

QUESTIONS GOD ASKED

8. "IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU TO BE ANGRY?"

READING: Jonah chapter 4 verses 1 – 11

This week, I read the story of a young boy who was pulling a large hay wagon down the road when it overturned in front of a farmer's house. The farmer came out and saw the young boy crying and said, "Son, don't worry about this, we can fix it. Come in for something to eat and then I'll help you put the hay back on the wagon." The boy said, "No, I can't. My father is going to be very angry with me." The farmer said, "Don't argue, just come in and have some lunch and you'll feel better." The boy continued, "I'm just afraid my father is going to be very angry with me." The farmer and the young boy went inside and something to eat and drink, and afterward, as they walked outside to the wagon, the farmer said, "Well, don't you feel better now?" The boy said, "Yes, but I just know that my father will be very angry with me." The farmer said, "Don't worry. Where is your father anyway?" The boy replied, "Under that pile of hay."

Anger is an emotion we all experience at some stage – either as a reaction to something we do not like, or see as a reaction in others. It can be justified at times, often called righteous anger. When Jesus cleared out the Temple on arriving in Jerusalem at the start of his last week, expressing anger at the abuse of the Temple and court and of the cheating and thieving that was going on there under the very eyes of the religious leaders and, seemingly, being sanctioned by them. But in most circumstances, our anger might not be described as being righteous. Anger makes almost everything feel ugly and it does nothing for us either. People curse and swear, rant and rave and may even turn violent. We see that side of things in our own world – the anger at the shootings in America, and that anger spilling over on to our own streets. The anger at impositions because of COVID-19 on people's free movement. The anger at the destruction of our environment, The anger at the steady influx of refugees. Whether the anger being expressed sometimes depends where you stand, what your politics are or personal experiences of life have been. The distinction between righteous and unrighteous anger today seems a bit more clouded.

Jonah had been called by God to be a prophet to the people of the city of Nineveh, an evil city, noted for cruelty and injustice. Jonah hated them intensely and was worried that if he preached God's message to them, they might repent of their actions and God would forgiveness them = something Jonah and many others felt the Ninevites did not deserve. They deserved everything that was coming to them, so he decided to take himself out of the picture and head off on a ship in the opposite direction. He hadn't gone very far when a storm arose and the ship was in danger of sinking, Realising that his disobedience towards God was probably the reason for it, he told the ship's captain to throw him overboard, as he was the cause of their predicament. Over Jonah went, then to cut the story short he ended up, like Pinocchio and Gepeto, swallowed up by a great fish where God spoke to him and reminded him of the original calling. After 3 days, the fish vomited Jonah up and off Jonah went to preach God's message, still harbouring the thought that the Ninevites will not listen and thus receive their just deserts. However, the people listened, the people repented and there was a great revival amongst the Ninevites. You might expect Jonah to be surprised or maybe even happy to see what God had achieved in the hearts of the evil Ninevites. Instead, there is prejudice and anger. With this context we come to another of God's questions when He asks Jonah "Is it tight for you be angry?" By looking at this question, we need to be reminded once again of the width, the depth and the height of God's grace and that no one is outside of the boundaries of His love but that our reactions might drive them away from experiencing that – just like Jonah.

We need to carefully remember that our anger can cause us to miss God's grace in action in our own lives and in the lives of others. In **Jonah chapter 4 verses 1 – 4** we get the impression that Jonah is not just slightly miffed, he's livid. "See, God, I knew you were going to forgive them". It is tempting to think that Jonah is being self-righteous and has forgotten that he is also a sinner. But a better interpretation is that Jonah thought there were sinners - and then there are sinners. We

might think, that we have done anything desperately wrong – “no one got killed” but someone else, their wrongdoing merits all that is coming to them. What it boils down to here is that Jonah had a problem with how deep God's grace and mercy goes; uncommon grace and mercy. Jesus said **“there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15 verse 7).** Jonah is responding like the prodigal's son's brother, whose younger waste of a brother returns home and a feast is held. The older brother isn't rejoicing that his brother is home, he's ticked off that his father is holding a party. Unchecked anger becomes like a cancer that will not let you us go. *Once a circus performer would allow a huge python snake to encircle him and then at the last moment he'd throw the python off to the roar of the crowd. But one night when he went to throw off the snake he couldn't and the crowd watched in horror as the snake squeezed the life out of him. What the performer failed to realize is that with each passing performance, the snake was becoming stronger. That's what happens when you allow anger and unforgiveness to take hold in your life.* The truth is, sometimes we don't want favour to be shown to someone who we don't want favour shown to, especially when that favour or mercy is from God. Just like Jonah in **verse 3**, anger robs us of life. It steals our joy and joy is supposed to be a signature mark of the Christian. The true heart of the Christian is not for God's judgment or revenge, but for all people to come to know the love of God, no matter how evil they are or may have been. Our hearts to see all nations to receive God's mercy and worship God should be more passionate than our own selfish desires.

