

The Lord Saves

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[0 : 00] Folks, if you keep Jonah chapter 4 open in front of you, that would be great as we dive into it this evening. And can I just say it's wonderful to hear your voices this evening, especially without having to wear masks as we sit in the pew.

It's great to hear you as we sing together. But let us pray as we dive into Jonah 4. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, as we come now to your word, as we think about what it means, as we think about its relevance for our life, as we think about how it should shape our lives, our worship, and how we think about you.

Father, would you open our ears? Would you soften our hearts? And would we glorify you? Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Let me start off by asking you a question. What makes you angry? Now, I'm not talking about slight annoyance or the frustration that you get when things get on your nerves a little bit.

Like maybe when you find dirty dishes after your flatmate or spouse has cooked and they couldn't be bothered clearing up. That's not anger. That's annoyance. I'm talking about real anger.

[1 : 19] What is it that makes you clench your fists so hard that your knuckles turn white? What do you hear or see that immediately makes your face turn as red as a traffic light?

What is it that absolutely makes your blood boil? It makes you so angry, all you want to do is scream, shout, maybe even punch stuff, and feel physically sick.

We've probably all had those moments where we are so angry that we're unable to think. We're confused. We're outraged. You feel as if you've been slapped in the face and you can see, you can't see how any good can come from any of it.

Well, that is how we find Jonah this evening. And tonight we're going to see what made him so angry. And it isn't what we might expect. But if you have been following along in this series, then it is what you should have seen coming.

So if this is your first time joining in the series tonight, please go to our website or to the YouTube channel and catch up with everything that has been said.

[2 : 34] Because it's really important to get the whole picture of Jonah to grasp what this book is really all about. So we started off by thinking of the context, how this book was probably written by Jonah after the events had already taken place.

Probably as Jonah reflected on all that had happened in Nineveh. And he was back in Israel. He saw the same attitudes, his attitudes and his approach to God mirrored in the attitudes of the rebellious, presumptuous nation of Israel.

See, Jonah was a prominent prophet, a spokesman from God to an idolatrous nation of Israel. And he was called to leave that position of power, of peace, of prosperity to go to Nineveh.

A city in the Assyrian Empire that would ultimately come and destroy Israel in just a few years. So Jonah hears the command to go and what does he do?

He runs the opposite direction. He's swallowed by a fish. He seems to repent in the belly of the fish. He is then vomited back up onto dry land and he reluctantly goes to Nineveh.

[3 : 52] Preaches the world's shortest sermon. And Nineveh repents. So the story has reached its climax. We would love it if Jonah ended in chapter 3, wouldn't we?

Mass repentance. God's amazing grace shown. And a prophet doing his job. All is well with the world. We would love the book of Jonah to end with chapter 3, verse 10, where it says this.

When God saw what they, referring to Nineveh, did and how they turned from the evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

But that's not how the book ends. We need to remember that Jonah has been consistent throughout this book. His anger has shown up time and time again. And now finally in chapter 4, we realize why.

And in this chapter, Jonah's intense anger is contrasted with the immense compassion of God. So last week we saw God showing mercy to the rebellious city of Nineveh.

[5 : 00] This week we see God who is slow to anger, abounding in love, showing compassion to a sinful people and a rebellious and angry prophet.

So tonight we're going to look at this passage through the lens of those two contrasts. An angry prophet and a compassionate God. So the first thing we see is an angry prophet.

Now Jonah must have heard the king's declaration for the whole city to repent in chapter 3, verses 7 to 8. How would you expect the prophet to respond in that situation?

We'd expect the man sent by God to deliver that message to rejoice, wouldn't we? They did what he wanted. But look at his actual response in chapter 4, verse 1.

Read with me. 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?

[6 : 03] 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. So Jonah is getting angry because of who God is and the mercy that he has shown to repentant Nineveh.

But he isn't just a wee bit annoyed. He considers what God has done to be very wrong. Why? Could it be that Jonah is being nationalistic and worried that God's mercy falling on Nineveh means that it will be robbed from the nation of Israel?

Could it be that he hates the Ninevites and harbors racist thoughts against them? Could it be that Jonah thinks that Nineveh don't deserve God's mercy?

Regardless of Jonah's motivation, it's evident that Jonah is angry because God showed mercy to a wicked people. Jonah basically says, God, this is so typical of you.

[7 : 21] How dare you do this to Nineveh of all places? You're so loving. You're so kind. I knew you would do this. But he doesn't say that out of worship and thanks.

He says it out of a sense of frustration and anger. See, Jonah's been consistent throughout this book in his anger and in his reluctance. In verse 2, he says, Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home?

