

Jonah 4

'Debating with God'

How would you feel?

Tonight I want you to come with me on an imaginary sneak preview of heaven.

I want you to imagine that somehow you have been able to see into heaven and meet some of the people there.

I guess that you, like me, would not be surprised to see certain people there.

People like Abraham and Moses, the apostles, some of the great known Christians throughout history.

However, I wonder how you'd feel if you found yourself stumbling across the following people:

- Adolf Hitler
- Stalin
- Saddam Hussein
- Pol Pot
- Osama Bin Laden

And I wonder how you'd feel if you found out that each of these masters of genocide were in heaven because they repented of their sins and trusted in Jesus on their deathbed.

How would you feel?

And how would you feel if you were the father or mother of a child who had died in one of the planes hijacked and crashed into the Twin Towers?

Or the brother or sister of one of the Jewish people who had been gassed in Hitler's holocaust?

How would you feel?

Perhaps you would feel something of what Jonah feels in Jonah 4.

You see, the nation of Assyria was as cruel and malicious as any of the people I've mentioned.

The prophecy of Nahum calls Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, 'the bloody city'.

A city full of lies and plunder, with no end of prey.

A place of flashing swords and glittering spears with hosts of slain and heaps of corpses.

A city known to betray nations with her whorings and peoples with her charms.

And so, when Jonah sees God forgive Nineveh as he does in Jonah 3, Jonah feels a deep anger.

And it is Jonah's anger that is the focus of Jonah 4.

So, let's turn to this chapter and see what God has to teach us from his word today.

Jonah 4

Jonah 4:1-4

- Jonah's anger

First, let's just have a look at Jonah's response.

Read Jonah 4:1.

'But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.'

The original language actually says that it was exceedingly evil to Jonah or exceedingly disgusting to Jonah.

In other words, Jonah looked saw the evil of Nineveh.

He hated it.

He saw God have mercy and change his mind about destroying the city.

And he hated this as well.

In fact, he was disgusted that God was so merciful.

- I knew it!

In verse 2 we are told that Jonah's anger is expressed to God.

He prays to God.

And look at what he says.

He lets us know why it was that he did not go to Nineveh in chapter 1.

He did not go because he knew God was gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The words Jonah uses here are not his own.

They are part of words that were spoken to Moses by God himself in Exodus 34:6-8.

In the two chapters before Exodus 34 God had threatened to leave the nation of Israel because of their idolatry.

They had broken the covenant he made with them and he had every right to walk away from his obligation to them.

However, Moses pleads with him.

And even though there is no repentance by the nation, God changes his mind and acts in surprising grace and mercy.

He decides he will stay with his people despite their sinfulness.

It is just after this that God reveals himself to Moses.

We are told in Exodus 34:6-7 that...

“The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

Jonah knew this story.

He knew how God treated Israel.

He knew that God's nature was to have mercy.

And he knew that if God had any chance to have mercy he would do it.

And so he knew that if he could possibly forgive the Ninevites and avert trouble he would.

- And I can't accept it!

And what these verses say is that this is all too much for Jonah.

He can accept that God would be merciful to Israel.

But it is all too much that he would be merciful to this pagan and evil city of Nineveh.

And his disgust at God is so overwhelming that he would rather die than see Nineveh saved.

Look at what Jonah says to God in verse 4.

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

- God's question

In verse 4 God responds.

His words literally read: 'Do you do well to be angry?'

In other words, God is asking Jonah: 'What right to you have to be angry?'

It is these words that set the context for the next section of the chapter – verses 5-11.

In these verses God deals with Jonah's anger.

Let's have a look at what goes on.

Jonah 4:5-11

In verse 5 there is a flashback to when Jonah finished prophesying to the city.

He apparently came into the city from the West, travelled through and then exited the city on the East.

We can easily imagine the scene.

Jonah finds his job finished.

He is not sure what is going to happen to the city.

Perhaps he still hopes that God will do a Sodom and Gomorrah type of act and destroy the city.

And so he finds a good vantage point and builds himself a temporary shelter to wait out what remains of the 40 days he had prophesied.

In those days in Mesopotamia timber was scarce and expensive and generally imported.

Jonah's shelter would therefore probably have been built from stones and/or clay.

Perhaps he put up a rough roof with some branches from the local brush that had not been claimed for firewood.

It was probably a very crude dwelling with little real shelter from the hot middle eastern sun.

Then, just as God acts in mercy toward his prophet.

Just as God had appointed a great fish to swallow him in Jonah 2:17, now God appoints a plant to grow.

And the plant greatly eases Jonah's discomfort.

And where Jonah was exceedingly angry with God for being merciful to Nineveh, he is now exceedingly glad that God is merciful to him.

