

David Macleod: Jonah 3 & 4

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 0 0] The text that I'd like to take for this morning is actually from Jonah chapter 4 and verse 2. And it's a text that enables us to see and enables us to rejoice in the fact that God is a gracious and a compassionate or merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. So we're thinking about the swathe of the two chapters here but I want to really rest upon this text and focus our thoughts around that particular text this morning, that God is a gracious and compassionate or merciful, it's translated here, God's slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That's our God. And it's only because that is our God, that He is our God, that we are here. And it's only because of who

He is and His character and His nature and His revelation to us that we are able to come to the Lord's table. And as we meditate upon the fact that God is gracious and compassionate, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love, that should give us such a sense of joy and such a sense of assurance and peace as we come to the table. As we come, yes we must come with great reverence, we come examining ourselves, we come seeing our sin, but we come seeing our Savior. And so yes, there must be reverence but there can be joy and assurance and peace with that reverence. God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love, how that should thrill us. And yet, as we revisit Jonah and as the camera zooms in on the expression of the face of Jonah in chapter 4, we see no trace of a smile on Jonah's face, we find only a scowl. We hear no joyful, thrilling praise from his lips, but rather what we have in the form of a prayer is simply an angry protest against God. In chapter 3 we read that revival comes to the city of Nineveh and God used Jonah in bringing such revival. You would think that God's prophet, God's man would be rejoicing at the wonder and the far-reaching nature of God's salvation and the privilege that God would use even Jonah in bringing such salvation. That is the greatest thrill for any preacher. Friday night when I came here, just before we began the service, I said to Thomas that there are any particular things I should be aware of just so I can be praying and in the conversation that we had, one of the things that Thomas said right off was pray for conversions. Pray for conversions because there is no greater thrill for the preacher than seeing people who were dead in transgression and sin as we were coming to life in Christ, finding forgiveness in Jesus. And yet for Jonah, God's prophet, we see no such thrill, no such joy, no such celebration. We read that as Jonah reflects on what happened in Nineveh, Jonah was greatly displeased and he became angry. It displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry. Two points this morning as we think about this section of God's word.

We look first of all at Jonah's anger and secondly we look at Jesus' application. We think about the anger of the prophet and then we think about the application for us here and now as we look at all this in the light of Christ. So that is the structure of the thoughts this morning. First of all we think about Jonah's anger then because that is what we are confronted with in this prayer, in this verse. I have a friend who is studying at university just now and part of the course that he is doing involves really detailed study of bugs. Every conceivable creepy crawly that walks on the countryside of the area that he is staying in, he is in about them, he has got them in wee boxes, he has put them under microscopes, he has examined them, he is reading about them, he is absolutely thrilled with these creepy crawlies. Studies every detail. Now in my opinion as I look at them I would not touch them. I think they are the ugliest things. I would recoil rather than be drawn to such things and yet as he shares with me something of what he is studying, he is thrilled. He is absolutely filled with praise and wonder at the creative power of God and the sustaining power of God even in the life of these ugly little creatures. I would have never expected the study of anything as ugly as a beetle to provoke such a burst of praise. And as we come to study Jonah's anger, it is ugly. It is ugly but it actually underlines for us the beautiful and the wondrous character of God. It is

a dark backdrop through which we see the light and the beauty of God's character and his attributes. Now Jonah's anger is, it is ugly. And verse 2 it says that Jonah prayed to the Lord and he says to the

[7 : 25] Lord, oh Lord is this not 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 and merciful, slow to anger and abounding instead fast love and relenting from disaster. He is so angry he doesn't want to live. Now oh Lord please take my life from me for it is better for me to die and to live. Why is Jonah angry? Jonah is angry because of the character of God.

And Jonah is angry at the way that God was dealing with Nineveh. He was not treating them as their sin so clearly deserved. There's four elements here to Jonah's anger that highlight the four aspects of God's character. First of all Jonah is angry because God is gracious.

