

Jonah 4

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[0 : 00] Please do turn back to Jonah chapter 4 on page 775. Jonah chapter 4! We left last week on a remarkable scene. Nineveh, an entire pagan city brought to faith, an entire city, bowing the knee to the Lord. An entire city crying out to the Lord and confessing their sin and receiving God's mercy. Out of all the miracles of the Old Testament, this has to be up there with one of the most remarkable. And so God's mercy is on full display in this city.

A mercy so great, he can bring a violent pagan people to their knees. This is the stuff of dreams, isn't it? It would be like today, you switch on BBC News and we see the whole of North Korea laying down their arms, turning to the Lord Jesus. Kim Jong-un has sent out a TV broadcast saying, everyone has to pray, confess your sin, open up your Bibles and cry out to the Lord Jesus.

Everyone get to church now. From this day on, our nation belongs to the Lord Jesus. Can you imagine that? Well, God can do that. He can still do something like that to North Korea because it's happened here in Nineveh. And so if the book of Jonah ended after chapter 3, we would end on a high, wouldn't we? We would end on a ringing note of God's mercy. Mercy to the sailors in chapter 1, saving mercy to Jonah in chapter 2, and huge mercy to Nineveh in chapter 3.

But that's not where this book ends. We now enter into quite an unusual chapter, don't we? Maybe when Ruben read this, you might have thought, what's this all about?

And why does this book end on such an abrupt note and also much cattle? Well, I've said throughout, the book of Jonah is about God's mercy.

[2 : 22] And I want us to see this chapter is still about God's mercy. But there's something different going on in this chapter. In this chapter, God is pointing the finger at us.

And he's asking us a question. So you could say the previous three chapters, the finger has been pointing up to God's mercy. Pointing up, look at God's mercy on the sailors.

Look at God's mercy on Jonah and on Nineveh and in our lives. Look at the mercy God has shown us in all this world in the Lord Jesus.

The finger has been pointing up so far. But now the finger points down toward us. And in this chapter, God asks us a question.

Now you know how great God's mercy is. Now that you've seen it in your own life. Ask yourself this. Do you think this mercy is just for you?

[3 : 32] God's mercy is wonderful, isn't it? How he treats the undeserving, the wandering, the running, the guilty. God is merciful beyond compare.

But as we look at that mercy and we enjoy it in our own lives, God asks us, Do you think mercy is just for you?

And this is the first thing we need to ask ourselves today. It's my first point. Do you think mercy is just for you? So this chapter begins just after a remarkable scene.

But this chapter doesn't begin with very good words. Or a very good word either. Three letters. But. This is never a good sign in Jonah, that word.

We could have ended on such a high note with Nineveh's conversion. But. It displeased Jonah exceedingly. And he was angry.

[4 : 34] Jonah sees this amazing scene in Nineveh. Repentance. Faith. Transformed lives. Glorifying God. But Jonah sees it, looks at it.

And he's furious. It displeased Jonah exceedingly. And he was angry. Actually, the word displeased here doesn't quite capture the force of it.

It literally means it was evil to Jonah. He sees their repentance and God's mercy. And he says it's evil. In fact, it's the same word used in chapter one.

When God saw Nineveh's evil ways. So God saw the old Nineveh. And said it was evil. But Jonah looks at God's work in this new Nineveh.

And says, no. That's evil. And Jonah is fuming. And why? Why this reaction of all things?

[5 : 41] Well, look what he prays to the Lord. Verse 2. Oh Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish.

For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And relenting from disaster. Therefore now, oh Lord, please take my life from me.

For it is better for me to die than to live. We find out something interesting here. We find out why Jonah ran in the first place.

Why he ran to Tarshish. He knew God is merciful. And so when God told him to go to Nineveh. He knew God was going to have mercy on them.

And Jonah didn't like it. Jonah didn't want Nineveh to have mercy. And so Jonah sees this city turning to the Lord. And he's fuming.

[6 : 40] I can't believe this. I knew you would do this, God. I knew you would show them mercy. I know exactly how gracious you are. I can't believe this. I'm fed up.

I can't stand seeing this. Just kill me. Kill me now. He's having a tantrum, isn't he? And sin can do that to us. It can turn us into toddlers when we don't get our own way.

We want one thing in our lives. And God does another thing. And our sinful instinct is to throw a hissy fit. I cannot believe you did this, God.

But why is Jonah having such a strong reaction here? Why wouldn't he want Nineveh to have mercy? Well, remember, Nineveh is an Assyrian city.

And the Assyrians are Israel's enemies. And they're an openly and notoriously violent people. And so Jonah has just witnessed God have mercy on his worst enemy.

[7 : 49] On violent criminals. It would be like God converting Adolf Hitler. And seeing it. And saying to God, Do you realize how violent this man is?

Do you realize the suffering he's caused? Do you realize the atrocities he's inflicted on innocent people? And you're going to save him, God? Are you kidding me?

I can't believe this. And so Jonah sees Nineveh. And he thinks, They are beyond God's mercy.

Not that God can't save them. But that he shouldn't. They're too evil. I don't want that sort of sinner included in God's people.

