

Anger at Grace Jonah 4

Friends, I don't know about you but I've always found the end of the story of Jonah to be a bit confusing. It seems a bit anticlimactic really, almost like it's unfinished.

It just ends, rather abruptly - with Yahweh's question just hanging there... *"Should I not be concerned about that great city?"*

Personally I think the end of chapter 3 would make a better ending. All the Ninevites have repented and turned away from their evil and violence and Yahweh has decided that He will do the same and spare them from destruction...

And they all lived happily ever after... the end!

Oh but wait, not everyone lived happily ever after. Someone is not happy about how this story is ending, and it's not the evil stepmother or the wicked Queen - it's Jonah!

Which is rather ironic isn't it - what preacher wouldn't fall over with joy and be totally blown away if, as the result of one rather mediocre sermon, an entire city has turned around.

Everyone has repented from their false beliefs, from "a profit at all costs" mentality, from corruption in government and business, from madly pursuing materialism and debt...

all the drug dealers stopped dealing and criminals stopped stealing, neighbors stopped fighting with each other, and everyone turned to God - to Jesus Christ... and because of that even the NHL labor dispute was resolved!

Every preacher dreams of something like this happening. And this kind of turnaround is so incredible it sounds like a bit of a fairy tale - but that's what happened in Nineveh... and Jonah is angry about it!!!!??

And he's not just mildly upset, he is greatly upset - a literal translation of chapter 4:1 reads "it was evil to Jonah a great evil, and it burned him." Jonah is furious - he's seeing red as we would say.

Because in Jonah's estimation, the Ninevites deserved destruction; and friends after a quick study on the fine art of Assyrian cruelty I don't think that you and I would necessarily disagree with Jonah.

Last week I shared with you how they skinned people, impaled them on spikes, and buried them inside walls, they uprooted entire nations and dispersed them as captives throughout their empire, leading them around chained with hooks in their jaws... they were brutal people.

There was a great deal of pain and suffering and misery in the world because of the Ninevites and the Assyrian Empire.

And friends, I know we understand how Jonah feels because we react the same way whenever our justice system only gives a slap on the wrist to a repeat drunk driver,

or when a serial killer like Carla Holmolka cuts a deal with the prosecutors so that she will be given parole and go free after a twelve year sentence.

We're outraged as well – and we protest.

Letters and emails are written to newspapers, victim's families make official statements, the talk around the water cooler turns indignant and angry, everyone wants to weigh in on how our justice system is broken, how we're soft on crime, about how criminals are living it up in Club Fed on our tax dollars....

We know how these conversations go. I know we can understand how Jonah feels that Nineveh is not getting punished for its violence and cruelty;

that it's wrong for Yahweh to extend mercy and grace simply because they've have expressed remorse for what they've done – that's fine but there should be consequences!

It infuriates Jonah and he is left asking the question "what about the victims?" So he accuses Yahweh of being too loving, too gracious, too merciful –

He describes it as if it's a character fault that makes Yahweh a pushover who is not strict enough on those who so obviously deserve it.

In essence Jonah is saying "Yahweh you have failed in your role as the judge of this world! If this is the kind of world you are going to run... I don't want to live in it – I would rather die!"

You see friends; this world is full of people, organizations or circumstances which are much bigger and stronger than we are.

And they can easily run right over us... and we draw a great deal of comfort knowing that if something like that happened we can always plead our case to the highest power – Yahweh, and get things made right.

But if we've been victimized and we see the one who is supposed to be on our side, being merciful and going easy on those who have victimized us – well...

what options do we have left except to take matters into our own hands – but how do we retaliate against Yahweh?

We accuse him of failing us and throw the gift of life that he's given us back in his face – and hope that it hurts him! "Now o Yahweh take my life, for it is better for me to die than to live!"

Friends, have you ever had one of those moments? Do you know someone who has had one of those moments?

It's hard to deal with and it's hard to know how to respond to, isn't it?

But with Yahweh being God and all – and being slow to anger and full of love – doesn't smite Jonah down for the inappropriateness and arrogance Jonah has shown, indicting Him and putting Him on trial.

He just turns the tables on Jonah... once again; and the accused now becomes the cross-examiner

"Do you have a right to be angry?"

Jonah, Son of Amittai, have you forgotten what your people deserve? The 10 tribes of the northern kingdom have broken covenant with me Jonah, they worship idols, they do not pray towards my temple, they are led by a wicked king,

yet I had compassion on them and used you to proclaim my compassion and promise a victory over their enemies to give them peace!

And you Jonah, Son of Amittai – my prophet, you fled from my command, you disobeyed a direct order... and resisted me until you were almost dead...

yet when you asked me to spare your life, I did!

Jonah... do you have any right to be **angry** with me because of whom I have shown mercy and love and compassion to?

Friends, that same question comes to us when we are angry enough to accuse or blame God because we see a lack of justice reflected somewhere in this world, when someone who victimized us gets off easy, or when we feel like life has been giving us the short end of the stick and others prosper.

What right do we have to be angry that there is grace and mercy in this world? Have we not benefitted from grace and mercy at some point in our lives?

Receiving just a warning instead of a speeding ticket...

Getting a few extra sick days at work... handing in an assignment late and not getting docked any marks... having some stranger in line pay for our coffee when we forgot our wallet at home...

Or the most profound expression of grace and mercy of all time - our Lord Jesus Christ offering his life in place of ours to pay the debt which our sin has accumulated.

