

# Jonah 4

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[0:00] Thank you, as always, for your extremely kind and warm welcome to the Old Passer. I was reflecting, I've been away for some 22 years now.

! In the United States, I'm married to a very lovely American lady who wishes that she could be here this morning. But I was thinking, I've now lived in both places for so long that I have a distinction of being misunderstood in both the United States and the United Kingdom, and certainly by my wife. So if I say to you, Barb sends you greetings, in America that sounds like, who's Bob? Barb sends you greetings this morning. So thank you for your welcome. Let's pray as we come to God's Word. Father, thank you for what your Word tells us of itself. That it is a living Word. That it is a true Word. That it is a fountain of life.

Lord, that it's like a sword or a knife that's able to distinguish the motivations of our hearts by your Spirit. And Lord, it is able to lead us.

[1:26] So Father, we don't pray for the preacher necessarily this morning. We pray for the Spirit of God to work. Lord, would you use your Word, we pray, to lead us and guide us. In Christ's name. Amen.

Last December in the United States was a terrifying month for natural disasters. You may have heard of some of the tornadoes that tore through the state of Kentucky, overturning entire towns as they went.

Or of the forest fires which raged across the American West. Apparently with gusts of 110 miles an hour, propelling a monster fire that made its way through the communities north of Denver, Colorado.

And one of the people who was in one of those communities was a man called Hunt Fry, who was interviewed by the local news. He was in a Costco store. I don't know if you know of Costco. I think there's one in Southall.

But he was there and he said that he was impressed by the staff who worked in the Costco, who carefully went around and mentioned to people that the building might be on fire.

[2:36] And ushered them towards the exits. And then he said he saw them running like antelopes for the exits. It was just apocalyptic, he said. I was thinking, in its way, it's not a wholly inaccurate picture of Christian mission, which is the call to take the gospel to the whole world, the world that's in danger.

Here we are, like people serving in the store, calmly but appropriately telling people that the building is on fire, ushering them towards safety, and then running like antelopes ourselves for the exit that we find in Jesus.

I think as we come to this very well known text this morning, we may as well remind ourselves that God is far more invested in missions, in the work of missions, than you and I are.

It is his idea. It is his initiative. It is his kindness. It is his mission. But he has called us to join him in his great project to take his message of rescue to the nations and to our own nation.

If this has always been true of God, we shouldn't be surprised that we find it here in the middle of the minor prophets. Here is a God who takes the initiative to send Jonah to this city, even the capital city of the mortal enemies of Israel.

[4:04] So in chapter 4, we are going to look at three ways that God shows his missionary heart to us this morning through this story of Jonah.

First of all, God shows the glory of his heart by putting mercy before judgment. God shows the glory of his heart by putting mercy before judgment in these first four verses.

You probably know Jonah well enough that not much words of background are necessary, and Paul gave us a word or two of background before. But the year is sometime probably in the 8th century BC, and the place is the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

This is probably some 50 years after they attacked the capital of Israel and caused great calamity there.

But now the bloom has gone a little off the road as far as the Assyrian Empire is concerned. They are in decline. And this reluctant Jewish preacher has been sent to preach a message of warning and judgment to the Assyrian nation.

[5:12] And you know, if you know the book of Jonah, that he had decidedly mixed feelings about the project. But his message was to tell them that if they did not repent, their own city, very much like those towns in Kentucky, would be overturned if they did not repent.

The Jews, of course, had every reason to hate the Assyrians. The Assyrians, if you know of them, were among the cruelest nations ever to inhabit this planet.

They'd inflicted terrible pain on the people of Israel. If you can think of ISIS as a national empire, a power of hundreds of thousands of troops, you have an imagination of something like Assyria.

So you can imagine that the young Jonah, perhaps having lost family members to such cruelty, hearing stories of what had been done by the Assyrians, not unlike those who'd suffered in the Burma Death March or those who had lost family at Auschwitz.

How could there be forgiveness for such cruelty any more than anyone would have seriously suggested a quippal for those accused at Nuremberg? So Jonah expects the Assyrians to suffer.

[6:28] That's what a moral God does. If God is true, the Assyrians would pay for what they had done. If God is moral and right, and if he has any concern for his people Israel in what they suffered, he will be the instrument of revenge.