But Jonah's shade and relief was short-lived.

The very next day God did some more appointing of natural forces.

This time God appointed a worm.

And the worm apparently ate away at the stem or the root of the plant and caused it to die.

The shade died.

And Jonah's head began to burn again under the hot sun.

But this was not the end of Jonah's bad day.

Verse 8 tells us that when the sun had risen, God did some more appointing of nature.

This time he appointed a scorching east wind.

It is possible that this wind was the sort of wind that is called the scirocco.

The scirocco is a constant hot air flow that is so full of positive ions that it affects the levels of serotonin and other brain neurotransmitters.

The scirocco is known to cause exhaustion, depression, feelings of unreality and even occasional bizarre behaviour.

The wind and the heat must have caused great difficulty for Jonah.

He may have experienced heat exhaustion and all the anguish and depression that this combination of elements would stimulate.

Everything was going wrong for him.

It appears as though God is against him.

And so Jonah calls out to God to end his life.

Then, in verse 9, God responds.

Do you do well to be angry for the plant?

What right have you to be angry about the plant?

Notice the difference in what God says here and what he says in verse 4.

God has narrowed down the scope of the question of Jonah's anger.

In verse 4 it is about God's action on Nineveh.

Here it is about God's action on the plant.

Jonah responds to God's question in verse 9.

In effect, what Jonah is saying is that the plant was important to him.

It was significant.

It delighted him.

And now he is suffering because of its demise.

He is angry enough at its demise to want to die rather than live without it.

The point Jonah is making is that the plant is worthy of life because it is important to him.

The criteria for its ongoing life is its importance to Jonah.

God now has Jonah where he wants him.

And so he turns to Jonah and analyses his anger.

Let's try and paraphrase what God is saying in these verses:

Okay, Jonah, let's take a look at your anger.

You are angry about this plant.

But is your concern for the plant genuine or just plain selfish.

After all, you never had the devotion of the gardener for the plant.

If you feel what you feel about the plant even though you are not the gardener, then how do you think the gardener might feel?

How do you think the gardener might feel who has tended the plant, watched it grown and then saw it wither and die?

If you feel such intense emotions for a plant you had nothing to do with in terms of its growth, then imagine how I feel for Nineveh!

I made the people of Nineveh.

I love them as my creation.

They have cost me huge effort and they mean the world to me.

Your pain over a plant is nothing beside mine when I contemplate their destruction.

Jonah, as you yourself said in the boat, I am the creator of the world.

I am the God who notices when a sparrow falls to the ground.

I am a God who is even concerned about sparrows and the cattle in the city of Nineveh.

I care for everything I have created.

And I particularly care for the people I have created.

And these people of Nineveh have not had the advantages you Jews have had.

For centuries, I have been your God and you have been my people.

You've known my word and my will.

*And yet you've been sinning against me from the very first day I called you.
And I've been changing my mind about judging you ever since then.
What's more, I've even been personally lenient and forgiving with you, Jonah.
After all, a recalcitrant prophet deserves death.
But I didn't kill you.
Instead, I rescued you with a great fish.
And then I used you again as a prophet rather than throwing you aside.
I've been merciful to Israel and I've been merciful to you, Jonah.
And you have the gall to be angry at me for being generous with this city and its
people who sin without having the advantages you Jews have had.
Jonah, your anger is totally, totally, totally unjustified.*

Some New Testament Perspectives

The story of Jonah is a great story, isn't it?

And the message of this chapter is overwhelming, isn't it?

I wonder if you can think of some NT passages that take up some of the themes of this passage.

Here's a couple to think about:

- Luke 15:1-31 (note the background – the reaction of the Jews).
- Matthew 18:21-35

Note that this second passage is a very serious warning not to act like Jonah.

We have experienced God's great mercy in Jesus through his death for our sins.

We must reflect that experience in the way that we treat others.

If we don't, God will act towards us as we have acted towards others.

What right do you have?

We need to ask ourselves the question God asks Jonah.

What right do we have...

- to be angry with God being merciful
- to not respond to others like God does (accepting, forgiving, welcoming, etc.)
- to be unforgiving
- to be critical of God being merciful

You see, God loves mercy.

God loves grace.

God loves forgiveness.

God loves welcoming the alien and the stranger.

God rejoices in one sinner who repents.

He will leave the ninety nine sheep to go in search of one who has strayed.

He is the Lord, the Lord, the God of steadfast love.

So, if you have forgotten these things, then let me urge you to rethink things.

- Return to the cross.
- Refresh your mind and your heart with the truths there.
- Bask in God's mercy and grace.
- And determine to have a heart like his – full of mercy, full of grace, full of patience, full of kindness.