And we might protest a bit and say – well yes... but going 15 km over the speed limit or forgetting my wallet is minor, and sure I've sinned, I'm not perfect but what I've done is nothing compared to what was done to me! I was bullied, I was abused, I was targeted!

Granted maybe our offenses are minor compared to what we've witnessed or was done to us, but do we truly believe that

we are made from such different stuff as our offender that we deserve to be given mercy while they ought to be severely punished?

Consider this friends, if we have the capacity to be **angry** about grace and mercy, to be furious about something that is inherently good and restorative – what does that say about us?

What else might we have the capacity for? If we can hate what is good, what might we be able to love that is evil?

Friends, it was ordinary Christians like you and I, concerned about jobs, economic stability, rising food prices and social morals who fell hook line and sinker for Adolph Hitler's Nazi agenda.

You see if we look at things from Yahweh's perspective it would be Jonah's sin that is worse by far.

From our perspective Nineveh's cruelty seems way worse, but what can you honestly expect from those who are ignorant

about Yahweh's law and did not know better – in fact Yahweh says “they do not know their right from the left”

What they were doing was terrible and wrong... but it wasn't a flat out rejection and disobedience like Jonah had committed. Jonah who ought to know better,

Jonah who ought to be full of gratitude for the grace and mercy he's received – this Jonah spits in Yahweh's face and walks away... from Yahweh's perspective that's way worse.

And friends when we blame Yahweh for allowing evil in this world, when we state that we won't believe in a God who allows bad things to happen to good people, when we determine that it's wrong for offenders to receive grace and mercy.... We're doing the same thing.

You see friends – Yahweh wants to teach Jonah, and us, that it's better to live in a world that runs on grace and mercy than it is to live in a world where every infraction is met with punishment.

Yahweh shows grace and mercy again to Jonah by providing a plant which shelters him from the hot sun, the point is that Yahweh's grace and mercy meet our everyday needs, even our most basic ones such as shelter from the elements.

And if Yahweh grace does that, surely His grace can meet the need we have for healing when we've been victimized. But if we insist, like Jonah, that what we need is to see the offenders punished by a zero-tolerance policy... well Yahweh is about to show Jonah what zero-tolerance feels like.

Because... if Yahweh wanted to be merciless He could, and He gives Jonah a taste of what life would be like if He meted out punishment for each offense regardless of ignorance, remorse or repentance.

The blessing of the vine is removed – killed by a parasite, the sun beats down on him, a scorching wind blows against him, there is nowhere Jonah can turn for relief, he is tormented.

You see friends, insisting that those who have deeply hurt us or victimized us must suffer punishment will not bring us the

healing or relief that we need – that will only come from Yahweh's grace and mercy.

So sweltering under the sun and the hot wind - Jonah finally admits that life without Yahweh's grace and mercy is not worth living either, and now... Jonah is upset that Yahweh has allowed the vine to die!

And while that seems very self-interested at first, and it is, the Hebrew wording indicates that Jonah seems to pity the plant and he's angry that Yahweh sent a worm to destroy this poor helpless plant.

Poor Jonah, it seems he can't live with Yahweh's grace and mercy but he can't live without it either...

So Yahweh concludes his dealings with Jonah explaining that just as Jonah pitied the plant, He pities Nineveh.

While it doesn't make much sense for Jonah to pity the plant, he neither created it nor cultivated it – it certainly makes a lot of sense that Yahweh would pity Nineveh, after all they are

human beings, created in His image – and they don't know their creator and his laws...

So... Yahweh concludes – “should I not be concerned about that great city as well?”

And the story of Jonah ends without us knowing if Jonah finally got it – and lived happily ever after, and friends that because whether he did or not is between himself and Yahweh.

What's more important, after hearing Jonah's story, is whether we get it? Do we see why he should be concerned about that great city? Do we see something that can be redeemed in the Ninevites as Yahweh does?

When we look around us at our world, at our culture, at our great city... what do we see? Do we see reasons why Yahweh should be concerned about this world, our culture, our city? Do we see something that can be redeemed from that which is secular, immoral, ignorant, even hostile?

We know Yahweh does. That's why John 3:16 says “for God so loved the world – the cosmos... the beautiful arrangement... that He sent his only son...”

Friends, the story of Jonah ends with a question – to which the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ was and is the definitive answer and the ultimate expression of grace and mercy for us... and also for those who have victimized us.

You see the story of Jonah brings us to that point where **we** wrestle with the question of how Yahweh can be concerned for those who have done evil to us and if we can give them grace and forgiveness as well – its up to us to write our own ending to the story of Jonah.

And this morning I'd like to share with you how Corrie Tenboom wrote her ending.

You see Corrie was a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp – and she credits her faith in Jesus Christ as giving her the strength to endure the horrible atrocities and abuse she suffered at the hands of the SS gaurds.

After being released from the camp in 1945 Corrie began to travel around the world, speaking about God's love and grace and about forgiveness.

But she had a Jonah moment in her ministry – and this is how she describes it.

I was at a church service in Munich and I saw him, the former SS man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing centre at Ravensbruck.

He was the first of our actual 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 painblanched face.

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

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal about 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.

And we might add that it is not on punishment and consequences that our world's healing hinges but on the

punishment that Christ endured in our place so that the very worst of us... might experience the grace and mercy of Yahweh.

Because friends – should he not be concerned about that great city?

Let's pray