

Jonah 4 - Grace

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[0:00] Good morning. Today's reading can be found on page 929 of the church Bibles. Jonah chapter 4, starting at verse 1.

But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord, Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? This is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish.

I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life.

For it is better for me to die than to live. But the Lord replied, Is it right for you to be angry? Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city.

There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade, and waited to see what would happen to the city.

Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort.

[1:04] And Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered.

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.

But God said to Jonah, Is it right for you to be angry about the plant? It is, he said, and I'm so angry I wish I were dead. But the Lord said, You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend to it or make it grow.

It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?

This is the word of the Lord. Good morning, church. Like I said earlier, my name is Nathan. I'm the trainee pastor here at West Kilburn. And I mean this when I say this.

[2:14] It is my great joy and privilege to get to preach God's word to you today. Let me start by saying this. In the book of Acts, we are shown a people that are commended for the fact that they keep on looking at what Paul is saying, and then looking at God's word to check that what he is saying is true and scriptural.

And so in that spirit, can I encourage you, keep Jonah open in front of you, continue to check back in on it. I will continue to refer to it. But as we have our Bibles open at Jonah 4, and as you might realize, we're back in Jonah, we did take a three-week break.

If all you can remember about Jonah 1 to 3 is the fact that there's some fish involved, you're probably not on your own. So we're going to do a little bit of a recap first before we dive in to Jonah. Here's a little recap. So to start with, Andrew took us through Jonah 1. The wickedness of Nineveh, this city, has come before the Lord. And so he calls on Jonah, go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, says God.

But Jonah goes in exactly the opposite direction. He flees away as far as he can go from Nineveh. And then a storm comes. He knows it's because he has disobeyed God.

[3:30] And by his own admission, the only way to stop that storm is to throw him overboard. The men are hesitant, and the men on the boat didn't actually believe in Jonah's God. But by the end of the chapter 1, even they feared the Lord.

In the last verse, he is thrown overboard, and it says, the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Steve then walked us through Jonah 2 and Jonah 3.

In Jonah 2, while in the belly of this fish, he is pleading with the Lord, Lord, help me, save me from this. I will proclaim your message, what you told me to do, if you would just help me here.

And so he is spat out of the fish on a shore near Nineveh, and he is on his way again. God again charges him, proclaim the message, and in Jonah 3, he proclaims that message.

He speaks five words in the original language of Hebrew. There are eight translated into English, and these are the words. Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown. It's quite an unimpressive sermon, but God is speaking, and God is working through it.

[4:35] The entirety of Nineveh comes to repent, to believe in who God is, and turn away from their wickedness. The king even sends a decree, and now the entirety of Nineveh is repenting and mournful for their sin.

And Steve preached to us about the joy of a repentant heart, and that's the end of Jonah 3, the repentant people of Nineveh. So, God's word has gone out to his people.

The people have repented, and we see one of the biggest revivals ever recorded, which is 120 people turning away from their wickedness and to God.

So all this awe-inspiring stuff happens, and then comes Jonah 4. The prophet has done his job. He's proclaimed the message, and now God seems to take aim at his heart.

He wants to teach Jonah something of who he is and what he's all about, and I think that should really speak to us today. And that's where we're going to dive in to Jonah 4.

[5:33] But before we dive in, let me pray for us as we start. Lord, we thank you for bringing us here together. We thank you for your grace and the grace shown in the story of Jonah.

Lord, may you please edify us with these words, the words of your scripture. And Lord, please speak. Your servants are listening. In Jesus' name I pray.

Amen. Okay. Here's a big idea of this big passage of Jonah 4. God is gracious and merciful and we are so often not.

God is gracious and merciful and we are so often not. That's the great big idea of the passage, but we're going to look at that in about three different stages. First is going to be the stage of grief.

This is the anger that Jonah has for the grace that God has shown to Nineveh. The second is the grace that is God's character in this passage that he is a gracious and compassionate God.

[6:35] Then lastly, the gift. Out of that flow, out of that grace flows a gift that God gives us and that's what we're going to look at. But let me start by saying this. If you know me at all, you will know that I like some pretty rubbish films.

Right? I studied media at A-levels and I can assess a film and tell you that the cinematography is good or this, that, and the other. I could probably tell you what a good film is. I just don't like them. They seem a bit pretentious and the story is never that gripping and I'm just not a fan.

I like some quite rubbish films. One of those films is Safe Haven. If you've watched it, you'll know that I love this. Any given moment you ask me what film do you want to watch, Nathan, this is it and it drives my family nuts.

But what's beautiful about this film to me is that it's just basically a romantic drama. The plot line is this woman is leaving a bad relationship in the city and escaping to this small old town and she finds the love of her life.

If that sounds familiar, that's because it is. It's basically the plot line of every romantic film or hallmark film. But it's just better and I love it. Here's the thing about this film.

