

# 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 February 2015

Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[ 0 : 00 ] On the 8th of December 2003, a friend of mine was in central London, and he was passing a bus stop. and he heard two ladies speaking to each other, saying, where are all the buses? Where are they?

Why are they taking so long to come? I don't know where they were going, but they certainly wanted to be somewhere. And they were so preoccupied with their own concerns and what they were doing, that they'd missed the big picture of what was going on around them. Because the 8th of December 2003 was the day the England rugby team were having a parade through central London, having just won the Rugby World Cup. But these dear ladies completely missed the big picture of what was going on, and so they were rather disgruntled because their own specific needs were not being met.

And as we turn to Jonah chapter 4, we see something similar happening. Jonah is not just disgruntled but angry enough to die, because he's missed the big picture. Of what God is doing, and more importantly, the big picture of who the Lord God is. And aren't we sometimes a bit like that? Well, let's have a look at Jonah.

[ 1 : 05 ] We've got to work through this chapter. We'll look first at Jonah's anger with God. Then we'll look at God's lesson for Jonah. And finally, God's gracious invitation to us all.

So let's start with Jonah's anger with God there, in verses 1-4. It's extraordinary, isn't it? He just had this extremely successful mission trip to Nineveh. You'd think at this point he'd be signing up a contract on the God channel to rake in lots of money for his fantastic preaching.

But no. How does he respond? Verse 1. It displeased Jonah exceedingly. That is, the fact that the people of Nineveh had taken the message seriously and repented.

And the fact that God had shown them mercy. That displeased Jonah greatly. And he was angry. And to his credit, he does a good thing in his anger. He talks to God about it.

Look at verse 2. He prayed to the Lord and said, See, up until this point we haven't been told why Jonah ran in the opposite direction.

[ 2 : 21 ] But now he tells us, or at least partly explains it. He said, God, I didn't want to go preach to those people because I knew what you're like. I knew you'd forgive them. It's funny, most people today are angry with God if they think he exists.

They think he's a mean bully. Jonah was angry with God because he knew God is a forgiving God. See, at the heart of it, Jonah was angry because he didn't want the Lord God to show mercy to the people of Nineveh.

He didn't want them to receive mercy and grace and forgiveness. Now we're not told exactly why. We don't know exactly what Jonah had against those people.

Was it he was scared of them? That's what some people will say. Assyria was a big power.

Actually, at the point of Jonah's life, it wasn't a big power. Well, they got bigger again. Was it that Jonah was just racist?

Just didn't like those people over there? That's possible. But we don't know. Was it that Jonah felt he was somehow spiritually or morally superior to those cruel Assyrians who worshipped other gods?

[ 3 : 28 ] And they were cruel people. History records the terrible things they did to the nations they conquered. For whatever reason, Jonah felt he didn't want the Lord to show their mercy.

Underneath it all, at the heart of it, Jonah was proud. Whether that was proud of his race, proud of his religion, proud of his performance. He just didn't want God to be nice to other people.

He only wanted God to be merciful to him. And what's important for us is not the reason why Jonah didn't want the Lord to be gracious to them, to forgive them. What is important to us is the fact that

that's what Jonah didn't want.

The fact that Jonah didn't want God to be merciful to these others. And actually, are there times when you and I are like that? Are there people who we look down on because we think we're better?

Are there people we loathe because we fear them? Are there some people we just think are too bad, too hopeless for God to save? I think of good Christian people who are studying Bible studies with.

[ 4 : 37 ] Who would love most people who then talk with absolute venom about their political enemies. Or others who welcome in the stranger, who welcome in people from all over the world.

But who just loathe the idea of people who fall into sexual sin, especially homosexual sin. It's as if they cannot imagine God could ever be gracious to them, to those type of people.

Well, that's Jonah's attitude. How could God be merciful to the people over here? And even if we don't have that attitude in quite the same extent.

Actually, we sometimes feel the same way, don't we? Why does God bless that church over there and not my church? Why did God give that colleague there? Why does she keep her job when I'm being made redundant?

Why did that man get promoted when he's not nearly as good as I am? Why is God doing that? Like Jonah, we want God to be merciful to us and kind to us and give us good things.

[ 5 : 41 ] But we can end up resenting it when he gives those good things to other people. So whenever we think along those lines, we're thinking like Jonah. But you see how strongly Jonah feels about this.

Look at verse 3. See how angry he is with God for showing mercy to the people of Nineveh.

Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me. For it is better for me to die than to live.

I'd rather die than you show mercy to these people, God. It's an astounding thing to say, isn't it? How could he talk like that? What could it be that Jonah's whole sense of identity and self-worth was so challenged by God showing mercy to the people of Nineveh that he felt like life was no longer worth living?

Maybe he thought he was superior to them. Maybe he thought he was morally better than them. Maybe he just feared them. But the fact that God is showing mercy to the Ninevites means that Jonah sort of lost his whole sense of purpose and identity and worth in life.

I don't know if you've ever seen Les Miserables. There's a little parallel in it, I think. So Les Miserables is the tale of Jean Valjean, a man arrested for stealing a loaf of bread, who, as we go on in the story, is forgiven and set free by a bishop who treats him with mercy and kindness.