I don't want them to have mercy. I just want them to have judgment. And that's why Jonah goes out of the city in verse 5. He goes through the city.

[8 : 50] Out the other side. Into the countryside. Makes a little hut. And he sits in it. And just watches. He watches the city.

And waits to see what might happen to it. Why? He's hoping judgment might still happen. Maybe this city will still be destroyed.

Maybe they'll get what they deserve. And so he just sits. And sulks. And waits. So he doesn't like how God's mercy works, does he?

But how does Jonah think about God's mercy for himself? He's very happy for God to show him mercy. Isn't he?

Just think back to his prayer from the belly of the fish. The rain in the background will help you right now. What did he pray from the belly of the fish? When I was in darkness and distress and dying.

[9 : 55] Lord, you heard my voice. I thank you. You brought my life up from the pit. But when I was running from you and courting your judgment. Lord, you had mercy on me. But when I was nothing, you heard my prayer.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. But just for me. I'll have your mercy. I'll enjoy your mercy. I deserve your mercy.

But not them. And so in his childish strop, Jonah is completely missing something. He's completely misunderstanding mercy.

Mercy has nothing to do with being deserving. In fact, the very definition of mercy is not giving people what they deserve. You can't be more deserving of mercy than another person.

That's the opposite of what mercy is. God only shows mercy to the undeserving. To the evil.

[11 : 00] And so Jonah is completely misunderstanding sin. When it comes to their guilt before God, there's no real difference between Jonah and Nineveh. Both have been running from God.

Both were in darkness. Both had the judgment of God hanging over them. Before the judgment seat of God, all are condemned. None are deserving. And so Jonah is completely off the mark, isn't he? But we shouldn't be too quick to mock Jonah here. Because Jonah's reaction is here for a reason. This book doesn't end on chapter three for a reason. It's because we all can so very easily be like Jonah. It's very easy for us to be happy with the mercy God has shown us, isn't it?

To love God's mercy for us, as we should, absolutely. But then, in our enjoyment, it's very easy for us to not really be interested in anyone else having it.

[12:13] We can think, well, as long as I'm saved, and I'm safe, then that's all good. God being my God is great. And I love him being the God of my family and of the ones I love.

That's brilliant, but that's all that matters, really. And so we kind of switch off the evangelism part of our brains, don't we? Prayers to save the lost just kind of fall by the wayside.

We'll run the outreach events. We'll turn up, but our hearts, they're not really in it. And it's easy to become like this. There's a bit of Jonah in all of us.

And we can even fall into the same trap and think, some people are beyond God's mercy. We think God shouldn't save some people.

We see people out there with those awful views, calling evil things good, spreading lies to our children, harming our children, attacking the church, making our lives even harder as Christians.

[13:22] Or maybe we just see the plain evil people out there, and we can think, they are so awful. I can't wait until they meet their maker.

I can't wait until they get what they deserve. I just want them to be proved wrong. I just want judgment. We can be sitting in our booths, rubbing our hands, watching and waiting for judgment to fall.

And this feeling can be even stronger when it comes to our personal enemies, can't it? Those have really hurt us. And as we think about those people, and if we're honest about what's going on inside of our hearts, we know the real desire of our heart is, Lord, please don't show them mercy.

And so the finger points down to us today, and God asks, Do you think mercy is just for you?

Because we can so easily drift further and further away from how Jesus treated his enemies.

What did Jesus teach us? Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. When Jesus was being crucified, what did he say?

[14:52] He looked at the evil men around him, butchering him, and he prayed, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Jesus desired mercy.

Even for the worst of the worst. Even for those who murdered the Son of God. And this is a million miles away from where Jonah is, isn't it? But Jonah doesn't see it.

He's fine being in his tantrum. He doesn't realise how way off he is. And so God wants to show him his folly. But he doesn't just tell Jonah.

God is such a good teacher, he gets Jonah to see it for himself. Just like he's been doing with Jonah the whole time, God is calling Jonah back, and getting to see how he should really think about God's mercy.

And he does this by getting Jonah to ask himself another question. A question we all need to ask ourselves today too. And the question is this.

[15:59] Do you care about something more than a human soul? And this is my second point today, my final point. Do you care about something more than a human soul?

Look what happens next in verse 6. So just like God appointed the fish, God appointed a plant. And as Jonah looks out over Nineveh, God makes the plant grow and spread and cover him like a little tent. It shades him from the hot sun.

In my parents' back garden, they have lots of nice plants, and they have this one little tree that kind of falls over the patio. And last summer I was playing with my nieces and nephews, and we made a little den under that tree in the summer, and the hot sun would hit the tree but it would shade us.

And we kind of had, well I almost had a little nap in there, it was nice. Well that's what Jonah has.

And he loves it. He was exceedingly glad because of the plant.

[17:15] He really cares about this plant, doesn't he? But look what happens next, verse 7. God appoints something else. A worm. And this worm is like the very hungry caterpillar.

It starts eating away at the plant, attacking it, killing it. And so the plant withers and dries up. And so where does that leave Jonah?

