

Do you do well to be angry?

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: 13 August 2014

Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[0 : 0 0] Please do be seated and please turn to page 775 in the Visitor's Bibles and to Jonah chapter 4, page 775.

And as we come to study God's word, let's ask for his help. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that we have it in our own language.

We thank you for freedom to gather around it and consider it. We pray that you would please speak to us in whatever our situation of life today, that your truth would join up with where we are and who we are, and that you would help us to respond to it with glad hearts.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. I'm going to start reading at chapter 3 and verse 10. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he 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, O 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 were a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

[1 : 3 5] 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 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 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. 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.

[2 : 4 2] 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.

We come to the end of the story. And in many popular renditions of this story, all the important stuff is already done. We had the storm back in chapter 1.

We had Jonah being thrown into the sea. We had the fish. We had the journey to Nineveh. We had the preaching in Nineveh. We had the dramatic response. All the exciting looking stuff is done.

All we're left with is an angry man sitting in the hot sun. Seems rather an anti-climax, doesn't it? Given what's come before. Well, that is what we have in chapter 4.

An angry man sitting in the hot sun waiting. But, far from being an anti-climax to this story, this is the pointy end of the book of Jonah.

[3 : 55] The conclusion, the climax. This is where the action happens. This is where the big issues are dealt with. Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown, was Jonah's message.

And amazingly, the people of Nineveh, from the greatest to the least, believed that message and called out to God for mercy. Jonah is exceedingly displeased that they've done that.

He is very angry indeed. He can't bear it. And he prays to die. He goes outside the city to see what will happen. Presumably, what will happen when the 40 days are up?

This chapter is all about waiting. Waiting to see what God will do. Will Nineveh's change of heart meet with a response in God?

The sun beats down. The clock ticks. Jonah waits in the sun.

[5 : 03] He is very angry. Jonah waits in the sun. We, the readers, know what's going to happen. Because we have chapter 3, verse 10. Which tells us how God has already responded to Nineveh's repentance.

But Jonah has not had that sort of preview. He has to wait to see. His waiting is explicit in verse 5. He sat under the booth in the shade till he should see what would become of the city.

Oh, he has his suspicions all right. But it's only in verse 11, right at the end of the chapter, that he's told for definite of God's pity for Nineveh.

Meanwhile, the clock ticks. Jonah waits. And Jonah waits. Jonah waits. And Jonah waits suspiciously. And out of his suspicion flows his rage.

And the question of the question of the church. And the question of this chapter is this. Do you do well to be angry? It's there in verse 4. It's repeated in verse 9.

[6 : 12] It's the great question of this chapter. And indeed, I think, of this book. Here is a man very angry about what he thinks God is about to do. Look at chapter 4, verse 2 for a moment.

Jonah is angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish right back at the beginning.

I knew you would do this. Verse 2 takes us right back to the very start of the story. And it makes it clear that Jonah's anger was present right from the beginning of the account.

From the moment he received God's command to go to Nineveh, he was an angry man. And now it's boiling over. I was so angry, chapter 1, that I wanted out of being a prophet.

I didn't want to play in your game anymore. I'd had enough. I quit. I ran. I wanted out of it. Now, of course, he found out there was no escape from this game. Because as he said back in chapter 1, his God is the God of everything.

[7 : 16] The God who made the sea and the dry land. There's no running away from him. And via storm and fish and sea, he found himself back in the game. But he still wants out. Look at chapter 4, verse 3.

Please take my life from me. It's better for me to die than to live. I want nothing more to do with this enterprise. He repeats it in verse 9, this time in connection with a plant.

I do well to be angry. I'm angry enough to die. Do you do well, Jonah, to be angry? That's the question of this chapter.

Now, let me state three assumptions I'm going to make when considering this. First, I'm going to assume that Jonah himself is the main source of this story. Now, we don't know who put together the final version of this book or exactly when that happened.

We simply don't know. But apart from the sailors, there are no other human players involved in Jonah's journey to Nineveh. I take it, then, that the information basically comes from him, whoever put the final thing together.

