at the heart of this? Do you know why this shows us his horizons are so narrow, so shrunken, so shriveled?

Do you know why? It's because he has forgotten what Israel was for. Jonah has forgotten the point of the church. Why did God choose Abraham?

Why was God merciful to Abraham? Why was he merciful to Israel? See, it's like the pizza delivery, isn't it?

What do you do when you order pizza? The doorbell rings and the man is standing there with the boxes. You hand over your 20 quid. There's the beautiful smell and you say to the man, thanks very much.

You take the boxes, you pay your money and you close the door. Thank you. It's mine. It's ours. We bought it. It's ours. You don't open the door again, do you, and go down the street ringing the doorbell, number 20, number 24.

[11 : 14] You don't go down the street dishing out the pizza, driving down the road in your car, opening the window, giving it out to people. No, it's mine. Quite rightly. You paid for it. I own it.

God rang Abraham's doorbell and came to find him and gave Abraham a gift, made Abraham a nation, gave them his law, which meant that he gave them his light and he took that nation and was leading that nation up a hill to shine out that light to the whole world.

What did Israel do halfway up the mountain on their way to shine out the light? What did they do? Halfway up the hill, they closed the door and said, thanks very much. This is wonderful.

We like this. This will do nicely. We'll just sit here. Thanks. Oh, I love this light. Let's all gather around and look at it. things began to go wrong.

And God sent his prophets and Jonah came along and he helped the people to love the light more. And they came back to the light. And then God said to Jonah, now take that light like it was always meant to be, Jonah, to the top of the mountain.

[12 : 34] Shine it out to the ends of the earth. And Jonah slammed the door shut in his face. I just knew this day would come, Lord.

I just knew that that's what you're like over my dead body. Brothers and sisters, again and again and again, God's people learn that God's horizons are always bigger than ours.

Always. What is the church for? What is the point of the church? What's the point of all this, this weekend, this morning, this evening, next Sunday, the Sunday that follows it?

Your history as a church family in this place? Who are we for? us or the nations?

Us or them? Us or the lost? Let me give you a diagnostic tool to do, okay?

[13 : 51] I want you to do in your head, I want you to make two lists. Number one, in your head, list all the things that you expect from church. When you walk in the door this morning, next Sunday, what is on your must-have list?

It's all sorts of things, isn't there? A really good service. We want good music. We want good preaching. We want maybe age-specific ministries, something for our children, something for our children or for the older people.

Good parking, if possible. Not a lot around here, I guess. We want clean facilities. What do you expect from church?

Personalize it for you, yourself. Now in your heads, flip the piece of paper, side two, list all the things we know God expects from church.

Love one another as I have loved you. Visit orphans and widows in their affliction. Preach the word in season and out of season. Make disciples of all nations.

[14 : 59] Bear one another's burdens. forgive those who wrong you. Now here's the diagnostic question for you. Which would upset you more?

Not having the things on the first side of paper or the second. If one side is missing, which would cause you to look elsewhere?

We'd have to be very naive, wouldn't we, at least, to not be honest before God and at the very least feel the pull of that first list on our affections, wouldn't we?

Isn't it true? All those things matter to us. And it is part of human nature to take good things and to make them the limit of our horizons, to narrow the world around us.

And it is part of the divine nature to stretch stretch out our horizons to Him and to others and to a lost world out there. A man called Tom Rainer has a really interesting little book called Autopsy of a Deceased Church.

[16 : 14] I actually bought it at the Free Church Assembly in June this year in St. Columbus in Edinburgh. Tom Rainer says, when you lay out a dead church on the slab, because it happens, doesn't it?

Churches die. There it is. The day comes when the doors are shut and the church is dead and it is lying there stone-cold dead and the forensic experts are called in and they do an autopsy on this dead church.

How did this once living organism expire? Well, the forensic experts always find the spirit of Jonah chapter 4 verse 2.

Maybe it's stuck somewhere in the windpipe or clogging an artery. My home. My country.

My traditions. And over this dead body, Lord, will I ever look to your world, your nations, your love of mercy for the people of the world who are lost and who cannot tell left from right.

[17 : 26] Good riddance to them. Here's what Tom Rainer says. As you examine the dead body, you always find these signs of death, death.

The past is the hero. The budget moves inwardly. The great commission becomes the great omission. Personal preferences carry the day, not what will serve the gospel best.

It's challenging, isn't it? And one of the signs, one of the signs that horizons are narrow is, well, what is it here in the text?

It's anger. Anger. You will know your horizons are small if you get angry when God moves outside them.

And so look at this with me. Number two, God's horizons are always bigger than ours. And number two, God's purposes are painfully deeper than ours.

[18 : 38] God's purposes are painfully deeper than ours. Friends, I find this astonishing. I mean, what would you expect God to do with Jonah here?

What would you expect him to do? Chapter four, verse one. Oh, for goodness sake, Jonah, not again.

Why can't you get it? You've had your chances. Jonah has experienced grace himself. He's witnessed grace for others and he's livid.

What does God do? This time, raise the rod and strike him down? No, what does God do? He asks questions.

Verse four. See what God's doing? God, do we really know how merciful God is? When we take what God has given and take and take and take and then throw it back in his face again and again, what does God say?

[19 : 50] God, let's talk one more time. Let's talk. Do you do well to be angry? Is that the right thing to do, Jonah?

I said on Friday evening, right at the start, sometimes God's people hate what God is doing in their lives. They hate it. They just cannot see that what God is doing is right.

We do not live in a simple world, do we? Sometimes it is the people who serve God the most who end up the angriest. Do you know that?

I came across these words. See what you think of this. there is a particular darkness that sometimes comes to those who work hardest in the Lord's service.

Resentment towards God is the special temptation of mature believers who serve Him well. Wow. resentment towards God is the special temptation of mature believers who serve Him well.

[21 : 06] Jonah was a cross-cultural missionary. He was a preacher. And he's angry with God. Listen to Sinclair Ferguson.

Taken out of normal context, working under pressures never before encountered, sensing the frustration of a new culture and a language never before encountered, these can bring out the worst in a person and often do.

Sensitivities appear that are often hidden in our Christian fellowship at home. The bold knight who rides off into foreign parts with high aspirations may soon find that God has removed them across the face of the earth more for their sanctification than for others.

A missionary once shared with me, I never knew what a heart of filth I had until I went overseas. Oh, the depth of God's purposes with us.

You see how much He loves us? Whether you are angry with God this evening through what you feel you've done for Him and it just hasn't gone to plan, or angry with Him because you cannot possibly see how He can be right to do what He's doing with you, He just can't be.

[22 : 36] Whether you know your horizons have kind of narrowed in around your own pet likes and dislikes, God's purposes in our lives are always, always painfully deeper than ours.

We want answers. God wants character. We want an end to hardship.

God wants Christ to be formed in us. Maybe that process where God deals with us to do that is going to hurt us and hurt us some more.

Jonah learns, God loves His servants more than He loves their service. Do you know that? God loves you more than He loves your service.

He loves you and He will wound to heal. I want you just to look at how God does this with Jonah.

[23 : 41] It's incredible, isn't it? He does it with Jonah with a gardening lesson. It all revolves around a plant. It's so strange, isn't it? Just look at the text with me.

There's Jonah in a huff, verse 5. It's amazing, isn't it? He doesn't even stand to watch. He storms out. Therapists call this infantile regression, don't they?

In the face of a crisis, some people retreat to childish behavior. Well, here is spiritual infantile regression. Do you notice Jonah has blanked God?

Verse 4, the Lord asked a question, have you any right to be angry? And Jonah storms out without answering. Have you ever done that? Withdrawal from the company of others, total preoccupation with himself.

Let me sit here and lick my wounds. And to get Jonah to answer the question in verse 4, okay, everything that happens after verse 4 is to get Jonah to answer that question.

[24 : 49] Have you any right to be angry? To get Jonah to answer that, God has to teach him a lesson about gardening. Do you notice what happens next?

Jonah made himself a shelter, sat in its shade. Verse 6, then the Lord God provided a vine. Where have we seen that word provided before? Chapter 1, verse 17, the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah.

Two acts of salvation for Jonah, a fish provided to save him from drowning, a plant provided to shade him from frying.