Reluctant even before he left the gates of Israel. Jonah's angry because God acted according to his character to the point in verse 3 where he says it would be better if he had died.

See, Jonah wants to play God. He wants to be the one who determines who is forgiven and who isn't. And in verse 3, he basically says, If this is what you are going to use me for, if you're going to use me to tell a wicked people about forgiveness, just kill me.

I want nothing to do with it. He is so angry. But here's the thing. Jonah has forgotten that the only reason he is still alive is precisely because God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

[8 : 42] From the beginning of this story, Jonah has been reluctant, running away, trying to stop God's plan of mercy from happening, consistently being disobedient.

And yet God spares him and continues to use him. Why? Well, because God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

And that's also the only reason that the nation of Israel still exists. See, these descriptions of God that Jonah says in verse 2 were first spoken in Exodus chapter 34.

Drop that down and you can look it up later. The tragic story of Exodus 32 to 34 is that the nation of Israel rebelled against God and began to worship a golden calf.

Now, just a side note, if you were here for our first sermon in this series, the context of Jonah that we looked at was that Israel at this time had set up two golden calves in the north and the south of Israel.

[9 : 46] So alarm bells should be ringing in our minds. And so God saw the rebellion of Israel in Exodus and was angry at their idolatry, but showing his mercy, his kindness, his love and his patience, he renewed his covenant with them and gave them this revelation of himself from Exodus 34 verse 6.

God says, The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. See, Jonah knew that well, to the point where he uses the same words to describe who God is, but in an accusing way, rather than in an attitude of praise.

Jonah is the angry prophet who says, I knew this would happen. How dare you show mercy to sinful Nineveh? Now, before we all jump at the chance to hate on Jonah, let's reflect and see how we can have the same attitude today.

See, there are people in our minds who we think are beyond the gospel. People who we think, frankly, we don't want them to be forgiven. You've got the big people like dictators and people in the world who have committed atrocities against humanity.

But we've got it on a local level too, in our own city, in our own lives, our own families, our workplaces. There are parts of our city, for example, and the surrounding areas that do not have a church, that have no connection to the good news of Jesus.

[11 : 30] And, realistically, we do little about it. We have friends and work colleagues who don't know Jesus, and maybe we're intentionally not sharing Jesus with them because they're mean.

They're a bully or they're rude to us in the workplace. Maybe you've been hurt by people, and you really don't want them to be forgiven because they've hurt you. See, it is not our job to dictate who God is merciful to, but we are to see his character, to know his character, and praise him for the mercy and compassion that he has.

And we should rejoice when people become Christians, not assume that we know better than God. See, we are not God. We are not the ones who save people, but we are called to go and tell people the gospel.

Jonah is an angry prophet who says, I knew this would happen. How dare you show mercy to sinful Nineveh? Then the second thing we see is the response of a compassionate God.

Look at verse four with me. But the Lord replied, is it right for you to be angry? God responds to Jonah with incredible patience, doesn't he?

[12 : 51] See, here we see God's character worked out again because God had every single right to be angry with Jonah. He is constantly disobedient.

He's angry at God for acting according to his character. Jonah doesn't understand God's grace and his mercy, but instead he actually wants people to suffer judgment and die.

Jonah wants God to judge his creation. God has every right to be angry with Jonah. But God, being compassionate, gently poses a heart-searching question that should make Jonah reflect on the goodness of God's mercy and how it wasn't only given to the Ninevites, but also to him and to the nation of Israel.

See, out of compassion, God says, Jonah, are you right to be angry at the same mercy that I have given to you and to your nation? Jonah's cast off the Ninevites as idolatrous, violent, wicked people.

But one look at the nation of Israel and you'll see that idolatry is rife. That God, one look at Jonah's heart and we see that he has such a warped view that God must act according to what he thinks is good and right.

[14 : 16] Jonah's taking his own forgiveness for granted. But God is gently and patiently giving Jonah a lesson in humility. Now, isn't it easy for us to be like Jonah?

And presume that God will be merciful to us. See, Christians are forgiven through the death and resurrection of Jesus, absolutely. And we must remember that.

And yet we still live in a sinful world. And there is that constant battle, isn't there, between our old sinful selves and our new identity in Jesus, that tension in our lives, and we feel it every single day.

And so when we're hurt by others, we think that our anger is completely justified. But we forget that God has also shown us immense forgiveness for the way we have rebelled against him.

We expect others to forgive us when we've wronged them. And yet we hold on to our anger and we withhold our forgiveness. And so we need this same question.

[15 : 25] We need this reminder of humility to be taught that we are not special or superior to other people, but we are recipients of God's abundant mercy.

And our desire should be to share that with the world. To tell the world of the life-transforming message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that should change our hearts and that brings us into a right relationship with God.

Brothers and sisters, remember God's character. Let it change your heart. Let it impact your thoughts, your actions, your devotion to God, and pray for all people to hear and respond to the gospel and then go and share it freely.

A compassionate God responds to an angry prophet and says, is it right for you to be angry? And then we get the second look at an angry prophet who is waiting for disaster to strike.

Look at verse 5 with me. Jonah had gone out and sat down at the 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.

[16 : 44] So instead of responding to God's question, Jonah acts like a toddler and has a tantrum and runs off. You know those moments where a child wants something done in a very, very specific way.

And if it's not done in that specific way, their world is over. Everything is wrong. And they run off, they cry, they stomp their feet, and they will not be consoled.

A full-blown tantrum. That's what happens here. But it's just a little bit quieter. See, Jonah doesn't respond to God.

He doesn't reflect on God's question, but goes outside the city, builds a little shelter for himself to see what will happen to this city of Nineveh. And you can imagine him, can't you, as he's building that little shelter, muttering under his breath, mocking God's decision and questioning everything he knows about God and the Ninevites.

But notice that his shelter is overlooking the city. He is waiting, watching, hoping almost, that God's judgment will still fall on Nineveh.

[18 : 00] Jonah's wanting God to suppress his mercy and compassion and instead rain down fire on the city that he deems unworthy of forgiveness. Maybe he even thinks that his accusation of God, that his desire to die if God doesn't act the way he sees fit, would have changed God's mind.

As if a mere man can change the mind of God. But in his anger, Jonah does not rejoice over Nineveh's repentance. He waits and he wants their judgment.

And he's ignoring and disregarding God for acting according to his character. Now we're not going to sit on a hill and overlook a city like Jonah did.

But we are tempted to look at a world steeped in sin and think that they're being stupid. We're tempted to cast people off and consider them as a lost cause.

For example, our house overlooks two high-rise flats here in Edinburgh. If we follow the same path of Jonah, we can look at those and think that all the people who live in those high-rise blocks are lost because of some of the issues going on in those buildings.

[19 : 17] Or, we can look at those high-rise flats as a mission field full of broken people who need to hear about Jesus. But it goes deeper than that too.

See, when we think about people who have harmed us, do we like the idea of them suffering for their sin? Do we hope that people will be exposed and get tripped up by their sin?

Or do we pray that God would change their hearts and remember that God can make a new creation of every single person? God forgives Nineveh, but Jonah doesn't.

See, the thing we forget when we look about the world steeped in sin is that we were once those people too. We're not better than anyone else.

The only benefit we have in this life is Jesus. The most important thing this world needs is Jesus. We're not to judge or anticipate people's response or to look forward to people's judgment with joy, but we are to have compassion on a world and share Jesus with them.

[20 : 30] This week, I want you to think of one person and one area in the city that you can pray for, one area near where you live.

Pray for opportunities to share Jesus with that one person. Think of ways that you can reach that place that you're praying for. It may be that you have a coffee and a chat with that person.

It may be that you pray for and support a church plant in a specific area of this city or wherever you live. It may be talking about your faith openly with your family, your friends, your work colleagues.

But also ask, we must ask ourselves, when we see God's mercy being shown to a sinful world, will we resent it or will we rejoice about it?

And then we get the final contrast in this chapter, the final response of a compassionate God. He gives an object lesson in what it means to be compassionate.

[21 : 33] So from verse six onwards, God gives Jonah this object lesson to help him understand that as we've been thinking through this whole series, it is God who saves. That God's mercy and grace are to be shared freely, not hoarded by a small number of people.

God shows undeserved kindness to Jonah in verse six. Read it with me. Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort.

And Jonah was very happy about the plant. Now notice two things about this verse. First, it is God who provided the plant for Jonah.

In verse six, seven, and eight, it says three times that God provides, highlighting the fact that he is the creator. He is the one who is in absolute control.

But then the second thing to notice is at the end of verse six, Jonah was very happy about the plant. See, Jonah's happy that his discomfort from sitting under the hot sun, beating on his head all day, has been taken away.

[22 : 46] It pleases Jonah that he has this plant. And this is the first and only time in the book of Jonah that he is pleased.

And it's for completely selfish reasons. And so the Lord provided a worm to chew the plant in verse seven, the sun and a strong wind in verse eight to wither the plant.