For surely God has said, vengeance is mine. And once Jonah gets to Nineveh, you know, which is a whale of a story in itself, Jonah was ready, wasn't he, to be the one to bring the Assyrians the bad news.

But, to Jonah's surprise, here is what God actually says and does. This is right at the end of chapter 3, verse 10, coming into chapter 4, because the chapter breaks are somewhat awkward.

When God saw what they did, that they repented, how they turned from their evil ways, God relented of disaster that he said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

And this is Jonah's reaction, we read, of the mercy that it pleased God to give. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

[7:38] It's an anger of immense proportions. An anger that you notice has him threatening God more than once, that he wishes to take his life. Reminded of what George Whitfield said, that the last idol to go is self-righteousness.

So, when it is challenged, we will give up even our very lives to see ourselves justified in our self-righteousness. So, this is Jonah's spiritual crisis.

Literally, the language says here, what God has done was, to Jonah, a great evil. And then this, that if they ever make a movie of Jonah, I imagine this will be comic relief, because it seems to be so absurd.

I should have known, of course, Jonah is raging, that you would do something like this. I knew that you were a gracious God, Exodus 34, and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, relenting from disaster.

I should have known that you would have done this. Notice, even in the way that he reports this, even in the way he writes this down, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them.

[8:45] And he did not do it. You can catch there even some of Jonah's anger. It's just not good enough, God. He's telling his master.

And I think this is important, because here is the first contrast. It's between the messenger of God and the God who sends him. Jonah, who considers himself justified in his anger, God loves his enemies.

That is the glory of his love, said Bonhoeffer. He puts mercy before judgment. And certainly in the United States, I wonder across the Western world right now if this is an appropriate contrast. You know, in our own day, in a time when so many are ready to judge and to condemn and to write people off, given the slightest Facebook post or Twitter comment, to exclude others for not saying or doing the right thing, and so many, even within the church, that would do that, here is the reminder that the good news of Christ's mercy is what we're about.

We are compelled to offer his mercy before we offer judgment. So it's not that there are other things to say as we speak and devote ourselves to our own cultures, but this is the nature of the God we serve, that he puts mercy before judgment.

[10:20] Second, God shows his people their continuing need of his grace, verses 5 through 8. Like I said, it's difficult not to see this as a tantrum, because it is a tantrum.

A reminder to us that whatever age we get to, we can all of us act like six-year-olds. So Jonah, you see here, stomps off into the desert. He sets up kind of stadium seating in the desert, waiting for God to change his mind, waiting for God to obliterate the city.

I'm thinking at this point, Jonah has shown himself not to be much of a builder, because you'll notice that the shelter he erects has to be replaced by God's plant within a day. And Jonah awaits, doesn't he, to find this, I'm imagining, I have no idea what it was, but a giant elephant ear plant that is kind of covering him, and he says he is very happy about it.

When dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah, so that he was faint.

What is God doing? Well, this is either, isn't it, a picture of God being mean and vindictive, getting his own back on the prophet, being small-minded like we can be, or, more likely, it is a picture of God loving Jonah by speaking to him in the only terms that he can understand at this point.

[11:54] He's giving him an object lesson. Jonah has received an undeserved gift, which has saved his life, or at least his suntan, and God now takes it away to teach Jonah something.

Personally, when I reflect on Jonah, I'm reminded of when I was six years old. I had diphtheria. I was in a German hospital. My parents had taken me there in some alarm over me, and when I woke up, I found I was surrounded by German nurses.

I had no idea where I was. I only knew that I was extremely angry, as angry as a six-year-old can get at his parents. They had left me with these people I didn't know, and when they finally did turn up, they brought me a big orange teddy bear.

But this teddy bear's first trip was airborne, because I launched him into the air, throwing him at my father's head. I wanted you, I said. This is not enough.

And here is Jonah, I think, having grown to love this huge, silly plant as something that had done good to him, the way that we sentimentalise inanimate objects and simple creatures and forget the giver who has given them.

[13:07] But now it has been taken from him, and so he is angry again, this time on behalf of this quite innocent plant. How dare you, God, take it away?

