

When Grace Makes you Grumble

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[0:00] Well, good afternoon everyone. Please do take a seat and welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime Bible talk here at the Tron.

We're going to be studying Jonah chapter 4 today. It's the last in our series. So if you could open that up, that would be a real help to us all.

And I'm going to read from the very end of chapter 3, chapter 3 verse 10 through to the end of Jonah. So Jonah 3 chapter 10.

When God saw what they did, that's the Ninevites, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, Oh Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?

[1:11] 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, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. And the Lord said, Do you do well to be angry?

Jonah went out to 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 should see what would become of the city.

Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.

But 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.

[2:15] And he asked that he might die and said, It is better for me to die than to live. 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. And the Lord said, You pity the plant for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in the night and perished in the night.

And 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.

Now, I know what you are all thinking. Wouldn't it have been so much nicer if the book of Jonah had finished at chapter 3, verse 10?

Everyone would have been happy. The people of Nineveh had repented. And Jonah seemed to have learned all the lessons that he needed to learn. But the reason Jonah doesn't end his book here is because he hadn't actually learned all of his lessons.

[3:27] And he wants to remind Israel and us too that we haven't learned everything that we need to learn either. So rather than leaving us on cloud nine, Jonah wants to leave us on God's operating table with the scalpel prepped, ready to expose our gangrenous insides.

But like a surgeon, God doesn't leave us, expose, and inflict wounds on us for no reason. No, he cuts deeply. But he cuts so that he can bring about real healing and real transformation in our lives. But the problem that we have today is that it's our attitudes and our behaviours that are rotten and need operated on. And they're a little bit harder to pin down, aren't they, than a ruptured appendix. So this afternoon, God is going to perform major surgery on us, but not using a scalpel, but rather by asking us three simple but very sharp questions.

So the first question God asks us is, are you ever angry when God's grace is displayed to others? Looking at verses one to four.

[4:39] Now you think that any prophet would be over the moon to see Nineveh repent like they did. But not Jonah. He's furious, verse one.

Notice the double impact. It displeased him exceedingly, and he was very angry. Now the word displeased here sounds a bit soft to us, doesn't it?

I mean, we get displeased about having a weak coffee. But the word translated displeased here is the exact same word that is translated as disaster in verse two.

Jonah was so angry about God forgiving the people of Nineveh that it seemed like the end of the world to him. And he says that this was the reason why he fled to Tarshish in the first place.

The idea of God displaying grace and forgiveness to the people of Nineveh was so intolerable that he wanted nothing to do with it. Death was more preferable than what he was experiencing right now.

[5:43] And the staggering thing is, unlike a petulant child who would say something like this for dramatic effect, Jonah actually means it.

He even prays to God to take his life from him. Something that he knows that God is well and truly able to do.

But God has brought him to the point of drowning already in chapter two. And as a reader, while I'm left thinking, look, God, just do it. He's literally asking for it.

You have been nothing but gracious to him. And he has shown nothing but blatant disobedience. You owe him nothing. Smite him down. But like we said before, we're not meant to look at Jonah and thank God that we are nothing like him.

No, rather, we're to look at him and recognize the exact same attitude that we see in him lurks beneath the surface in us too. Even though we might keep it concealed beneath a covering of manners and self-delusion.

[6:52] And that is why God asked Jonah a question in verse four. Do you do well to be angry? But it's also a question he is asking the people of Israel in Jonah's day, the first receivers of this book, and to us too.

It's a question that demands self-reflection, doesn't it? He wants to break through our airbrushed versions of ourselves. For an Israelite who is willing to examine themselves honestly, I think this question would be quite revealing.

But the Israelites loved being God's special people and didn't want anyone else to have what they had. Just like Jonah, they had experienced God's rescue in the Exodus and received God's promise and commission.

They wanted God to be gracious, merciful, patient, and loving with them, verse two, but exclusively to them. They thought that they were entitled to it, whereas nobody else was.

But the thing is, this quote about God's character in verse two is lifted right from the book of Exodus in chapter 36, where God promised to protect Israel and be their God.

[8:13] But it wasn't because they deserved it. For just two chapters earlier in the book of Exodus, we read about Israel's gross sin with the golden calf incident, when they utterly forsook Yahweh, their God, to worship their own creation instead.

And they didn't even repent of this in the book of Exodus. They were only saved because Moses interceded for them. So Israel in that day were hardly deserving of the grace that God was showing them.

And neither were they Israel in Jonah's day, centuries later. They were experiencing God's unmerited grace too. If you can take your mind back a few weeks to chapter one, you'll remember that we talked about the fact that Jonah was preaching in a very bizarre period of Israel's history. Israel were continuing to rebel against God. But God in his mercy, out of pity for Israel, was protecting them and giving them success.