In the sun. And so God appoints another thing. A scorching east wind. Do you remember a couple of summers ago when it was 40 degrees here in the UK?

And the wind would blow but it was never a fresh breeze, it was just this, it was just a scorching hot air hitting you. Well Jonah has that right in his face. And so the sun beats down on him and he starts to faint.

And he gets into a tantrum again. He's even more fed up. Verse 8. And he asked that he might die and said, It is better for me to die than to live.

[18:18] But God said to Jonah, Do you do well to be angry for the plant? And he said, Yes, I do well to be angry. Angry enough to die. Lord, this plant was giving me shade.

It made me happy. You don't realise how valuable this plant was to me. And now it's gone. Of course I can. Of course I'm angry. We can be like this with so much in our lives, can't we?

And what happens when the roof over our heads starts to leak? We get in a huff, don't we? A pipe bursts and we're fuming.

The house needs that same repair again and we go into a strop. Or the foxes get into our plants in the garden. Or maybe the food goes off in the fridge and we have to throw it away.

And it gets to us, doesn't it? We get worked up. We get angry. Because we care about those things. We pity them. And just think, what is that anger saying?

[19:27] It's saying something about God. We're frustrated at his providence. At his choices. When we care about something, we want God to care about it too.

Lord, why didn't you care about these things? My house, my garden, my fridge. Don't you see these things matter to me? When we get angry, it shows us, it shows what we think God should care about.

We care about it. And so we think God should care about it too. Well, this is what Jonah says to God.

God, I care about this plant. I know you've just let it wither. Come on, God, I care about it. You should care about it too. And look at God's reply in verse 10.

And the Lord said, God is exposing something in Jonah here.

[20:52] Do you see what he says? Jonah, look at your reaction. You care so much about this plant. Something that doesn't even really matter. You didn't labor for it.

You didn't make it grow. It was just a plant that appeared for a little while. And yet you're spending so much energy getting worked up over it. Look at yourself, Jonah. Do you realize how much you care about something that doesn't really matter?

And you want me to care about it too. Well, if that's the case, why don't you want me to care about Nineveh?

A city with 120,000 souls in it. Souls with infinite value. Souls that have an eternal destiny.

Souls that are utterly lost. And in that city, there's even cattle that's worth more than your plant. Why would you want me to care about those small things in your life, but not these souls over here?

[21:57] Do you realize what you're saying, Jonah? You're saying mercy should be for you, and even for your plant, but not for those souls over there. You're saying your life matters, but not theirs.

Look at your heart, Jonah. Do you care about something more than a human soul? This is the question the book ends on.

The question God asks us today. Do you care about something more than a human soul? Because what we care about, what we get worked up over in life, it reveals what we want God to care about.

Think about what you care about day to day. What you spend your energy concerned about. It's often the small things in our lives, isn't it? The plants, the roof, the garden, the fridge, the car.

Things in the grand scheme of eternity don't really matter. But we get worked up over them. And in our anger, we're saying to God, you really should have mercy on me and all these things in my life above all else.

[23:13] All the while, there are human souls out there, lost souls without Christ, in desperate need of God's mercy.

And if we're honest, we're not even that fussed. Well, God is getting us to think about those insignificant things we care about.

And he wants us to put it next to a lost human soul. And he wants us to ask ourselves, do you care about something more than a human soul?

Whether it's your neighbor, your friend, your family member, or even if it's the worst possible person you can imagine, that is a human soul that matters, a soul that will last forever.

And so we should care about them. We should care about where they're going after they die.

Because God cares. God has concern for the lost, for the running, for the evil.

[24 : 20] That is why he sent Jonah into Nineveh. And that is why he sent his son into this world. To seek and save the lost.

To call not the righteous, but sinners. To not be served, but to serve. To give sight to the blind. God has a heart full of mercy for this world.

He hasn't left this world to play on the tracks. He's calling this lost, running world back to him. God has pity, concern for this world.

He's patient with the stubborn, isn't he? He persists in following the one who runs away. And we see that in our own lives, don't we? Just think, where would we be?

Where would our lives be without God's mercy? Just think, how far, think about how far we could have run without God's mercy. Look where our families would be without God's mercy.

[25 : 31] God cares about you. Yes, God's mercy is for you. But it's not just for you. There is a whole world out there, human souls, that God is concerned about.

God cares about human souls. And so we need to ask ourselves, do we? We care about a lot of things in this world.

We have a concern for plants and houses and everything. And we want God to care about them. And in his grace, he does. God does care, even about the little things in your life.

But he has a deep concern over something even more precious. A human soul. And so God says today, will you have concern over what I care about?

If someone hasn't put their faith in Christ, that should rile us up, shouldn't it? That should send us to our knees in prayer, and it should send us to our feet to bring the good news of Christ to them.

[26 : 46] Because what do we find in Christ? Mercy. Brothers and sisters, God's mercy is for you.

Absolutely. But his mercy is also for so many more. It's there for every lost soul that turns to Christ. And that matters.

Those souls matter. And God's mercy is there waiting for you and waiting for them. Our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

How amazing if every soul would know his mercy. Let me pray.