I have so loved this plant for less than 24 hours. So surely God is teaching Jonah, as we too need to be taught, don't we?

This was not a man who presumably was young in his faith. He was, at least at this point, middle-aged, if not older. But the difference that he needed to see was between the plant and the people of Nineveh that God had a concern for.

Jonah had invested all of his energy at this point into this temporary plant, but God, verse 10, has laboured over Nineveh. He tells Jonah that he has grown the Ninevites and now brought them to the point where they will receive his mercy.

So God has every right, by virtue of every possible argument, to do undeserved good to these people. And should God be merciful to his obnoxious but orthodox prophets, yet give these wretched, repenting people only judgment?

[14:25] That's the contrast. That's the nature of God. That's the issue that's at stake in Christian mission. Whether we can just forget the nature of the person we're representing for the sake of the words that

we're speaking or the sake of some conversion.

Let God be true and every man alive, Paul says in Romans 3. Because here is a God of grace, the God that we must represent, the God whose nature, as Crammer said, is always to have mercy. I don't know about you. I am very touched by the story of John Newton. If you read his whole story, it is actually a remarkable story of God's grace.

A year after he wrote the song Amazing Grace aboard the Greyhound during his conversion, we know from his diary later and his testimony to Parliament that he was commanding a slave ship off the coast of Africa.

And he writes in his memoirs that to his shame, he followed the other sailors into the hold of that ship and systematically, night after night, abused young women who were in chains there.

[15:39] This went on for weeks until he became deathly ill and almost died. At that point, Newton became the wretch that he describes in Amazing Grace.

And on his deathbed, it was God who broke him, showing how wretched a man could yet be saved by the mercy of God at the cross.

So who's to say how far God should show his mercy? If God showed mercy to Jonah, shouldn't he show his mercy to Newton? If he showed his mercy to Newton, shouldn't he show it to the Assyrians?

If he showed it to the Assyrians, to whom shouldn't he show it? If they will but turn to him and find his mercy as they cry out for rescue. That's the very roots of the gospel, isn't it?

Again, in the heart of God. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

[16:45] I've been thinking about my own typical response to those around me. I tend, I don't know about you, I tend to divide people up into people who are likely prospects for the Christian faith and those who are not.

I think over the years, I have ruled people out as being impossible. People who are so far beyond the grace of God that I wouldn't bother with them.

But as I've looked at them, I've realised, really, by the grace of God, to me, that it's my indifference which has ruled those days. Not the mercy of God. It's my own lack of compassion which has been motivating me.

And not the mercy of God, the God who can do everything. So the gospel reminds us, doesn't it, that while we were yet sinners, not promising prospects at all from any earthly point of view, that Christ died for us as we still need his mercy and need to represent his mercy to others.

So it's very easy, isn't it, to try to make two gods as religious people. A God of mercy for us and a God of judgement for those who are not like us or those who disagree with us or those who won't listen to us.

[18:03] That's at the very core of self-righteousness, isn't it? And my own experience is that it can creep back. But here is someone with a pure heart, the God of all mercy and grace.

The more you see his mercy to you, the more you see your own need for the gospel. And thus you give the gospel, I think, more freely, more readily.

And finally, God shows his own heart because in this story it's clear that he has invested himself in these people, verses 9 through 11. And the Lord said, You pity the plant for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow which came into being into a night and perished in a night.

And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also, interestingly, much cattle.

Jonah is a book about the heart of God. And so, therefore, it is a book about Christian mission.

Translators have noticed something about the verb here.

[19:14] I think it's translated in the NIV, pity, or perhaps compassion. In the old version of the NIV, which often used, it's the verb concerned, to be concerned.

Shouldn't I be concerned about that great city? The verb, in the original language, was used of kings giving or withholding mercy and judgment. And the power of the verb is this.

It means to do what one does, what one must do, with tears in one's eyes. So if Jonah had turned the conversation around and asked God earlier, do you do well to be angry?

In other words, why aren't you be angry about this injustice God could perfectly well say of the day that justice was coming, yes, in my justice I will do very well of that day when God would bring justice on one particular person whom he sent.