Now what is grace? Grace is when God gives us the blessings that we do not deserve. Nineveh was an evil city I think we'll look a bit more at that this evening. We could delve into the prophet Naaman and we're giving an insight into the city and the violence and the wickedness and the evil that was evident in that place. It was a city that was pagan it was idolatrous. What did they deserve? They deserve punishment. They deserved as it says in verse 4 of chapter 3. They deserved to be overturned overthrown by God's wrath.

That's what they deserved. But as Jonah preached about the coming judgment the people in Nineveh they heard God and in response they realized their sin and they repented. And we read about the fasting and we read about the sackcloth and we read about the ashes that are all evidences of that repentance that was there in the city of Nineveh. And as God saw their repentance how did God respond? He showed them grace. He did not destroy the city but he saved them.

And that made Jonah very angry. So Jonah is angry because God is gracious. Secondly Jonah is angry because God is compassionate. The word in the Hebrew that's used there can be translated as merciful or compassionate. What is compassion? Well compassion is when someone comes alongside us in order to rescue us. Some people will confuse compassion with empathy or sympathy. We can feel empathy and a connection we can be moved in our hearts as we see our people in distress. We see it so often in the news. Horrific situations and it touches our hearts and we feel empathy. We feel that sympathy where we are moved. But that's not compassion.

[11 : 12] Compassion is not only to feel that but it's to respond in action. Compassion is not only to see and feel for a people who are in distress but it's to reach out to them. And that's what God did to Nineveh. He saw their sin. He saw their lostness. And he used Jonah to go into that city to come alongside these people in order that they will be saved and not damned. In order that he would be able to bring them to a place where they will receive God's mercy and not his wrath. And that would have brought joy and salvation to the streets of Nineveh. But it made Jonah very angry. Thirdly Jonah is angry because God is slow to anger. Now when we tend to think about our fallen human anger, we tend to think of it as explosive or at least I do. I think about anger. I think about something that starts off down there and it starts to bubble up and it's like a volcanic eruption. We see something. We're outraged. We begin to think upon it. It's stews within us and if we're not careful, the anger that's bubbling up within us explodes out from us. That's our anger. It's not God's anger. God's anger is wrath. It's righteous. And it's just. And it's settled. God is the God who sees everything. Thought, word, deed. And so there are no miscarriages of justice where God is judged. He has all the facts. He has all the motives.

He has all the thoughts, the words, the deeds. He sees it all. And every offence, it brings his anger. God's wrath is settled. It's just. And if I can put this this way, it's slow burning. It's not explosive and impulsive. It's slow burning. And that gives opportunity for those who are in sin to repent. That gives opportunity for those who are in sin to seek forgiveness. And that's what Nineveh did. The slowness of God to anger gave Nineveh and gave heaven reason to rejoice. As hundreds of thousands, if it seems that over a million people likely were saved, what rejoicing must have been in the streets of heaven? What rejoicing in heaven if once in a repents? How about a million in one reviving touch? What joy?

And yet this seems to have given Jonah reason to have nothing other than anger. So we have this developing picture again of Jonah. He was ugly in chapter one. He is repenting in chapter two. And he's ugly again in chapter three. We have this picture of him, at least I do in my mind. Fleeing from that revival city. When I read accounts of when revival came to Lewis in years gone by, if you're a

believer, you just think how wonderful it would have been to be there, to be part of it. When you speak to people who experienced it, they said you just never wanted to leave. You just wanted to be in that place all the time. And yet here's Jonah and the city is reviving. God is at work and Jonah cannot get out quick enough. As the songs of praise go up, Jonah has his fingers in his ears. He's running out of the city with that judge mentalism in his heart. Doesn't God see how evil these people are? Doesn't God see that these Ninevites, they're not his people? Doesn't God see a thunderbolt is required for this city? And it seems that with the anger of Jonah, had

God asked him to press the nuclear button to wipe out the city of Nineveh, that he would have been happy to do. If God called him to be the agent of his purging wrath, he would have had enthusiasm in that mission. But after 40 days, the thunderbolt hadn't come. God had relented from disaster and God's slowness to anger at the sin of Nineveh frustrated Jonah beyond words. And yet ironically, it's only because of God's slowness to anger and patience that he would endure such a sinful prophet and that he would listen to such a contrary prayer. Finally, Jonah is angry because God is abounding in love. I love that Jonah didn't seem to have. And this is the culmination of everything that has gone before. The grace that God showed to Nineveh, the compassion with which he deals with him, the mercy as he holds back that wrath, the readiness to relent from sending disaster. All of this is testimony to the searching, saving love of God for an utterly undeserving people. And it's all just too much for Jonah. And so he prays, take my life away. If this is how it's going to be, I don't want to live. So that's Jonah's anger. And all is bitter ugliness.

Where does it leave him? It leaves him sulking out of communion with God in a bog of self pity, wishing he was dead. And it's a tragic picture. And it's a picture that in some ways we'd rather not look at this. To be quite honest, I almost set aside the whole study just because of this horrible picture of God's prophet. We'd rather not look at it. Just say on the Sunday morning of the communion, but it's in the Bible. And so we have to look at it. And it's a warning for us. First for me. It's a warning for God's people. We may have walked close with God once as Jonah did. We may have been used mightily by God once as Jonah was. We may be able to profess an orthodox, correct doctrinal faith as Jonah just did with his lips. And yet our hearts can be far from all that we're doing and saying.

[20 : 26] We are so vulnerable as Christians. And the second that we let pride in. The second that we think for one moment that we are worthy of God's love and others are not. How far we can fall and how ugly we can become. And so we need reminders. We need the sacrament as well as we need this picture. We need the sacrament in order that we will keep on remembering that it was Jesus death and that alone. Which atone for our sin. Not our merits. Not our righteousness. That is filthy rags. It's the blood of Christ. There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in. It's nothing we can take pride in there. And each time we see that truth. Each time we come to the table. Each time we are reminded that we are not worthy but that Jesus was and is and ever will be worthy. We are humbled. Each time we remember the broken body and shed blood for us. Our ugly pride. They can so quickly and so explosively burst into self righteous anger such as we've heard. It's buried. So there's Jonah's anger. Secondly, we see Jesus application.

We see how this impacts us today. Jonah is a character that Jesus actually speaks of like. We're going to look at that this evening, God willing. And as Jesus speaks of the sign of Jonah, as he speaks to the people that he ministered to as he was in this world about Jonah, there is a strong warning of judgment to come and the need for us to escape that judgment. But there is also a powerful invitation to receive and to rejoice in the grace of God. And that's what I'd like to focus on for the few minutes that we have left just now. The grace of God. Because that's the only thing that can make us ready. God's grace is amazing. As we sometimes say. And you know, we see God's grace most wonderfully, not in the city of Nineveh, but rather on the cross at Calvary. And we see God's grace most powerfully, not in the people of Nineveh, but in the mirror. If we are Christians, we should do anyway.

We should see God's grace most powerfully as we consider how God deals with us today. In the light of that cross. Jonah said to God, I knew that you're a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abiding in love. I knew it. Do we know it? Do we know that in our hearts, in our beings? It's thinking it for a moment. God is a gracious God. We sang in Psalm 103 and it says in verse 10, he does not cheat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. We don't have to look at Nineveh for offense. We just have to look at our hearts. We see sin. We see iniquity and yet

God offers us forgiveness.

He offers to wipe the slate clean. He offers us redemption to buy us back through that blood. He offers us peace. He offers us a joy that is constant and unshakable and eternal.

He offers us eternal life freely. Do we deserve it? No. Could we earn it? Never. And yet still it is offered to us in Christ. God did not treat Nineveh as their sins deserved and God does not treat us as our sins deserve because he treated Jesus as our sins deserved. God did not repay Nineveh according to their iniquities. God does not repay us according to our iniquities because he repaid Jesus according to our iniquities. And this is grace. I always say it to the children. Do you want to know what grace is? Write it on the fancy board that you've got here. G-R-A-C-E. God's riches at Christ's expense and the transaction was affected at

[27 : 10] Calvary. Jesus has paid the price. Jesus has taken the punishment. Why? Because God is gracious and God is compassionate. I've seen a couple of articles recently about messages that were sent from the other end of the world and they washed up on the beautiful beaches of Harris. So there's a message and it's opened up and it's read and there's an amazing story at the end of it that gets fired around Facebook but there's never any close contact between the one who sent it to a thousand miles away and the one who receives it. That's not how the Lord dealt with Nineveh is it? They were a putrid people. They were an offence to him but God did not send a letter. He sent his prophet personally and that's not the way that God has dealt with us. God did not send some encrypted message from another realm delivered by some nameless, faceless, angelic being. God sent his son and they called him

Jesus and he came to love and heal and forgive and he lived and he died to buy my pardon and yours. Does that not blow your mind? Because it should do. God sent his son. Some months back now in Harris, E&D; was preaching one morning and he said a sentence that has stuck with me ever since. He said this. He said at one time in a manger in Bethlehem, there lay one who was greater than the universe. And why was he there? He was there on the most breathtaking mission of compassion and mercy. Sometimes we see a situation, we see somebody in need but we recognise that if we get involved, it's going to potentially be messy, there may be crossfire, we may get caught in it. So we feel the empathy but we step back, we withdraw. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan, man lies battered and bloodied on the side of the road. And the priest walks by and the Levite walks by. They see the need, they see the predicament but they will not get involved and then along comes the Samaritan and he sees the need and he comes alongside the man and he shows compassion.

God sent his son, let me say it again. That's what we remember. God sent his son, God the son left the realms of glory to come to this world, into a world that is sin saturated.

The God who cannot bear to look upon sin, he came into that world of sin, he himself who knew no sin, became sin for us. So that we could become righteous in him. Whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us. When we were utterly lost, Christ came to finance.

When we were absolutely without hope, Christ rescued us. Why? Because God is a merciful and a compassionate God. And God is slow to anger. How do we know? Because we have today, quite simply, we still have breath, we still have life, we still have opportunity. Jesus could have come back already in all his glory and taken all who are trusting him, his bride, his church to be with him forever and sent all who are in rebellion against him to eternal just punishment. He could have done, but he hasn't yet. He's given opportunity, another one. We have another opportunity to gather around the table, another opportunity where we remember the Lord's death until he comes. And the reason he has not yet come is because he is slow to anger. Right at the beginning of this little book we observed how the wickedness of Nineveh, the evil of Nineveh came up before God. And so he got hold of Jonah and said,

[33 : 06] I want you to go there. Still God sees everything. And just as the wickedness of Nineveh came up before him, the wickedness of our day and our nation and our world and our hearts, day by day it comes up before God. He sees it. He sees when no one else sees. We only have to pick up the newspaper any day of the week to see how much is a nation and as a world, we must grieve the God who made us. And so what loving patience causes his hand to hold back punishment, how slow he is to anger. How much our God is like the father of the prodigal, scanning the horizon for souls that are returning. And how much Jonah is like the elder brother who would not receive and who would not rejoice over those the father accepted. And so every day that you are given and I am given, every day that this world continues to exist is another evidence of how slow God is to anger.

And finally we see that God is abounding in love. We thought a little about our tokens of love in terms of the children with Mother's Day. A few weeks ago there was Valentine's Day and there were some hugely elaborate celebrations and tokens of love that are sent through various mediums but they are all so pale and pathetic in comparison with the love of God for us in Christ. It is a steadfast love, an abounding love that God showed to Nineveh and showed more so to us in Jesus. John 15 and verse 13 says, greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends. It is what we remember, his death. You know there are many stories that we can tell and retell of those who sacrificed their lives for others and we remember them and it is right that we do and we don't belittle them in any way but you know every human being has to die sometime. Jesus didn't ever have to die but he chose to die. He chose to lay down his life and he did it for you and he did it for me. Why? Because God is abounding instead fast love and as we gather around the table we remember that love. We remember the body that was broken, we remember the blood that was shed to save us from the coming judgment, to save us from that second death,

from that eternal hell and to offer us everlasting life. So what must we do in response to all this? Simply come. Come to the God who shows us such grace. Come to the God who reaches out in such breathtaking compassion. Come to the God who is slow to anger. Come to the God who is abounding instead fast love. Let us put our faith, let us profess our faith in Him. We pray.