[8 : 25] Second assumption. Because of that, I'm going to assume that Jonah told this story deliberately against himself. He's not portrayed favorably here.

I take it that as he looks back on the questions God raised about his anger, he knows now that those were questions that needed to be raised.

There was something wrong with his anger. Third assumption. I'm going to assume that the first readers of this book, the people this story was written down for, were Israelite people a bit further on in history.

Israelites who had experienced grim judgment from God at the hands of the Assyrian nation to which the city of Nineveh belongs. I take it, then, that the first people who heard this story understood only too well why Jonah might have been angry.

And that they, too, needed to face the question. Do you do well to be angry? Now, it's very easy in a chapter like this to spend ages psychologizing about Jonah.

[9 : 44] But interestingly, we're not told that much in this chapter about precisely why Jonah is angry. He's obviously angry that Nineveh might get off the hook.

But why precisely does that make him angry? Is it because he hates the Syrians? Possibly. Is it because he'd rather be back home with his successful ministry in Israel? Possibly.

Is it because he sees God's call to Nineveh as a sign that days of mercy for Israel are on their way out? It's possible that all of those contribute. But this passage gives us little specific information to work on.

So instead of speculating about what this passage doesn't say, let me try to focus on three things that this passage does say. One. God is very, very patient with Jonah.

Remember what this book says about who God is? He's the owner and absolute ruler of everything. The sea, the dry land, the sailors, the fish, the whole of Nineveh from the king to the animals in the fields.

[10 : 53] The plant, the worm, the wind. Everything belongs to him. Remember who Jonah is? Well, he's just a little person among myriad other persons.

He's a person God has used to be sure, but he's just one little human creature. And the little human being, the servant of God says, I am angry at you for what you're doing.

Angry enough to die. I don't want to be in your game anymore. I have the right to be angry that you are being merciful. Remember who's who in the story?

Jonah is a little person, furiously shaking his fist at kindness on a grand scale. You, Yahweh, you ought not to be doing this in your world.

I know what's right. I know what's just, even if you don't. I know what ought to be done, even if you won't do it. I think that what you're doing is so bad, I don't want anything more to do with it at all.

[12 : 02] Kill me now and put me out of my misery. I'd rather die than have anything more to do with what you're doing. In response to this furious fist shaking, God is exceptionally patient with Jonah.

In fact, he shows Jonah the same sort of kindness that Jonah himself is so angry about. The patience is all the way through the chapter. Look at verse four. Do you do well to be angry, Jonah, little person?

Such a patient question. It's not at all what he deserves at this point. It's there in verse six. The Lord 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.

Isn't that kind and gentle? I'd have let him fry a bit in the sun if I were God. But God is kind to this furious little creature. It's there in verse nine. Do you do well to be angry for the plant?

Again, such a patient question. Inviting Jonah to understand what's going on. Patient question and explanation again and again and again.

[13 : 16] God is very, very patient with Jonah in this chapter. Why? And why does this chapter make such a big deal of it?

Well, apart from the fact that it shows how patient God is, I take it it is because this kind of anger is commoner than we would imagine amongst God's people.

It's very easy to write Jonah off as a specially angry man. His behavior so extreme as to be beneath contempt, we don't even bother thinking about whether we might share it.

But I'm assuming that this story is here because Jonah thinks that it needs to be told. That a wider audience needs to know how he'd thought of God and how God related to him in response.

Let's imagine that some years down the track, a couple of things have happened as they did. God has brought judgment on Israel. His patience with Israel has run out. This once privileged nation has been overrun by fierce enemies.

[14 : 20] has become to all intents and purposes like the rest of the world. And as Syria, Nineveh's country is the instrument of God's judgment.

It's quite clear by now to the readers that Nineveh's response to God in chapter 3 didn't have any great long-lasting effect.

We have lost our privileges at the hands of those people. How can it be right for God to have had mercy on them?

How can that be right? It's easy to understand how a later generation could be angry at God's mercy to such undeserving creatures.