God allows Jonah to feel the full extent of his discomfort sitting in the blazing heat of direct sunlight as he sits, wanting a city to fall in judgment.

And Jonah begins to grow faint. And at the end of verse eight, he says, it will be better for me to die than to live. And we get that same question again in verse nine.

Is it right for you to be angry about the plant? Now, at this point, we might hope that he's learned his lesson, right? That he might cry out to God from his disaster, that he wouldn't want even his worst enemies to be going through what he's going through.

[23 : 55] And that's a fraction of the judgment that would befall Nineveh if they didn't repent. We want Jonah to repent for being merciless, for having no compassion and grace on the Ninevites.

But instead, he hardens his heart even more. And he is adamant that his anger is right. He responds basically by saying, yes, I should be angry. That plant meant so much to me.

And it's wrong that you took it away. That plant should have lived to enjoy life, to be a blessing, not to be cursed, to be shown mercy, not disaster.

Another keen listener cannot help but think, Jonah, if you think that for a plant, why on earth can you not see that that is true for a city of 120,000 people?

And that's exactly what God draws out in his final response to Jonah in verses 10 to 11. God describes the plant in verse 10 to help Jonah see that he had nothing to do with it.

[25 : 02] He didn't plant it. He didn't cultivate it. He didn't water it. Everything was under God's control. This plant should mean very little, if not nothing, to Jonah. But how different should it be for God and his care for a city of Nineveh?

People that he created, 120,000 of his image bearers, people utterly lost without God's mercy. That's what God says in verse 11.

God is saying, Jonah, that city should mean more to you than this measly little plant. And in a humorous way, a good example of the use of irony in Hebrew literature, God says, if the people don't matter to you, Jonah, think of the animals.

That's how verse 11 ends. And the book ends with a question. God basically saying, isn't it right for me to show love and mercy to all people, even those who you think don't deserve it?

And I think the book deliberately ends that way because it means that the readers are the one who have to ponder the response. The original readers of the rebellious and idolatrous nation of Israel, who in their pride and sin had presumed that their prosperity and peace was a sign of God's favor, but who had forgotten their duty to be witnesses in the world of the great God that they served.

[26 : 28] But the question is just as relevant today in 2022 in Brunsfield. So the thing that we need to remember as we end our series in Jonah tonight is the overarching theme that it is the Lord who saves.

He is the one who shows compassion and mercy. He is the one who is slow to anger and abounding in love. And the only reason that we are here this evening is because of his character.

And the ultimate expression of that character is what we're going to celebrate in a few moments as we remember Jesus' death and resurrection as we celebrate communion together.

But it should also change the way we view the world we live in. And remember that our role is to be witnesses, to be ambassadors of Jesus who go out to all kinds of people in all kinds of places and freely share the gospel without any hesitation on our part.

So your love for the Lord should produce in us a love for his people, yes, but also a deep, deep love for the lost people of this world. We live in a country where currently less than 2% of the population know Jesus.

[27 : 45] That means that over 90% of this country is on a road to hell with no hope in Jesus. That should break our hearts.

And that should move our feet to go. It should open our lips to speak the glorious truth of the gospel, the glorious truth that it is God who saves.

If we choose who we show mercy, love and grace to, we are disciples of Jonah, not Jesus. Jonah was written so that the nation of Israel could reflect on their view of God, their view of the nations around them, and their view of themselves.

They presumed on God's goodness and took his loving kindness and compassion for granted. This chapter especially should challenge the way we think about and how we respond to this God who is faithful and compassionate and how we live in light of our relationship with him.

So if you're taking notes, jot down these three quick questions and think about them in the coming days. What is it that makes you happy?

[29 : 00] Question one. Is it the pain whilst you want others to suffer? Question two. What is it that makes you angry? Is it the repentance of those who we consider enemies?

Question number three. What makes you want to give up? Is it because God is not acting exactly like you think he should? Are you trying to play God?

So what makes us angry? Jonah was angry because Nineveh repented and that is contrasted with the immense compassion of God.

And when we see God's love and mercy being showed to a sinful world, will we resent it? Or will we rejoice about it?

Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Heavenly Father, we ask you for forgiveness for the times that we have looked at this world and looked forward to some kind of judgment to follow them because of their sin, maybe because of how we've been hurt.

[30 : 14] Father, would you help us never to rejoice at people's judgment, but help us to see the judgment coming for them and to have such a burden for them to come to know Jesus.

To find life, to find a restored relationship with you. Father, help us to take that burden and to share Jesus with the world.

Help us to love people so much that we cannot help but share Jesus with them. In his name we pray. Amen.