For this is the heart of God's living justice, that he will go to extraordinary rates to uphold the heights of his justice and to show the breadth of his mercy.

[20:19] That's the story of Christ to his enormous cost. So it's not that the question is irrelevant. I think it's probably the very question that God wanted Jonah to ask, a question that would be finally answered some 800 years later.

So this is God's question to his student Jonah. Shouldn't I be concerned about that great city? Shouldn't I be concerned about the hundreds of millions God might ask who are trapped in their own sin, who don't know even this day that there is a way out?

To those of us who seem unreachable, to those that as we look at the world we would say there is no way that God could possibly reach them with the gospel.

Shouldn't God be concerned for them? Shouldn't God be concerned that his own people still don't know the value of the extravagant gift that has been given to them?

So I think this text asks us what should you do? How should you respond to this God of mercy? And the call here is I think again to re-examine our own debt to God's gift of extravagant mercy to us.

[21:32] Maybe like Jonah we should be very un-Presbyterian and experience great waves of emotion over this extreme sorrow over our sin. Extreme joy that because the sinless saviour died my sinful soul has been counted free.

If that doesn't crack a smile on the face of a Presbyterian I don't know what will. If we've been given such an astounding gift and it doesn't move us to then go out in mission then I wonder what will. I don't know if you know the story of Billy Bray the 19th century Cornish tin miner turned preacher Billy by reputation was the grumpiest man in Cornwall he was an alcoholic by addiction he was a coal miner by trade who was saved by the reading of John Bunyan's visions of heaven and hell as he lived in danger of coal pit collapse.

And what it did in Billy was it totally changed him. It totally changed him by personality he was a giant of a man but he became a radically different individual emotionally and by nature.

When people were converted in his town he would turn up at their house and put that person on his shoulders and run round the house singing glory glory he would say if they were to put me in a barrel I would shout glory out through the bunghole praise the Lord.

[23:04] And when I read stories like that it is again it's kind of a mirror like Paul was talking about out to my own heart. Where is the love of the gospel gone?

Where is the love and the urgency of mission gone in me? Am I content now just to be within these four walls speaking to people who agree with me? So it's someone here in Jonah who could be shown the heart of God and here is someone as we read of Jonah that might too also be shown the heart of God.

So you can see all the ingredients of the gospel are here in this story. God will one day revisit another city with another prophet and yet in that city he will pour out all of his judgment, the judgment that he and Jonah were speaking about upon the head of that prophet his own son to completely rescue those who will take shelter under his mercy in Jesus.

And God's concern, his justice through his tears were shown at Calvary as mercy indeed has been shown to you and me. So in closing let me say how grateful I am for the continuing witness and the gospel vitality of IPC.

You know in its way IPC did far more to shape me than the other way around. And I think because of this doctrine of grace I'm grateful for Paul and for the elders here.

[24:34] I'm grateful for Graham who I hear has had an anniversary of some almost 40 years of faithful service as an elder here. And I'm grateful for you. I'm grateful for you who've been gathered from so many different places.

You know what I'm struggling with and what many American pastors are struggling with right now is it's as if the church has turned inwards and said we just want to be with our own people, thank you. We just want to live in safety and security among people who politically and ethnically and economically are like us. It's a fundamental disagreement with the nature of the gospel and with the church itself.

So it's so refreshing to be among those who are committed to being together by the will of God, by the grace of God coming from such different places and from different cultures and different politics and different ethnicities things.

But radically brought together under the gospel of Jesus. So you know, Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh and when he got there he set about doing what he wanted to do, oblivious to the idea that God might have a different plan.

[25:49] But it has been revealed to us in Jesus, here is a God of mercy who still desires to reach the nations with his gospel, who still desires to reach people even here in Ewing with the message of Christ.

How radical would it be if we were to ask him, even today, even for this week, Lord, who would you have me talk to? Who would you have me pray for? Who have I perhaps written off in my own heart as being unreachable, perhaps somebody at work, perhaps somebody in my family?

Could it be that your gospel could reach them if we were to talk, they and I, about Jesus? Perhaps the Lord will surprise us with what he can do, and that wouldn't be such a disaster, would it?

Let's pray. Let's pray.