[7:45] It starts and ends with some quite dramatic and intense scenes. And I couldn't really tell you much about those scenes because I just skip over them. I don't really want to come here for the intense stuff and the intense drama.

I'm here for the nice sleepy old town that's chilled out and a romantic film. So I watched the middle.

It's complete bliss. But I mention all of that to say that I think that's what Jonah 4 is like for us.

It's the start and the end of that film to me. It's the bit that's kind of overlooked. It's the bit we're least familiar with in the story of Jonah. I got to university I think before I even found out really and I'd grown up in the church but that was the first time I really found out that Jonah 4 even existed as a chapter.

Partially because maybe it's just because I focused on the exciting bit when the prophet is in the mouth of a fish or maybe I didn't get taught it. Who knows? But I think it's overlooked but there is so much that we need to see in this and that can speak to us.

So why don't we start with the grief? Let's start with grief. I mean Jonah is really angry and you don't have to wait to see that. That's right in verse 1. It says, but to Jonah this seemed very wrong and he became angry.

[8:59] I mean the word there for anger is a sort of hot raging anger. By verse 3 he already wants to die. He is furious with what God has done with forgiving the Ninevites.

But why? He's preached the message and they've repented and God has forgiven them. So why is Jonah angry? Well a few clues for what might be making him angry here.

First is the wickedness of the Ninevites. The wickedness of the Ninevites is quite well known. If there was a mode of torture at that point in time the Ninevites were probably involved in doing it. They treated their captors and prisoners terribly and historical accounts are quite gripping but really horrific. They also engaged in things like child sacrifice. I mean the book of Jonah starts by Jonah being told to go to Nineveh because his wickedness has come up before the Lord.

They are a wicked people make no mistake about that. God knows about it and yet he sends Jonah and those are the people that are forgiven. And so Jonah's annoyed.

[10:05] Those are the people that could possibly be forgiven. That might be one reason. The other side of his anger seems to be predicated on this prevailing opinion that the Israelites that Yahweh the God of Israel while he had authority over the entire world his grace his favor his mercy was only meant to extend to Israel his chosen people.

So put those two together and Jonah has this expected favoritism of the Israelites combined with the wickedness of the Ninevites and he is angry. He has made up his mind this is very wrong. And of all the possible reasons for his anger they all boil down to this general thinking from Jonah. Jonah believes that Nineveh deserves judgment and yet they have had and received grace and mercy from God.

Jonah believes that Nineveh deserves judgment yet received grace and mercy. We see that here don't we? Just look with me at verse two I'm going to read these verses out again. It says isn't this what I said Lord when I was still at home?

That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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.

[11:17] Now Lord take my life for it is better for me to die than to live. He doesn't hide his cards does he? The reasons for Jonah not wanting to be in Nineveh the main reason is not that he was afraid of what the Ninevites might do to him these wicked people.

It was not because it was a long journey they just didn't want to go on. It's not because he thought they might reject the message that the prophet had to proclaim. No the main reason wasn't any of those things.

The main reason is because Jonah knows God's heart. He knows his character. He knew that God would show the people grace and mercy if they would repent. And he didn't want that.

He wanted to see them judged. He was afraid that God would be exactly who he says he is. Gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and for Jonah maybe the worst one relenting from sending calamity.

See Jonah is saying what is the quiet bit in his heart out loud. Jonah is screaming in all of this enough God. This is why I didn't want to come here. I knew you were gracious. I knew that you would make some way for them to turn back and I don't want that.

[12:28] They deserve judgment. They are wicked. God, you're wrong to offer them mercy. They don't deserve it, says Jonah. And just as he wishes his life away, God comes to him with a question on which this passage turns.

Is it right for you to be angry? Is it right for you to be angry, Jonah? Is it right for you to be angry that I called 120,000 people to me and they repented and put their faith in me?

Is it right for you to be angry at my grace for these people? Is it right for you to be angry at who I am, gracious and compassionate? I think we all may know what the ideal response here is from Jonah but we don't see one.

Jonah doesn't say anything. All we know is that by verse 5 he is sat down and is looking at the city. By all accounts he is hoping that they are destroyed, judged for what they are doing, that their repentance was futile and actually they are still going to be judged.

That is the way he comes into it. God is about to use an object lesson to help Jonah out. God is using the leafy plant that grows.

[13:42] Look at me at verse 6. Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort and Jonah was very happy about the plant.

But at dawn the next day God provided a worm which chewed the plant and so that it withered. 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. This time it's a plant and yet again he is furious.

Angry to the point of death and here comes God again it's the same question but just this time it's about the plant says is it right for you to be angry about the plant? Before we even get to his answer to this it shows us his heart.