So they were hardly entitled to the grace they were experiencing either. It was only because of God's pity that they were experiencing any grace. So who were they to get angry if God showed his grace to someone else?

[9:36] They had no right at all to call a monopoly on God's goodness and mercy. But we're all prone to think in a similar manner, aren't we?

We love to be the ones with all the privilege. We like to check the weather forecast when on holiday to make sure that it's raining back home so that we feel even better about sitting there in the sunshine.

Though we hate to admit it, we don't like other people experiencing the same privileges that we have, especially if we think that we are entitled to them and think that others are less deserving. Now, I'll admit, I originally found it quite hard to relate to Jonah's anger when preparing this sermon. But it didn't take too much self-reflection and insight from colleagues and my wife to realize I wasn't too far away from Jonah after all.

Here's just a simple, a small snippet of the anger that I am prone to. Anger at colleagues when working as a doctor who were paid the same amount as me even though I thought they weren't very good at their jobs.

[10:49] Anger that people look up to other men in the church just as much, if not more than me, even though I feel I am more deserving of their adoration.

Anger that other people get similar or better responsibilities to me in church, despite seeming less equipped to do them. And the list went on and on and on.

And it rears its ugliest head when it comes to the matter of salvation. Without me, God might really struggle to get his work done here in Atron, I think to myself.

But I have no idea why he saved such and such. They seem more of a burden than a help to him.

And before I know it, I think I'm entitled to all of God's grace that he's poured out in my life and wishing that he'd reserved it for me alone because I think I'm entitled to it and nobody else is.

And the reason why we get so angry at God displaying his grace to others who we consider less deserving than ourselves is because it reminds us that we are completely undeserving too.

[12:03] But in reality, the only thing that we are entitled to, according to the book of Jonah, is death. That is what sin deserves. That is the only truth that every single person in the book of Jonah gets right.

The sailors in chapter 1 recognize they deserve God's judgment and death. Jonah in chapter 2 finally recognizes that of himself. And the people of Nineveh in chapter 3 understand that as well.

We are owed nothing by God and definitely have no right to dictate who is worthy of his grace.

So can I ask you a question? Do you do well to be angry when God displays grace to others? Well, the surgeon is about to make his second incision.

And the question he now asks us is, Are you ever angry when God's gracious provision is retracted from you? Looking at verses 5 to 9.

[13:10] Jonah responded to God's first question with abject silence. So God probes a little bit further with the forceps and sees if he can strike a nerve.

And God provokes a response by playing a bit of a game with Jonah. Jonah storms out of the city and heads for a high hill. Despite God's declaration that he will relent from pouring out his wrath on Nineveh, Jonah hopes that that verdict won't last.

We said last week that God was not like the child with the magnifying glass burning up ants with glee. But Jonah this week, well, he completely embodies that kind of attitude, doesn't he?

But despite his abhorrent behavior, God is overwhelmingly gracious with him. He appoints a plant to shade him from discomfort in verse 6.

And Jonah is absolutely elated at this. He was described as being exceedingly angry in verse 1. But now he's made exceedingly glad.

[14:16] Jonah's reaction to experiencing comfort and provision for himself is at the polar opposite extreme of the emotional spectrum than his attitude to Nineveh being spared.

However, this gracious provision wasn't going to last forever. for God was in the process of teaching Jonah a lesson. God had appointed the plant to grow and now he was going to appoint a worm to tax the plant, verse 7, and appoint a scorching wind, verse 8, to buffet Jonah until he was at the point of collapse.

It's clear that God is behind all of this and that there is purpose behind his action. for God appoints, appoints, and appoints and things happen.

And it's clear that God hits the nerve that he was targeting. Jonah's reflex reaction is uncontrolled rage. The withdrawal of God's gracious provision from Jonah provokes spitting fury as he screams at God that death would be even more preferable than what he was experiencing right now. Verse 8 and 9. It's bad enough, isn't it, for God to dispense his grace to people you think are less deserving of it. But even worse, when God strips his gracious provision from you when you think that you're entitled to it, God is getting the retractors out and exposing the darkest attitudes and behaviours of Jonah.

[15:53] Now, wouldn't you think that Jonah would want to airbrush this episode out of his little book, paint over the cracks? But he doesn't, does he?

Presumably, because he learnt his lesson and graciously chose to recount this episode that paints him in such an ugly light so that Israel could identify the same rottenness that resided within them. Jonah wants his reader back home in Israel to see that they did not deserve God's gracious provision in the first place. The writer of 1 Kings was clear that the temporary respite Israel was experiencing in the time of Jonah was not because of any proficiency in them.

No, solely dependent on the pity of God. And that comfort and relief, like Jonah experienced, could and was going to come to an end.

