

Jonah #4

And so we reach the final chapter of the Book of Jonah.

During our journey, we have seen the prophet Jonah disobeying God's command to go to the Assyrian city of Nineveh and preach against its wickedness by getting on a boat headed thousands of miles in the opposite direction.

Of course, Jonah discovers that running away from God is like trying to flee your own shadow, futile.

God sends a storm that results in Jonah being thrown into the sea, swallowed by a huge fish, and vomited back onto the shores of Israel.

God once again commands him to visit Nineveh, which he does, and Jonah preaches a warning to the Ninevite people that God is going to overthrow the city in 40 days.

The Ninevites respond to the message in repentance, and God relents from his judgment on the city.

At this point, you would expect Jonah to be delighted. God has given him a second chance, his mission has been successful, the city has been saved, and its people have turned to Israel's God in repentance. Hurrah!

But, once again the Book of Jonah springs a surprise on us... which you will hear as listen to today's reading...

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? 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. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.'

Jonah 4:1-3

Let's allow the words we just heard to sink in for a moment.

God has supernaturally rescued a disobedient Jonah from drowning, given him a second chance to fulfil his prophetic ministry, protected Jonah from harm, empowered Jonah's message and shown mercy to the occupants of a large pagan city.

And Jonah's response?

'I knew you'd do this God, and I really didn't want it to happen. That's why I fled to Tarshish. I knew you were a gracious and compassionate God, and I'm so furious I wish I was dead!'

Like a spoiled child threatening to hold their breath until they die, Jonah stamps his feet, clenches his fists and shouts at God for what he's done.

What Jonah is doing here is even more shocking than when he first tried to run away from God.

Remember, Jonah is a prophet of the LORD, the one true God. Being a prophet is a huge privilege and a massive responsibility, hearing and bringing God's message to the world.

Jonah knows Israel's history. He is aware that the people of Israel have always been a rebellious people. He knows that Israel has depended time and time again on God's grace, compassion and love. Jonah knows that if God hadn't regularly relented from sending calamity on Israel, that there would be no Israel at all.

More than that, he has experienced God's grace and forgiveness personally, both in being saved from drowning, and being given a second chance to perform his prophetic ministry.

And yet here is Jonah saying that God forgiving the Ninevites is 'very wrong.' He is telling God that he knows better than God does!

This is a terrifying mixture of arrogance, stupidity and blasphemy. The original audience would have been waiting for the ground to open up under Jonah's feet, or for a thunderbolt to obliterate him from existence.

Instead, God looks at Jonah the way a loving parent looks at a child who is having a tantrum because they haven't been given something they want, and with grace, compassion, love, and probably a half-smile/half-frown, God asks Jonah a question...

But the LORD replied, 'Is it right for you to be angry?'

Jonah 4:4

Jonah, probably still holding his breath, refuses to answer.

And so we move to the next scene.

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, and Jonah was very happy about the plant.

Jonah 4:5-6

Jonah is still not on speaking terms with God. Instead, he walks some distance away from Nineveh, constructs a makeshift shelter, sits down and stares at the city, 'waiting to see what would happen.'

What was he expecting?

Maybe he was hoping that God would change his mind and rain down burning sulphur on it like he had on Sodom and Gomorrah.

Probably he wasn't even thinking that clearly. What we do know is that he was once again running away from God.

And yet, like a loving parent putting a blanket around a child who is sulking under a tree, God miraculously causes a plant to provide shade for Jonah's tiny shack.

Jonah is very happy about the plant. But he is happy about the shade the plant brings. Jonah is not happy with God.

At least when God provided a fish to rescue Jonah from drowning Jonah composed a prayer of thanks for rescuing him. Yes, it was a terrible, self-righteous, self-serving prayer, but it was a prayer.

Here there is no mention of him being even the slightest bit grateful to God for his intervention. By now Jonah knows that what God wants to happen rarely fits in with what Jonah wants to happen.

And so, like any good and loving parent, our gracious, compassionate, long-suffering God decides that it is time for some tough love.

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.'

Jonah 4:7-8

God has so far provided a large fish, and a plant for Jonah's protection.

Now he provides a worm to destroy the plant that is shading his surly ungrateful prophet, along with a scorching east wind. God has decided to let Jonah experience what it is like when he withdraws his protection.

Jonah was hoping to draw comfort from seeing Nineveh destroyed. Instead God destroys Jonah's comfort.

And does Jonah decide to grow up? Does Jonah repent? Does he heck!

He once again declares that he wants to die. He is still in sulky child mode. You can imagine him frowning, folding his arms and pouting his lips.

If Jonah can't have his way, he doesn't want to play. He will not give the ball back. He will not do what he is told. He will hold his breath until he dies.

God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, continues to try and help Jonah to see where he is going wrong, by repeating the question he had asked him earlier...

But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?’

Jonah 4:9a

And, finally, Jonah sees sense, falling to his knees he... oh... no...

‘It is,’ he said. ‘And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.’

Jonah 4:9b

By this point I found myself hoping that God would grant Jonah’s wish.

But instead, God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, concludes the Book of Jonah with the following question.

But the LORD said, ‘You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend 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 a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left – and also many animals?’

Jonah 4:10-11

Once again God tries to show Jonah how he has got things twisted.

Jonah was more concerned about the fate of a plant than he was about 120,000 humans.

Jonah wanted the Ninevites’ evil to be punished.

God wanted them freed from evil.

And there the book of Jonah ends.

With a question.

What is best? To punish or to forgive?

Now, as good Christians, we know the ‘right’ answer.

But if we allow it, thousands of years after it was written, the story of Jonah holds up a mirror to us, revealing how easy it is to become judgmental when we are meant to be forgiving.

Some of you will know of a woman called Corrie Ten Boom.

Corrie was part of Dutch Christian family who helped hide Jews from the Nazis during World War II. She was eventually caught and, along with her family, transported to a concentration camp where she suffered dreadful humiliations and abuse, and where her sister and father died.

Despite this, after the war was over Corrie made it her mission to travel throughout Germany sharing God's message of grace and forgiveness through Jesus. In her book 'The Hiding Place,' she writes about an occasion when her faith was severely challenged...

"It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower door in the processing centre at Ravensbruck.

"He was the first of our jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, my sister's pain-blanced face.

"He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein. To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!'

"His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who preached so often the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

"Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

"I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.

"As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass

from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

“And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on his. When he tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”

The Book of Jonah is a foreshadowing of the Gospel that Israel’s prophets foretold, and which Jesus revealed and fulfilled.

Jonah is an anti-prophet. Everything that a prophet was not meant to be. Like Samson was an anti-judge. As I’ve said before, in the Bible, as in life, some people serve as examples, others as warnings.

Jonah chose to ignore that when God blessed Abraham, it was so he would form a people that would be a blessing to *all* nations. And it was a message that Israel regularly ignored.

We live in a world where many are hostile to the Christian message. Even more are just apathetic, and some are completely unaware of it.

We live in a world where the concept of what is evil has been diluted and twisted. Human life is no longer considered sacred. Selfishness has been rebranded as ‘self-care.’ Pride as ‘self-esteem.’

And this is not a ‘modern’ thing.

2000 years ago Paul wrote to a young pastor called Timothy...

...the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather round them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

2 Timothy 4:3-4

“They will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.’ It could be a working definition for Instagram, TikTok and YouTube.

But this is the world we are called to be a blessing to, by living lives that are good. By living lives that demonstrate Jesus' radical love and forgiveness. By being honest, even when it costs us dearly. By sharing the good news of God's love and forgiveness in word and deed.

When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray he said...

This, then, is how you should pray:

*“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.*

***And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.***

*And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.”*

Matthew 6:9-13

The word 'debts' translates a Greek word which means 'that which is owed,' another way of saying 'sin'. Luke's version of the Lord's prayer uses a different word which means 'missing the mark,' another way of describing 'sin.'

And just in case we are in any doubt about what this part of the prayer means, in the following two verses Jesus explains...

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Matthew 6:14-15

Ouch. Jonah would have hated this. Don't be a Jonah.

Our decision to forgive others is a response to God's love and forgiveness of us. It is saying, "Thank you for reaching out to me, even though I don't deserve it. Now I want to be more like you. I want to learn how to forgive others."

And don't be a Jonah and limit that to your Christian friends and family. This week, ask God if there is someone that you have decided isn't worth sharing the Gospel with. Someone who you've got to the point where you feel like saying, "I haven't got time for them no more!"

It could be a friend, or an ex-friend. It could be a neighbour. It could be a relative. In fact, it is *likely* to be a relative!

It's quite possible there is no one who comes to mind, in which case, good for you.

But if there is someone, spend time praying that they might be found by Jesus, and that you are willing to be a part of that process. And if you really don't feel that you can pray that, then, like Corrie Ten Boom, ask Jesus to help you *want* to be a part of that process.

Why? Because Jesus commands us to do so. Being forgiven and forgiving other people are inextricably linked.

Jesus didn't need to be forgiven, and yet he died so that we could be. He paid our debts, and he forgave his debtors. He paid the price for our sins so that our sins could be forgiven

One of the last sentences Jesus spoke was asking God the Father to forgive the pagan, foreign soldiers who had taunted and beaten him, stripped him naked, nailed him to a cross, and who were dividing up his clothes between them.

Jonah knew that God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, and he hated it.

Let's acknowledge that we can be like Jonah, while asking Jesus to help us imitate God, to be compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness not just to our Christian family, but to those outside of it.