Do you see his heart, his priorities, his values here? There's two times throughout this passage that he has been angry to the point of death. Once over the repentance of Nineveh and once over a plant that gave him comfort for a few hours.

[14 : 52] So he has more compassion for a plant that he knew for all of 24 hours than for the 120,000 people that would be lost without God's grace in Nineveh. Do you see his heart, his priorities, what he values above everything else?

So what he values is his comfort and a plant far more than the lives of people. So the only time he's actually been happy at all in this entire book is in verse 6 when a plant comes to give him comfort. In verse 2 as he rounds at God about his character what we see is six different references in those couple of sentences to himself. I, me or my are used.

His priority is himself and his comfort and values and he values that far above and beyond the life of the people of Nineveh. See here it's really easy for us to think and just detach ourselves from it.

To think we are so far from being like Jonah yeah friends we're far more geared up to be like him than we think. Maybe you're not thinking our value a plant over 120,000 people.

[16 : 02] See one of Jonah's major issues here is that he has misplaced his priorities. His priorities are not in order. He's constantly prioritizing his own comfort and values above the lives of others and that is exactly the opposite of the way God sees it.

We're going to see that as we continue in this passage. But maybe it will help you to know how this plays out in my life in how I misplace priorities. About a week or two well about two weeks ago me and Daisy had a week off.

Knowing we had a few busy weeks ahead and a few busy weeks behind us we really were looking forward to this time off. We're getting away from London getting to relax and see some friends and go away and see some family.

But for various reasons you can ask me about after the sermon we had to cancel all that holiday. We couldn't go away and it was quite annoying. You try and make the best of it we were still in London we had a good time but it felt slightly disappointing.

And then at the end of that week my holidays are drawing to a close and it feels like a bit of a shambles. We wake up on Monday and the washing machine is completely closed. It's completely broke. It's gone. And I, and that was like the camel that broke the straw.

[17 : 16] The back, I didn't get that analogy right. You know what I'm saying. But that was the thing that sent me over the edge. Right? I'm annoyed. The toaster is completely gone. And I realise that all of this is a bit of a first world problem.

He didn't get his holiday. I know. But I'm ticked off. I'm really annoyed. I take myself off to a different room. I'm doing some household chores trying to just pray that this day gets better. My nice, relaxing weekend or week is off in shambles.

And I just felt this little thought perk in my head. He goes, that's a lot like Jonah, isn't it, Nathan?

Now, I've been prepping this sermon for a while and so this was in the back of my head. Annoyed and sad at my relaxing and my comfort being disrupted.

In that moment, I felt like God was convicting me. Holding up a mirror from Jonah 4. And it's not that it was wrong for me to be annoyed. Those are some annoying things and if you're annoyed about them, that is okay.

But I just felt God convict me and said, when was the last time you were this passionately prayerful, this passionately annoyed or this passionately angry at the fact that so many around you do not know Jesus yet?

[18 : 23] Your priorities are your comfort and the weekend of relaxation that you got taken away rather than the people around you. And it's one instance and one example of where our priorities are shaped the wrong way but I bet I'm not the only one where our priorities are not always right.

They're the wrong way round. See, we are far closer to Jonah in having our priorities wrong than we would like to admit. So here's my question for you. Are your priorities in line with God and does your life show that?

Are your life decisions the big decisions you make in life and the small alike are they marked by the gospel mission of Jesus Christ? To reach people, to care for people, to show his compassion to others.

Is your calendar set up to make time to care for people, to pray for others, those around you? Christians in this room, God calls you to die to yourself each day and live for Christ, prioritizing his ways over and above your own comfort.

So lovingly, I think it's right that we ask ourselves, how are you doing with that? How are you doing with that? But we've seen the bitterness and the wrong place priorities of Jonah, but now we see God's heart.

[19:42] As Jonah responds, saying, it is right for me to be angry with what you've done with this plant, God. We see verse 10 and 11, God show his heart. Look with me at those. But the Lord said, you have been concerned about this plant though you did not tend to it or make it grow.

It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left and also many animals?

God's response to Jonah is one of love and care for the people of Nineveh. People who are lost do not know their right hand from their left. God is saying, Jonah, their sins are many, yes, but each one of them is a man or woman or child made in my image.

Each one I have sustained and I have grown from birth until now. Each one is unique creation of mine. Should I not be concerned? Should I not have compassion for them?

God is adamant and passionate about the people of his creation and not just his chosen people in Israel and that's what Jonah is finding out. He is passionate about the entirety of his creation.

[20:59] Look down with me at verse 6. It starts by saying, then the Lord God provided a tree.

The words Lord and God are used together. They're used separately in the rest of the book, Lord or God, but they're used together here. The first word Lord in Hebrew here is the word Yahweh.

That is the personal name that Israel have for their God, Yahweh. So Lord is Yahweh and the second word God in Hebrew is Elohim. That word is used to refer to God, especially in Jonah, as the God of the universe, the God of everything that exists.