And you see, the way this little lesson works is that it's as if God is saying to Jonah, Jonah, how does it feel, all that grace? Do you like it, Jonah?

Doesn't it feel nice, that oxygen that you're breathing in the belly of the fish? That relief, Jonah, on your head, that relief on your body from the heat?

[25 : 59] King James version of the Bible that many of you will know calls the vine a gourd plant, huge leaves spread out over the head.

Isn't it beautiful, Jonah? Are you enjoying it there, safe, your needs met, cared for, loved? And so, friends, here's how this works.

Here's the rub, okay? God says to Jonah, Jonah, while you're savoring that grace, while you're enjoying it, let me now do to your precious plant what you want me to do to Nineveh.

Okay? You want Nineveh destroyed? Isn't that what you wanted me to do? Wipe them from the face of the earth? Well, let's try it with your plant.

Chapter 4, verse 7. Jonah was very happy about the vine, just like the people of Nineveh happily going about their daily business. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm which chewed the vine so that it withered.

[27 : 07] When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die and said it would be better for me to die than to live.

You see how this works? The point of the plant is to let Jonah taste his own medicine in physical form. Oh, Jonah, how does it feel when you lose something precious?

A plant. And you want me to do that to the people I've made? To people? To people? Well, look at the logic of it, verse 10.

Oh, Jonah, how does your garden grow? Who makes your garden grow, Jonah? Not even you. You've been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow.

It sprang up overnight and died overnight. You love that poxy little plant, Jonah, because of what it gives you. Your concern for that plant was totally dictated by self-interest, by what it does for you.

[28 : 21] What did you do for it? Nothing. You never had the devotion of a gardener for that plant, did you, Jonah? Have you ever seen a gardener? Some of you, I'm sure, are gardeners.

Have you ever seen a gardener at work nourishing a plant? plant? We had over our front door this summer a stunning climbing rosebush, if I say so myself, the best climbing rosebush in Aberdeen.

I'm sure you heard about it. My wife said, the only problem is the bush gets more tender, loving care than her. Do you know what it's like to care for something, to plant it, to fertilize it, to love it, to prune it, to grow it, to admire it, to invest in it?

Oh, Jonah, if you feel like that about a plant you haven't watered, you haven't weeded, and you haven't loved, and haven't cared for, Jonah, how on earth do you think I feel about the people of Nineveh?

The people of Nineveh. Oh, I know them by name. I know where they live. I know what their hurts are.

[29 : 48] I know who they've lost. I know what their sins are. I know what their greatest unanswered questions are. And they're lost, and I love them.

Do you care about a plant that I watered and grew and nurtured? When I preached this sermon at Trinity not long ago, I gave it the title, The Pharisee Prophet.

The Pharisee Prophet. Pharisees are made sad, aren't they, by what makes God happy? That's how you spot a Pharisee. sinners repenting, and sinners coming close to God, makes God throw a party after party after party, and Pharisees see God doing that, and they fold their arms, and they stay outside.

Jonah has a twin brother in the New Testament, doesn't he? The elder brother in the tale of the two lost sons. Isn't it interesting? Where is Jonah?

Alone, outside the city, there on the hill, outside the party while people are rejoicing and praising. Oh, how wicked, how wicked we can be to find terrible the things that God says are wonderful, to find disgraceful the things that God says are beautiful, sinners with nothing in their hands.

[31 : 30] They've never darkened the door of a church all their life. There is no track record of service, no long service certificate for their work in the church. There are no good deeds, no perfect family life with everything in order, everything neat and tidy.

All they have is mess on the floor, the wreckage of a life behind them. And people like that can come to their senses and come home to God and the angels shout for joy in God's presence and Pharisees with their hands full and their certificates lining the wall and their church attendance at stretches for 50 years and their Bibles read and memorized, stand and watch and say, how awful.

Who do these people think they are? Who does God think He is? And it's all because Pharisees lose sight of what?

People. They lose sight of people. Precious, precious people. So I want to finish with this.

God's horizons are always bigger than ours. God's purposes are painfully deeper than ours. Number three, finally, God's compassion is beautifully greater than ours.