Not just that they're undeserving, it's what they're going to do to us and what we will lose as a result of it. And so Jonah talks about God's patient kindness to him, a thoroughly undeserving creature, as he's portrayed in this book.

[15 : 25] And the question that God asks Jonah, God asks to us, the readers, the first readers and us now. Do you do right to be angry with what I'm doing?

You see, Jonah is not Mr. Constitutionally Grumpy. He's angry for a reason. And we shouldn't think that such emotions are unusual in God's people. God's mercy is shown to that person over there or those people over there.

And we think to ourselves, but those people have done that to us. Does God not know what he's doing here? Mercy's all very well, but doesn't he care about justice?

Is he a softy, a pushover? Is he naive? Does he not know that their repentance is hollow? It looks hollow from here. That kind of anger is not unusual amongst God's people.

When God shows mercy to a person or persons who've deprived me or us of a position of privilege, and especially when we suspect that the people concerned haven't really changed deep down, that raises huge angry questions about God's justice, which very quickly overflow into precisely the same sort of stubborn, willful disregard for God that we know those people over there have, or we suspect they do.

[16 : 56] I have a friend who went through great difficulty in this sort of area. This friend said, the most alarming thing about experiencing injustice at the hands of others was what I found inside myself.

Poke me in the right place, and horrid stuff comes out. Into a world where such realities are all too common, God asks, do you do right to be angry?

Into a world where fuming rage often overflows in response to what God is doing. Jonah talks about his own fuming rage and how God was so patient towards him in it.

Isn't that remarkable? God is very, very patient with Jonah. Second thing to observe. God has been very, very patient with Israel.

It's quite clear from the start that Jonah knew what God was up to when he sent him to Nineveh. How does Jonah know what God is going to do?

[18 : 15] Well, he knows his Bible, that's how. He knows what God has said about himself. And he knows that God is the sort of God who just has mercy on people. He's that kind of God. And that's why Jonah is angry.

However, for all his, he knows of God's character. There is something Jonah lacks, and that is perspective. Look at chapter four, verse two. Oh, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?

That's why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, as if you didn't know. For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

That's the Bible knowledge that Jonah has. I know this about you, and he's quoting the scriptures here. Where does this come from? Well, it comes from Exodus chapter 34.

Don't look it up right now. It's a famous passage where God declares his character to Moses. But those words about God's character, his mercy, are not spoken into a vacuum.

[19 : 25] The setting is very important. It's just after the people of Israel have been rescued from Egypt. God has brought them to Mount Sinai. He's given them his commandments. He's made them his people.

He has urged them to remain faithful to him, the true and seriously loving God. What do they do? They prove themselves instantly to be unfaithful to him.

They make a golden calf. It's a terrible act of rebellion. And it happens right at the very start of their national life. And right from the beginning, at that point, the whole relationship between God and Israel is nearly over as soon as it's begun.

Into that situation, God speaks about his mercy. A gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Why is that significant here? Well, because right from the outset, Israel had only existed because of God's undeserved mercy shown to her.

[20 : 34] No sooner was she formed than she demonstrated the need for that mercy. Jonah had been a faithful prophet in Israel, but it was not true that Israel had been a faithful people.

The privileges that Israel had always enjoyed were always totally undeserved privileges. And to fume at God's mercy on bestowing mercy to others is to have missed something very significant.

But those people, they're not really repentant, thinks Jonah. To which the question comes back, was Israel's repentance ever, at any time, proper and deep and lasting.

Ever? Never. That's why she's in the state that she is. That's why judgment is about to come. Israel has proved herself consistently through her history to be an unfaithful recipient of God's mercy.

Jonah knows the character of God through the words of Exodus 34, but he seems to have lost the context for those words. The context that makes those words so precious.

[21 : 53] God is the God who's merciful to the thoroughly undeserving, the flagrantly unfaithful, the inadequately repentant. He's merciful to those sorts of people.

People like Nineveh. People like Israel. People like him. He always has been, because that's what people are like.

Now this is a perspective that Jonah has lost. In the second chapter of this book, Jonah sees himself as one of the faithful ones.