See, in saying both together here, the writer is putting them together, Yahweh Elohim. He is God of both Israel and the universe. He is God of everybody and he is compassionate about everybody, not just Israel, but the entire world.

And as he sees people living in wickedness in Nineveh, his grace is on them. He sends a prophet to them to share a message that brings them to repent and allows them to be forgiven.

[22:14] And as we come to our last point, the gift, we look at the, looking at the character of God, does any of it sound familiar to you? One with concern and compassion for the sinners.

One who makes a way for people to be forgiven. One that holds our grace and love for each and every one of us. That God sees the wickedness and suffering of his people and sent someone to save them to save them.

It's Jesus, isn't it? That's Jesus. God sent Jesus to and for us. See, there is a whole load of wickedness in the world around us today, just like in Nineveh.

I don't think I really need to convince you of that. If you turn on your news or flick through Instagram or maybe just walk out your door and live a little, you'll see the brokenness and wickedness of the world around us.

Bitterness, hatred, envy, and generally wickedness fuel wars, hateful politics, broken relationships, and so much more. The gravest of our sins is not the individual things necessarily that we do or don't do.

[23:21] They absolutely matter and are sinful. But rather, it's the fact that we have turned away from God and his ways. The wickedness of our world is a symptom of us turning away from God.

The Bible says we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We have all deserved punishment just like the Ninevites did for our sin. And that sin separates us from God and the creator that we were meant to know and love forever.

And who does he send to save us? He sends Jesus. God himself came to this earth to save us. Tim Keller talks about Jonah 4 and the links to Jesus.

He talks about them as the God of the Ninevites, God figuratively weeping as he sees the wickedness of the Ninevites. And so this is one of the quotes he says about Jesus.

He says, he, Jesus, is the weeping God of Jonah 4 in human form. See, the same God that weeps over the wickedness of Nineveh and brings them back to him is the same God that weeps over us and in his compassion sent Jesus.

[24 : 31] All of that is the reason why Jesus lives a perfect life, died on the cross for you and me, taking all our sins on him and rises again having defeated death and sin.

He didn't just see the Ninevites way back when and offer a flailing, failing, and angry prophet. He sees you and me, ones that are sinful and need forgiveness and he sent Jesus.

so that if we, like the Ninevites, are sitting in here having repented of our sins, he is still that gracious and compassionate God, abounding in love and says, live in the freedom that your sins have been forgiven in Jesus.

See, we've seen the heart of Jonah and imperfect and grieving God's grace. We've seen the heart full of grace and out of it the gift that flows of Jesus for us.

And I just want to end with two things. There are so many things that we could take away, be convicted of and all of those things and be worshipful of. Here's two things I want to end on that might be very practical things that we can apply in our lives.

[25 : 38] First, let's remember God's compassion for others. God's compassion for others is so deep and wide that it extends far beyond your friends and family and far beyond the walls of our church.

We want to be like Jesus, not like Jonah. We want to show our concern and compassion for the people in front of us. Whether that's your Muslim neighbor that goes out to pray each Friday or the co-worker with no particular belief and a lot of apathy or maybe it's the curious agnostic searching for answers or maybe it's the person who hates churches, hates organized religion and doesn't really like you all that much.

See, no matter who the person is, God is concerned for them. He has compassion for them and he wants them to know him and his forgiveness through the gospel.

It is their greatest need and it is ours too. And so this week, why don't we remember God's compassion for others that we see in Jonah 4, their need for him and why don't we long to pray for them and share the gospel with them.

Secondly, why don't we continue to worship God his grace? This is not for us this zone is not for us to go home and just do a ton of things but rather that we would worship God for his grace to us.

[26 : 59] See, the quickest way for us to become more like Jonah and less like Jesus is to miss God's grace in our lives. Jonah disobeys God from start to finish and yet God is gracious. When he went the wrong way into a storm thrown into the sea, God graciously provides a fish.

When he hates God for forgiving the Ninevites, God graciously gives him shade and he graciously provides a worm to take that shade away that he might teach Jonah some of the heart of God.

See, Jonah wants judgment for others but refuses to acknowledge the grace that God has had to have on him in his own life for all of his sin. And I see that to be true in me.

I want to see people punished for their sins, punished for their crimes and I want to have gracious forgiveness for mine. But we are a people forgiven, sustained and carried by the grace of God.

So let us not forget that grace as we go out that God has had on us and may it fuel us to be gracious to others too. Let me pray for us as we end.

[28 : 07] Lord, we thank you for being a gracious God to us. We thank you for sending Jesus without whom we would be just like the Ninevites, lost and wicked.

Lord, we pray that you would continue to work in us to see us be gracious to others as we see our own need for your grace. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen.