

When Grace Makes you Grumble

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[0 : 00] Well, we're about to have our Bible reading, so if you could have your Bibles open at page 775, that would be very helpful. We're going to be reading from Jonah chapter 4 this evening, starting at verse 1.

Like I said, if you've got the blue Bibles on your chair, that will be on page 775. And just as you turn that up, let me just fill you in what happened last week.

Jonah had finally obeyed the Lord and had gone to Nineveh. And he had finally preached the message he was originally called to preach. And shock and horror, Nineveh repented.

And you'd think that Jonah might end his little book there on a happy ending, but he doesn't. So let's read together chapter 4. 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? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish.

[1 : 13] 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 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.

[2 : 27] 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 a night and perished in a 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?

This is the word of the Lord. Now I know what you are all thinking.

Wouldn't it have been so much nicer if the book of Jonah had finished just one chapter earlier? Everybody would have been happy.

[3 : 31] The people of Nineveh would have repented. And Jonah would have seemed to have learned all of his lessons and actually obeyed God. But the reason it doesn't end there is because Jonah wants to show us that he hadn't learned all of his lessons.

And he wanted to remind Israel, his original hearer, as well as us, that we haven't learned everything that we need to learn either. Rather than leaving us on cloud nine, Jonah wants to leave us on the operating table with the scalpel prepped to cut even deeper and expose our gangrenous insides.

But like a surgeon, he doesn't leave us exposed and inflict wounds on us for no reason at all. No, he cuts deeply and reveals the spreading necrosis beneath the surface so that he can bring real healing and transformation to his people.

However, the problem that we have is that it's a little bit more difficult to treat our problem. For we don't have a problem as simple as a ruptured appendix.

No, our problem is that we have diseased attitudes and behaviors. And they are just a little bit harder to pin down and operate on, aren't they? And if we're honest, we are never going to go into full remission.

[4 : 57] One, occurrence is inevitable and the same poisonous attitudes will return no matter how well we listen this evening or how much we endeavor to change.

But that doesn't mean that the operation isn't worth doing. It just means that we need to make sure we have regular checkups to ensure that these terrible attitudes of entitlement and selfishness that we see exhibited in Jonah here in chapter four don't take hold of us again in the future.

So tonight we're going to let God wield his scalpel and allow him to cut us open to examine us using three questions that I think this passage raises.

And these three questions should expose where the disease is hiding below the surface. And then thankfully, we will also finish by looking at the perfect example of health, who we can compare ourselves to to see whether we are being overtaken by these toxic attitudes in the future.

So perform the initial surgery with the three questions and then provide a means for regular checkups. So the first question we have to ask ourselves tonight is, are you ever angry when God's grace is given to others?

[6 : 19] Looking at verses one to four. Now you think that most prophets or missionaries would be over the moon when met with a response like that of the people of Nineveh.

Over 120,000 people repenting of their sin and throwing themselves on the mercy of God. Now you don't see that every day, do you?

But not Jonah. No, verse one. He is furious. Notice the double impact. It displeased him exceedingly.

And he was very angry. Now the word displeased here sounds a bit soft to our ears, doesn't it? I mean, we get displeased about a weak coffee or a strong coffee if you come to Vatron Church.

But the word translated displeased here is the 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.

[7 : 30] And as we see in verse three, it was like life wasn't even worth living anymore. And he even says, doesn't he, that this was the very reason why he fled Vatron Church, the reason why he didn't want to go to Nineveh 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. Which might explain why he had the sailors throw him overboard back in chapter one.

Death was more preferable than what he was seeing with his own eyes now. 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 God is well and truly able to do. For all through the book of Jonah, God has shown that he is the one in control.

And he's already brought him to the point of drowning already in chapter two. And as a reader, I am just left thinking, God, just do it.

[8 : 41] Do it. He's literally asking for it. You've been nothing but gracious to him. Despite his blatant disobedience, you owe him nothing. Give him the smiting he is asking for.

We have no time for this kind of behavior when we see it in toddlers, do we? So how much more prone are we to roll our eyes when we see this in a fully grown man?

And not just any man, but a prophet of God. But like we've said before in this series, when studying the book of Jonah, we're not meant to look at Jonah and thank God that we're not like him.

But to look at him and recognize that the same attitude lurks beneath the surface in every single one of us, even though we keep it concealed beneath a covering of manners and self-delusion.

And that is why God asks this question in verse four. Do you do well to be angry? It's a question that he asked Jonah, but also a question he's asking the people of Israel, the receivers of this book originally, and us here in the Tron today.

[9 : 52] It's a question that demands self-reflection. He wants to break through our airbrushed impressions of ourselves. Now for an Israelite who is willing to examine themselves honestly, I think this question would be quite revealing.

For 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 salvation, God had rescued them from Egypt, and they'd received God's covenant promises.

They wanted God to be gracious and merciful, patient and loving with them, like he's described in verse two, but not to anybody else.

They thought that they were entitled to it, and everybody else wasn't. But the thing is, this quote in verse two about God's character is lifted straight from the book of Exodus in chapter 34, where God promised to protect Israel and be their God.

But it wasn't because they deserved it. For just two chapters before these words are spoken in Exodus, we read about Israel's gross sin with the golden calf, when they utterly forsook Yahweh, their God, and worshipped something of their own creation instead.

[11 : 21] And they didn't even repent of it. But they were only saved because Moses interceded for them. So Israel were hardly deserving of all the gracious provision that God was showing them.

And neither were the Israel in Jonah's day a few centuries later. They were experiencing God's unmerited grace. If you can take your minds back just a few weeks, you remember that Jonah was preaching in a very bizarre period of Israel's history.

Israel continued to rebel against God, but God in his mercy, out of pity for Israel, was protecting them and giving them success.

And as a result, Jeroboam II had extended the boundaries of Israel, and the people were living prosperously, even though they were in opposition to God.

So the people in Jonah's day were hardly entitled to the grace that they were experiencing in their day either. So who were they to get angry if God showed his grace to somebody else?

[12 : 32] It's absolutely ludicrous. They had no right to call monopoly on God's goodness and mercy, but they didn't deserve it either. But we're prone to think similarly, aren't we?

If we're honest, we love to be the ones with the privilege. We like to check the weather forecast when we're on holiday to make sure it's raining back home so that we feel even better about ourselves lying on the beach.

The man who buys a new sports car would be absolutely devastated if he went outside and found everybody else driving the same car. It would take the shine off it.

It wouldn't be special anymore. And it's nice to get an A in an exam, isn't it? But it's even better if you're the only one in your class to get one.

But we hate to admit it, we don't like other people experiencing the same privileges that we have, especially if we think that we're entitled to them and think that others are less deserving.

[13 : 37] Now, I'll admit, I originally found it hard to relate to Jonah's anger when preparing the sermon this week. I thought Jonah's attitude was completely foreign to me and my experience.

Jonah is just super angry, petulant, and I just don't throw tantrums like that. I honestly don't. But it turns out, my anger just takes on a very different form.

Seething resentment. And that is by no means any better than what we see in Jonah here. And the more I thought about it, the easier examples from my own life began to emerge.

And some of the apprentices and staff helped me to come up with some examples too. I was more like angry Jonah than I like to admit. Here is just a very short snippet of the anger that I am prone to.

Anger at colleagues when working as a doctor who got paid the same amount as me, even though I thought they were rubbish at their jobs and utterly undeserving. Anger at people who seem to breeze through life and get a mortgage fresh out of university when I have to slog to get one and still haven't quite got one.

[14 : 56] Anger when guys who were complete idiots in school got girlfriends when I thought myself a much better catch. Anger that people look up to other guys in church just as much, if not more than me, even though I feel I'm more deserving of their adoration.

Anger that other people get similar or better responsibilities in the church than me, despite seemingly less equipped than me because I have a very high opinion of myself. The list goes on and on as the scalpel cuts deeper and I am left utterly exposed.

And I imagine I'm not the only one who could do this exercise here tonight. And the thing is, it raises its ugliest head when it comes to the matter of salvation.

I sometimes think that God was pretty savvy in saving me because look at all I do for him. I slog away for him without even complaining or at least not out loud.

Without me, God might really struggle to get things done around here in a Tron church. But I have no idea why he decided to save such and such.

[16 : 12] What use are they to him? And before I know it, I think I am entitled to all the grace that God has poured out in my life and I am wishing that he's reserved his grace solely for me and nobody else.

And the reason we get so angry at God displaying his grace to other people as well as us who we consider less deserving is because it reminds us that we are completely undeserving ourselves.

And none of us want our pride to take a knock like that. It hurts, doesn't it? But the truth is, the only thing that we are entitled to is death.

That is what our sin deserves. And that is the only truth everybody so far in this book of Jonah has got right. Jonah and the sailors in chapter 1 recognize that they are deserving of death for this sin.