But sadly, our anger can cause us to seek judgement on others when God is showing compassion. Continuing in **verses 5 – 8**, we see rather than Jonah celebrating with the Ninevites about God's great mercy, he leaves town and sets up camp, seemingly more interested in having a front-row seat to see God's destruction of Nineveh. As Jonah waits outside for the show to begin, God decides to give Jonah a lesson. Like God sending the storm at sea, he is again using nature to teach Jonah an object lesson on mercy, wanting to change Jonah's understanding of the relationship between justice and mercy. The point is, the true source of Jonah's anger is not from the sun, or the storm, or the fish, or Nineveh. The true source of Jonah's plight is his weak relationship with God. We see in the vine the providence of God. It was God's providence that called Jonah to Nineveh. It was God's providence that chose the storm. It was God's providence that chose the fish, and it was God's providence that chose the vine. God then sends a worm to eat the vine that was providing him shade and then sends a wind that increases the heat of the day. As quickly as Jonah went from despair to relief, he returns to despair, wishing that death would take him. The changing tides of life leave us fickle. Too often we misunderstand the depth of God's mercy and grace in our own lives and in the lives of others. At all times, we must realize that. God's grace is not an affront to our sense of justice, but ours and the whole world's only hope for salvation. We want our church, our way and in a way that makes us feel comfortable. We want our wrongs to be vindicated but not our offenses. Paul reminds the church at Colossae: **“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 3 verses 12-13).**

Finally, our anger can cause us to miss opportunities for God to show mercy to others through us. The final **verses 9 – 11**, are the words of God. With Jonah's heart and true motivations exposed, God now provides him some divine counsel, by showing how repugnant to Him Jonah's anger is about the plant, and His sparing of Nineveh. These final words expose the sin of self-righteousness and the depths of God's grace and mercy. You are angry over your precious vine – but what did it really mean to you? Your attachment to it could not be meaningful, for it was here one day and gone the next. Your concern was only out of self-interest, not genuine love. You weren't even its gardener. What would you expect a gardener to feel like, who tended to the plant and watched it grow only to see it wither and die? This is how I feel about Nineveh, only much more so. All those people, all those animals – I made them. I have cherished them all these years. God tells Jonah that he is not in charge. Jonah is God's instrument, not the other way around. With that, the story of Jonah ends abruptly. We never know the outcome or response of God to

Jonah. Nor do we know what happened to Jonah. God had the final word.

What kind of things steals our joy? We allow circumstances, anger, prejudices, and especially unforgiveness to rob us of knowing the real depth and beauty of God's mercy. How can I worship a God that allows my precious little plant to wither? The truth is, Jonah lurks in all of us. We're born selfish and God wants us to get out of ourselves. The first step is to make a priority what is important to God as being important in our own lives. Like Jonah we mull over things, hurts, and habits that stop us from enjoying a closeness with God. Our walk with God lacks time in His Word, it lacks prayer, and it lacks depth. We think that all we have to do is satisfy our religious duty. Jesus in his "Sermon on the Mount" said ***"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6 verses 19-21)***

The whole short "Book of Jonah" reveals God in all His sovereign majesty. God is sovereign over the prophet, the boat, the sea, the fish, over Nineveh, sovereign over the plant. God is sovereign and it is here that we find an unrelenting and powerful depth of God's love. Jonah reveals to us that God is holy. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh. He will not tolerate rebellious sin, but he is also full of mercy. God's mercy does not water down or diminish his holiness, it magnifies it. We should never forget that God is holy. Jonah also reminds us that God is mighty. It was God who sent the storm and it was God who calmed the storm. It was God who sent the fish, directed it to Nineveh, and caused the fish to vomit Jonah on to the shore, and Jonah reveals that God is merciful and gracious. He is pouring out his mercy daily. We live in a time of tremendous grace. Our turning from sin is not because we are righteous or holy, but because God is gracious and abounding in love. How wide and deep is God's mercy - as wide as Calvary's Cross.

JONAH chapter 4 verses 1 - 11

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ² 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. ³ Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.'

⁴ But the LORD replied, 'Is it right for you to be angry?'

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸ 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.'

⁹ But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?'

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

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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?'

PSALM 39 (taken from "Psalms Now")

I said to myself, "I'll watch it. I'll grit my teeth and hold in my anger at least as long as I am among ungodly people."

And I honestly tried, but it was no use. The pressures increased. The more I stewed about it, the more frustrated I became.

Finally, I exploded:

"O God, demonstrate some concern for me. Give me some reason for this endless conflict, some objective for this fast-ebbing life of mine. You made me what I am, and the span of my existence is but a speck of dust to You. This is true about every human being. A person is no more than a smidgen of moist air or a shadow without lasting substance. Men and women endure this temporal turmoil for no reason whatsoever. They agonise and toil only to leave the fruits for someone else to enjoy.

So I wonder, what in the world is it all about? I have no hope, except in You. I continue to lay claim to Your forgiveness for my failures. Keep me from being despised and abhorred by my fellow creatures. Lift Your heavy hand from me; I am utterly weary of its oppressing weight. When you punish people with judgement of their failures, You suck up like a tornado everything that is precious to them. Surely they are no more than a passing cloud on the eternal horizon.

Hear and decipher these confusing thoughts of mine. Lend Your ear to these agonising cries. Do not turn away from my pains and problems. I am just a swiftly passing traveller, as were all who have gone before me. Let me have just a morsel of happiness before I leave this world and enter into oblivion."