[33 : 01] God's compassion is beautifully greater than ours. Do you know what I think? Do you know what I think has really stuck in Jonah's throat? A lot of people think that Jonah is upset here in chapter four because the Ninevites are Gentiles.

They think that what Jonah is really upset at here is, well, he's expressing the sin of racism. The gospel is for my tribe, my kin, my clan.

But no, I don't think it's that. I think it's much more than that. The reason this is so hard for Jonah is because the Ninevites were Israel's enemies.

They weren't foreign neighbors, different skinned people across the border. They weren't like that. They were close at hand oppressors. They were the kind of people that burn your buildings and rape your wife and kill your children and cut the noses off those they capture.

And friends, to see God have mercy on people who have wronged you and brutalized you is a very, very bitter pill to swallow.

[34 : 18] Don't you think? If we cannot stomach the idea that God might show mercy to the kind of person I only want to show the door to, then we just do not know how beautifully great his compassion is.

Isn't it so humbling? The God of all the earth, the one who made it all and owns it all, the only person with universal sovereign rights over creation.

Oh, how he loves each and every single person. And no matter how much they wrong him, he lavishes love on them daily. What did Jesus say?

He causes his son to rise on the evil and the good and sends his reign on the righteous and the unrighteous. But how do we measure our own love, our compassion?

We measure it, don't we, by how we love the lovely, how we love our friends. God, if I was in charge of the sun and the rain, who would I send it to?

[35 : 32] Yet you see here, here is Jonah right up against the God of the Old Testament, the God of compassion who we discover is exactly the same God as the God of the New Testament who we meet in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ, Jesus comes to us and says, if you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.

The world around you tomorrow loves those who love them. But I say to you, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.

Friends, have you ever identified an enemy? Someone who wronged you, who cut you off, ended a relationship, trampled your rights, took what was yours, robbed you of your dignity, demeaned your person?

Have you ever done good to them? Shown them compassion and mercy? Well, maybe anger rises at the very thought of it.

[36 : 48] An enemy to me is a person to God. A person. And if we've never felt God's compassion as an offense to us, we've probably never really grasped that God is willing to welcome the people we want to exclude.

God is willing to show mercy to the person you want to punish. God is willing to forgive the people we cannot forgive.

Think of the person that you cannot forgive. I suspect some of us at least have some. Don't we? Live long enough in this world in all its mess and complexity.

Relationships at work, at home. Things get broken. Think of the person you cannot forgive. And like Jonah, learn to realize that to God they are infinitely precious.

And he longs to forgive them. He longs to. He longs to. C.S. Lewis said, to be a Christian is to forgive the inexcusable in others because God has forgiven the inexcusable in me.

[38 : 15] Well, did you notice that Jonah ends with a question? It's amazing, isn't it? Should I not be concerned about that great city? the end.

No answer given. Don't you wonder what happened to Jonah? Did he write this book? Did he come round?

Did God have to leave him sitting sulking on the hill? If there was a verse 12, what would it say? Well, says Jonah to us this evening, wouldn't you like to know?

Well, says God to us, as he so often does, you just leave Jonah to me. What about you? What about you?

What about me? List all your hurts, list all your wounds, list all your questions, and if the first word of your response to God's compassion is, but, but, well, then maybe God's work with us is just beginning.

[39 : 31] Maybe he's just getting started, and that's okay, for God's compassion has depths to it we just cannot imagine, and there's depths of compassion for you, for me, for the lost, for the world, and God will do whatever it takes, whatever it takes, to help us see it.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Loving Heavenly Father, we treasure together this evening as your people the depth of your purposes for us.

Forgive us, we pray, the narrowness of our perspective, so often people are big, marriage is big, employment is big, children are big, and you are small.

We love you for your love for us, your people. We adore you as gracious and compassionate. We worship you for the slowness of your anger, that there are no bounds for your love, that you relent from calamity.

And so, gracious Heavenly Father, this very evening, receive the worship of our hearts, we pray, wherever you find us this evening, in your hands, open up our lives to you, extend your hand of friendship to us.

[41 : 28] Give us your strong arm to lean on, and help us, we pray, to know you and love you all our days, for we ask it in Christ's precious name. Amen.