Jonah in chapter 2 recognizes that as well. And the Ninevites in chapter 3 recognize that they are deserving of God's judgment and death as well. We don't deserve any of God's unfavored merit in our lives.

[17 : 23] Our first breath in the world was not owed to us but was just a wonderful mercy. We are owed nothing by God and definitely have no right to dictate who is worthy of his grace and who isn't.

So let's just spend a few seconds responding to God's question in our hearts. Do we do well to be angry? Is it right to be angry when God's grace is experienced by others?

And are you really entitled to anything good yourself? 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. Jonah responded to God's first question with abject silence. So God probes a little bit further with his forceps and sees if he can strike a nerve.

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

[18 : 56] Jonah hopes that God will change his mind or that the people of Nineveh will go back to the evil that they were caught up in originally and break the terms and conditions of the agreement.

We said last week that God was not like a child with the magnifying glass burning up ants with glee. But Jonah this week completely embodies that kind of attitude and behavior.

But despite his abhorrent attitude God is overwhelmingly gracious to him. He appoints a plant to shade him from discomfort.

Verse 6 He doesn't want it getting too hot out on the hill. And Jonah is absolutely elated with this. He was described as being exceedingly angry back in verse 1 but now he is made exceedingly glad.

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.

[20 : 06] However, this gracious provision wasn't going to last for long. For God was in the process of teaching Jonah a lesson. God had appointed a plant to grow and now God would appoint a worm to attack the plant.

Verse 7 And appoint a scorching wind. Verse 8 To buffet Jonah until he was at the point of collapse. It is clear that God is behind all this and that there is purpose behind his actions.

God 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 the same refrain as the rescue of Nineveh had. Spitting fury and screaming that death would be more preferable than what he was experiencing.

Verses 8 and 9 But the anger seems to have escalated even further. When asked whether he did well to be angry in verse 4 God was met with grumpy silence.

[21 : 15] But here in verse 9 when asked the question Jonah boils over and erupts he can't keep his emotions under wraps. He roars back at God saying yes I do well yes I do well to be angry angry enough to even die.

it's bad enough seeing God dispense his grace to people you think are less deserving but even worse when he strips his gracious provision from you when you think you're entitled to it.

God is getting the retractors out and exposing the darkest attitudes and behavior of Jonah. now wouldn't you think that Jonah would want to airbrush this episode out of his book that he's written paint himself in a better light paper over the cracks but he doesn't and I trust that is because he came to his senses later down the line and recognized the rot that was resided within himself and by God's grace this transformed man then finally put this story to paper and graciously chose to recount this episode which highlights his ugly entitlement attitude because Israel of his day were ridden with the exact same disease.

We looked at the book of 1 Kings a few weeks ago and looked at what life was like in Israel during Jonah's ministry it was prosperous they would experience an appearance of comfort and relief just like Jonah was underneath this plant but like the plant that reprieve was going to come to an end.

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 Kings was clear that the temporary respite Israel was experiencing was not because of any proficiency in them but solely dependent on the pity of God.

[23 : 23] And if they weren't entitled to God's gracious provision in the first place then they couldn't hold God to account when he took it away. When Acts finally came crashing down on Israel for their sin and rebellion they could not complain and say that they deserved far better because in reality for years they had deserved far worse.

God has gracious provision from us. If he did so would we shake our fists and spit curses at him saying that he had no right to do so.

For it could happen. I was just thinking this last week. What would happen if no new students came to the Tron this year? God has graciously given us a good crop of students every single year to invest in and for them to bless us as they get involved in church family life and serving us.

But what if God withdrew that good and gracious provision from us? Perhaps to teach us a lesson like Jonah or Israel perhaps for some sin that we'd done collectively as a church.

would we humbly recognize that we were undeserving of all these years of gracious provision or would we reel at him in anger?

[24 : 51] Would we say that we were entitled to a good ministry because we were grafted for him for so long and he has no right to take this away from us? I think a bit more personally what if your area of influence decreased in the church?

Would you cling on to it for dear life for protecting the thing you feel that you have earned or would you take a step back and thank the Lord for graciously using someone as warped and floored as you in his kingdom purposes for so long?

And again God asked Jonah the same cutting question. Do you do well to be angry? Again it's a call for us to reflect.

Would I be angry if God stripped his gracious provision for me? And if the answer is yes then in what way do I need to change my thinking and attitudes to come in line with God's way of thinking?

And will I ask God to kindly work in me and transform me like he did with Jonah? Well there's one more incision that God needed to make on Jonah and there is no escape for us either.