When the axe finally came crashing down on Israel for their sin and rebellion, they could not complain and say that they deserved far better. Rather, for years, they had deserved far worse.

[17:07] Well, what about us? Are we angry when God retracts his gracious provisions from us? If he did so, would we shake our fists at him and spit curses at him, saying that he had no right to do so?

What if your area of influence decreased in the church? Would you cling onto it for dear life, protecting the thing you feel that you have earned?

Or would you take a step back and thank God for using someone as flawed and feeble as yourself in his kingdom up until this point? And again, God asks Jonah the same cutting question.

Do you do well to be angry? Again, it's a call to reflect. Would I be angry if God did that to me? And if the answer is yes, then in what way do I need to change my thinking and attitude to come in line with God's way of thinking?

And will I pray for God's help in doing so? Well, there's one more incision that God needed to make on Jonah and there is no escape for us either, I'm afraid.

[18:22] Our final question is this. Are you ever angry that God's concerns are often very different to your own? Looking at verses 10 and 11.

In these last two verses, God is going to show us what his concerns are and contrast them with Jonah's. And the hope is in doing so that Jonah will recognize how selfish and narrow-minded his perspective is and how selfless and expansive the Lord's is.

So the Lord compares Jonah's attitude towards the plant with God's attitude towards the people of Nineveh. And this exercise, of contrast, highlights the gulf between God's priorities and Jonah's priorities.

The only thing that they have in common is that they both have pity. Jonah for the plant, verse 10, and God for the people of Nineveh, verse 11.

But that's it. And whereas God's pity is good and well-placed, Jonah's is completely selfish and misdirected. Jonah pities a plant that he did not create or help grow that came and went in a day.

[19:38] He didn't plant it, he didn't water it, and it wasn't really around all that long for him to become really invested in it. Whereas God pities the people of Nineveh, who he created, he breathed life into their lungs and caused the first electrical impulse to pulse through their hearts in the womb.

Not only that, but despite their rebellion against him, he had graciously given them food and water, shelter, helped them to grow. God was invested in these people for not just a day, not even their lifetime, but from before he even flung the stars and planets into space.

Before time began, he knew them. So whose concern was more noble? Whose concern was more righteous? Jonah and his concerns for his own comfort and self-preservation, invested in a bloodless plant that he barely got to know?

Or God, who is concerned with real flesh and blood, who is known from before creation? Well, this comparison would have really jarred with the thinking of the Israelites back in Jonah's day. But it doesn't take long, a lot of thought, to see how they matched up with Jonah, does it? The book of Jonah finishes with this question, 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? [21:18] It's a question Jonah is asking Israel too, and the answer should be a resounding yes, but for the Israelite whose priorities were profoundly skewed, the answer is more likely, I guess so.

What does that mean for me? Israel, like Jonah, couldn't care less about anyone but themselves, wrapped up in themselves and their own personal privilege and comfort.

There was no time for anything or anyone else that might disrupt their position. But what about us? Are our commitments different to the Lord's?

Are we obsessed with our own personal comfort and privilege caught up in securing position for ourselves in church and our social circles rather than spending time and money in reaching our fellow creatures around us, who God pities, shows compassion towards, and is invested in?

Well, my hope is that we have seen the ugliness of Jonah's disease attitude, which is identical to our attitude at times. But we also need to see, we also need to have hope, don't we?

[22:38] We need to see how beautiful the alternative is, the healthy attitude that we hope God will manifest in us. And we see that healthy attitude exemplified most clearly in another Jonah, a prophet that God would send hundreds of years later to another sinful city, undeserving of his mercy and grace.

But this second Jonah wouldn't flee God's plan, but would rather submit to it at a great cost to himself. Jesus, like Jonah, would go outside the city, but not to rub his hands with glee, hoping that the inhabitants would perish, although he would have had every right to do so, because they had done nothing but mock and scorn him.

Jesus wouldn't shelter in comfort under a wooden shack, waiting for wrath to be poured out on others, but would hang on a wooden cross in the scorching heat and take God's wrath upon himself for the sake of others.

He didn't demand his own right or scream at God what he was entitled to, but like God the Father in verse 11 would cry out, forgive them Lord, for they do not know what they do.

They don't know their right hand from their left. His joy was not found in temporary comfort and self-preservation, but for the joy set before him would endure the cross.

[24:16] Jesus is the one who we are to look to when those poisonous attitudes start to rear their heads again. He will show us how to live, how to think, and through his death and resurrection we can really be transformed more into his likeness.

So let's pray for the Lord's help as we seek personal transformation as we strive to put these selfish attitudes to death. Well to help us pray I'm going to read some words from Philippians.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to their own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourself which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing.

[25:38] Taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Strengthen us, Lord, we pray, and help us to have his mind among ourselves. In Jesus' name, Amen.