[ 7 : 04 ] And so his whole life has changed around. And he starts being kind to people. But all the time he is hotly pursued by Javert, the policeman who is on his case, the policeman who wants to arrest him and get him back in jail for jumping his parole.

And later on in the story, 20 years on from the first time we meet them, Valjean is in a situation where he can kill Javert. Yet he doesn't.

He lets him go. If you know the story, at that point, Javert decides life is no longer worth living. He goes and drowns himself in the sand. He sings a song which I will not sing for you.

He says, Damned if I'll live in the debt of him. Damned if I'll yield at the end of the chase. I am the law and the law is not mocked.

I'll spit his pity right back in his face. There is nothing on earth that we share. It is either Valjean or Javert. That's kind of what Jonah is saying here. It's either the Ninevites or it's me.

[ 8 : 04 ] We don't have anything in common. So how can you show mercy to them? His whole sense of identity is completely unraveled by God showing mercy to these people.

I'd rather die than live. See, for Jonah, his self-esteem and identity is somehow in what he did or who he was or his ethnic identity or his status.

And it wasn't in the fact that he was someone who needed God's mercy. If we put our sense of identity and self-worth in anything we do or anything we think we are on our own, then that thing can go from us and we might end up like Jonah and want to die.

But if our identity is based on being someone in need of God's forgiveness, someone who needs God's mercy and God's compassion, then that is something that can never be taken from us.

That is a rock-solid place to live. So how do we see ourselves? How do we see ourselves? Well, Jonah certainly didn't see himself as someone who needed God's help despite what he'd been

through.

[ 9 : 16 ] But do you notice how the Lord deals with Jonah's tantrum? Look at verse 4. He doesn't shout. He doesn't scream. When my kids have tantrums, I'm not that patient.

I've been challenged this week as I've been reflecting on this passage. And hopefully I'll do better as a result. But what do you think? What's your answer to Jonah's question? Or to God's question to Jonah?

Was Jonah right to be angry? What did the Lord do for Jonah up until this point? Well, even when Jonah had run away in the opposite direction, the Lord had brought him back.

When Jonah was going to drown in the sea, when he despaired of his life, the Lord sent a big fish to rescue him. Such that when Jonah prayed to God from the belly of the fish, chapter 2, he came to the conclusion that salvation belongs to the Lord.

That rescue could only come from God. It's all his business. Yet now he seems to have forgotten that. Oh, the Lord had shown great mercy and compassion to Jonah. If only he recognized it.

[ 10 : 24 ] Well, that's Jonah's anger with the Lord. He's angry because God showed mercy to other people. Let's look at the Lord's lesson for Jonah, verses 5 to 11. Look what Jonah does, verse 5.

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade till he could see what became of the city. Jonah is like the man who hears as an airplane crashed and takes his video camera along to record it.

That's what he's doing here. He's hoping against hope that the Lord will change his mind and will destroy Nineveh and you'll see some great kind of pyrotechnics as sulfur and fire rains down the city. Now, because he's sitting in a desert and it's very hot, he tries to build himself some shade and some shelter.

After all, if you've been in a desert in the heat of a day, you'll know it's not good to sit and direct sunlight. But Jonah's shelter was inadequate. But look what the Lord does, verse 6. Now, the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah that it might be shade over his head to save him from his discomfort.

Back in chapter 1, the Lord appointed, same word, a fish to rescue Jonah. In verses 7 and 8, we'll see the Lord appoints other things for Jonah's good.

[ 11 : 37 ] And how does Jonah feel about this? So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of his plant. God, you're doing something good for me. Thank you. That's cheering me up. He was as overjoyed about the plant as he was overwrought about God's grace and mercy to Nineveh.

But then look what the Lord does. Verse 7. But when dawn came out the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plants that had withered. And 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.

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. The Lord who appoints a big fish and appoints a plant to grow up is the same Lord who appoints a worm and appoints a hot east wind.

And he does it all for Jonah's good. He's the one who appoints where we live, where we die, and appoints all the ups and downs of our lives. He does it all for our good.

Even if Jonah doesn't realise it just now. As his precious shade is destroyed, look how he responds. He asks that he might die. He says, it's better for me to die than to live. Well, Jonah wanted to die when he saw the Lord being merciful to Nineveh.

[ 12 : 53 ] Now he wants to die because he's no longer comfortable. As we fare to him in the scorching heat, it would have been really hot. But do you see what Jonah was primarily concerned about? He's concerned about his own comfort, his own status.

Like the ladies at the bus stop, he's missed the big picture. He's just concerned about his convenience and his comfort. And isn't there a bit of Jonah in all of us? Let me ask you, if you pray, what kind of things do you pray about?

Is it for our health and work? Or for growth and becoming more like the Lord Jesus Christ, becoming more Christ-like? Do we pray for our friends and families?

It's good if we do. Or do we pray for our enemies as well? Do we pray just for our concerns? Or for the big picture of God's concerns, God's compassion, God's purposes in the world?