[26 : 09] Our final question this evening is are you ever angry that God's concerns are different to yours? Looking at verses 10 and 11. Thankfully the last verses of this book are filled with clarity and compassion rather than misguided rage as God speaks and corrects Jonah.

In these last two verses God is going to show Jonah what his concerns are and contrast them with Jonah's. And the hope is in doing so that Jonah will recognize just how selfish and narrow-minded his perspective has been and how beautiful and kind and gracious the Lord's is.

So the Lord compares Jonah's attitude towards the plant with his attitude towards the people of Nineveh. And this exercise of contrast highlights the gulf between their 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 selfish and misdirected. Jonah pitied a plant that he didn't create, he didn't help it grow, and it came and went in just a day.

[27 : 35] He didn't plant it, he didn't water it, and the plant wasn't even around long enough for him to become properly attached to it or devoted to it or invested in it in any way.

Whereas God pities the people of Nineveh who he did create. He breathed the very life into their lungs and caused the first electrical impulse to pulse through their hearts before they even entered this world.

Not only that, but despite their rebellion against him, he had graciously given him food, water, shelter, and helped them to grow all these years.

God was invested in these people for not just a day, not even their lifetime, but from before he even flung the stars into space and crafted the earth with his hands.

So whose concerns are more noble? Jonah's or God's? Whose concern is more righteous? Jonah and his concerns for his own comfort and self-preservation.

[28 : 44] He was invested in a bloodless plant that he barely knew. Or God who's concerned with real flesh and blood who he has known from before creation.

The comparison highlights a vast chasm between God's concerns and attitudes and Jonah's. And Jonah is absolutely furious about that. He knew what God's concerns and priorities were.

That's why he quotes what God was like back in verse 2. Jonah was enraged that God's concern involved showing grace to unworthy sinners and rescuing them and even their cattle rather than preserving him and meeting his immediate and temporary needs.

But I think this would have really jarred with the thinking of the average Israelite back in Jonah's day. For it doesn't take a lot of thought to see how they matched up with Jonah. The book of Jonah finishes with this question.

Should I not 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?

[29 : 53] Israel. It's a question Jonah is asking the people of Israel too. And the answer should be a resounding yes. But for the Israelite whose priorities were profoundly skewed, the answer is probably something more like this.

Well I guess so. What about us? What does that mean for us? But Israel had no concerns for the wider world. Israel, like Jonah, they couldn't care less about anybody else rather than themselves.

Wrapped up in themselves they were and obsessed with their own personal privilege and comfort. There was no time for anything or anyone else that might disrupt their position as God's favoured people.

Well what about us? Are our commitments different to the Lord's? Are we obsessed with our own personal comfort and privilege? caught up in renovating our kitchens and securing our position in church rather than spending time and money and reaching our fellow creatures around us who God pities, shows compassion towards and is absolutely invested in?

Well my hope is that tonight we have seen the ugliness of Jonah's deceased attitude which is identical to our problem whether we admit it or not.

[31 : 17] But we also need to leave with hope don't we? We need to see how beautiful the alternative attitude is. The healthy attitude that we hope God will manifest in us as a church as we seek his help and strive to obey him and become like him.

And we see this healthy attitude exemplified most clearly in another Jonah. another prophet that God would send hundreds of years later to another sinful city undeserving of his mercy and of his grace.

But this second Jonah would not flee God's plan but rather humbly submit to it at a great cost to himself. Jesus like Jonah would go outside the city not to rub his hands with glee hoping that the inhabitants would perish although he would have had every single right to do so because they mocked and scorned him.

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

He didn't demand his own rights or scream at God what was entitled to him as his own son. But like God the Father in verse 11 would cry out forgive them Lord for they do not know what they are doing they do not know their left hand from their right.

[32 : 58] His joy was not found in temporary comfort and self-preservation but for the joy set before him he would endure the cross.

When we're worried about these poisonous attitudes rearing their ugly heads in us Jesus is the example that we must look to. If we keep our eyes fixed on him then our ugly attitudes will remain at bay as we're transformed more into the likeness of our wonderful saviour.

So let's pray together for God's help as we seek personal transformation as we strive to put our selfish attitudes to death. So let's pray together.

Now to help us pray I'm going to read some words from Philippians chapter 2. 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 that each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interest of others have this mind among yourselves 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 taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men and been found in human form he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on a cross therefore

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to so Lord we pray that you might strengthen us and help us to have this mind among ourselves in our church and when we leave in the workplace we pray this in Jesus name Amen