In fact, he and his nation have been thoroughly unfaithful. And God has been very, very patient with them. The clock ticks. God's patience is beginning to run out on Israel.

But God is very patient with Jonah, and God has been and still is very patient with Israel. Third big point that this chapter makes.

[23 : 00] God has the right to be patient like that. Verse five. Jonah went out of the city. He sat to the east of the city.

He 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 there might be a shade over his head to save him from his discomfort.

He was exceedingly glad because of the plant. Isn't that kind of God? We've remarked on this already. It's just a plant, a small thing, but it brings comfort. Verse six. He was exceedingly glad.

Apart from being rescued from the sea, this is the only other point in the book that Jonah is glad about anything. Isn't it kind of God? He does something unnecessary to bring joy to this horrid, nasty, angry little person.

He has the right to do that, even for a little angry man like Jonah. He also has the right to take the plant away, and he does. Verse eight. But when he does that, Jonah is once again fuming with rage.

[24 : 08] Yesterday I had a lovely plant. Now God has taken it away. I'm so angry I could die. This is just what I've come to expect from God. I'm reminded again how much I want out of his game.

For those of you who have been angry with God, this is a recognizable pattern. Little joyful moments at good things, followed by fuming rage when they're taken away.

Once again, the patient question, verse nine. Do you do well to be angry about the plant? I jolly well do. It was my plant. I'm angry that you took it away.

And again, the patient argument comes back, verse 10. You pity the plant for which you didn't labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night.

And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city? It was a small plant, and yet you're very angry about it.

[25 : 09] You didn't make it. You didn't have any call on it. It was always a gift. It wasn't yours. And yet you're fuming with rage. You weren't its creator. And yet you're concerned for it.

How much more then should I, the creator, have pity on that great and clueless city? You see, God is the maker and owner.

He cares intimately for everything that he's made. He has the right to be patient. The argument here is from the smaller to the bigger.

Jonah's concerns are passionate, but small and at the distance. God's concerns are great and intimately joined up to everything.

I think the big question of this chapter is, where is God's justice? We finished the book waiting. The clock ticks. What will God do?

[26 : 10] Now, of course, there was much more to God's justice than Jonah could see at this point in the story. Israel was, in the end, judged. The clock ran out for Israel.

Assyria was too, but for the moment, for Jonah, for Nineveh, and for Israel, mercy was still held out to be taken.

God's justice was not fully demonstrated yet. We know a lot more about God's justice and mercy than Jonah did.

We know something of the lengths that God will go to, to have justice and mercy done. It's the big question in the Bible. How can God be merciful and just at the same time? We know all about how he sent his son, a sacrifice for sins, God absorbing in himself, all the injustice of this world, the hurt of rebellion, so that wicked rebels can receive mercy.

We know lots more than he did, but there is still plenty about God's justice that we do not yet see. We do not know how it will all be worked out in the end.

[27 : 21] We don't know what the last day will be like. We don't know how God will be perfectly just and merciful all over the place, in everything. We do know, however, that for the moment, while the clock ticks until that last day, he holds out mercy, undeservedly.

Of course, in the meantime, things happen that make us small persons, from our perspective, sometimes very angry about what he seems to be doing.

Where is your justice? How dare you do that in your world? But the argument in this chapter is small to big.

Our concerns are passionately held, but small and with very inadequate knowledge. God's concerns are thoroughly joined up with everything, because he made it, and he owns it, and he will be perfectly right in the end.

Let me ask you a question. Do you think your concern for justice is better than God's? Do you think that? For that is what we do think when we're angry, like this.

[28 : 46] For the angry, the patient question rings out, do you do well to be angry? Let's pray together.

Three great truths from this chapter. God is extraordinarily patient with Jonah. God has been extraordinarily patient with Israel right from the beginning, and he has that right, because he is the creator.

Help us, Heavenly Father, when we are angry about what you have done, to remember who we are, and to remember who you are, to remember how we are thoroughly dependent on your undeserved kindness, to remember that you are much more passionately concerned about justice than we ever could be.

Help us to wait patiently till all of your purposes are worked out. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.