Well, the Lord appointed all these things for Jonah's good, to teach him a lesson. When difficult things come in our lives, it reveals our hearts, doesn't it?

[ 14 : 00 ] It shows what we're really like. We think we're quite nice, and then, we think we're patient, and then the train doesn't come. We think we're quite nice and kind, and then the guy in the BMW

carves us up as we're driving along the road.

We think we trust God, and then we lose our job. The Lord appoints these things to show us, help us see our own hearts, and so that we will then cry out to him for mercy again.

Look how the story goes on. So Jonah said he wants to die. Verse 9, 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.

Well, he's a petulant child, isn't he? And look how the Lord speaks to this petulant child. He said, Do you pity the plant for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night?

Should not I 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 much cattle? You see the contrast that the Lord is pointing to Jonah too.

[15:09] Jonah, you care about a plant, but you didn't make it grow. You didn't plant it in the first place. And it was very short-lived. Here's the city of 120,000 people. I created all of them.

They're made in my image. I love them. Shouldn't I be concerned about them? And by the way, Jonah, your plant, it was only here for a day and then gone.

These people, as those created in my image, will live forever. They either live forever in heaven or in hell. They're not just short-lived. And by the way, Jonah, if you don't like the people of Nineveh, at least think about the cattle, because there are quite a few of them as well.

And they're more valuable than the plant, by the way. And do you notice how the Lord describes these people? I guess Jonah would have thought they're horrible Assyrians, they're immoral, they're disgusting, they're violent.

How does the Lord describe them? In that verse? Verse 11? They are people who do not know their right hand from their left. That doesn't mean they're really stupid.

[16:17] It's a picture of being morally clueless. Yes, they're responsible for the evil they do. The Lord had called it evil back in chapter 1, verse 2. He pronounced the message of judgment on the evil they did back in chapter 3, verse 4.

So they're guilty, irresponsible. And yet the Lord in his compassion also sees them as people who are just lost. People who are clueless. Just as the Lord Jesus looked out in the crowds who are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

See, what's the lesson that the Lord is teaching Jonah here? He's teaching Jonah that the Lord is compassionate. And that those people need his compassion.

Amongst people I know, I have a friend who came to the Lord in prison. He was there for child sex offences. But his life's been turned around.

I have another friend I used to visit in prison. I visited in prison. I didn't know him before this. I met him in prison. He was in prison because he'd murdered his wife.

[17:27] Several years after finally getting out, he also came to faith the Lord Jesus Christ. He's a much humbler and different man. How can the Lord show compassion to people like that?

How can the Lord show compassion to a wicked city like Nineveh? Well, the answer is through Jesus. As we go on to the pages of the New Testament, we find that God so loved the world that he sent his own son to live as a man on this earth.

The only man who fully loved God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength and loved his neighbours and self. Who lived the perfect life and yet who died on a cross.

Who took the punishment that sinners like me deserve. See, God doesn't just overlook evil and injustice. It all gets paid for.

And it will either be paid for by Jesus on the cross or for those who reject Jesus, they themselves will pay ultimately in hell. That's how God can show mercy. He provided someone a substitute to take away the sins of the world.

[18:31] And there's a big contrast between Jesus and Jonah, isn't there? Jonah said, Lord, I'd rather die than have you show mercy to those people. I'd rather die than have the Lord show mercy to those people.

Jesus said, I'd rather die so that my Father can show mercy to those people. So you see Jonah's anger. You see God's lesson for Jonah and a lesson in his compassion.

And implicit in all this is the Lord's invitation, not just to Jonah but to you and to me as well. See, how does the story end? Verse 11 ends with a question, doesn't it? How does the question get answered?

We don't know what Jonah does, do we? And there's a reason for that. The question is left there because it's a question for us to answer as well. It's the Lord's invitation to us.

It's an invitation to see ourselves as he sees us and to see the world around us as he sees it. To see ourselves as Jonah's who naturally run away from God and who would not be able to come back to God if it was not for his kind, compassionate, merciful intervening in our lives.

[ 19 : 43 ] The Lord is saying do you see yourself as I see you? That's the invitation. And it's an invitation to see the world as the Lord sees it. How do we see the people on the bus with us heading to work?

How do we see the people on the streets walking past the town hall? How do we see the people on the television, the politicians, the business leaders, the filmmakers? How do we see the drug addicts?

Do we see them as the Lord sees them? As those in need of mercy? Or do we just see them as people out there, like the Ninevites, people who aren't as good as me?

Here's the invitation. Will we see ourselves as God sees us? Will we see the world as the Lord sees it? Or will we be like Jonah and miss the big picture?

So caught up in our own comfort, our own status, our own needs. John Newton was a slave trader in the 18th century. Did some terrible things as a slave trader, as part of that trade.

[ 20 : 47 ] And yet, came to saving faith in Jesus Christ as his saviour. Very near the end of his life, as he was, his brain wasn't necessarily working as well as it once did.

Pretty much on his deathbed. He said this, One thing I still know, I'm a great sinner, but Jesus Christ is a great saviour.

Is that how we see ourselves? Let's pray.