

Grace as Big as the City

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[0 : 0 0] The reading this evening is taken from Jonah chapter 3, verse 10, all the way to the end of chapter 4. And if you're using one of the Bibles from the church, it's on page 929, starting at Jonah chapter 3, verse 10.

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. 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? This 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. But the Lord replied, is it right for you to be angry?

Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he had 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 a shade for his head to ease his discomfort.

[1 : 2 2] And Jonah was very happy about the plant. 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. 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. 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 not I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?

This is the word of God. Thanks, Catherine, for reading. Jonah is so weird, isn't he?

[2 : 3 1] I love it. Well, let's ask God for his help as we come to this passage of Scripture. Let's pray to God. Father, we thank you that you know us.

You know each of us here. You know what we've been through, each of us, this past week. You know what we need. And we thank you, Father, living God, that you speak to us through your word.

So give us ears to listen well. And may the Holy Spirit apply it to each of our hearts. For we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Right. Jonah is weird. I mean really weird. Everything about it is weird. In the top trumps of Old Testament prophets, Jonah stands out as, well, just a bit weird.

For starters, he does some weird stuff. Like he's pretty much the only Old Testament prophet who gets sent by God to another nation with a message from God.

- [3 : 40] But Jonah doesn't want to go. He hot-foots it. He tries to do a runner from God. Which is pretty weird if you're a prophet and that's your job.
- And ever since chapter 1, we've been wondering why. Why did he go in the wrong direction? Why did Jonah do that? Well, tonight we get the answer.
- Jonah does some pretty weird stuff. But then some pretty weird stuff also happens to Jonah. Like he gets swallowed by a huge fish.
- Pretty weird, right? Right. Just putting it out there. Something that doesn't necessarily happen to you every day. Then in chapter 4, we just read things get even weirder as we get a glimpse into Jonah's psyche, his inner psyche.
- And he's an emotional rollercoaster, isn't he? He has a chart of facial expressions. Mainly Jonah is angry. Twice we're told in verse 4 and verse 8, he's so angry that he wants to die.
- [4 : 51] But in verse 6, he goes from extreme anger to extreme happiness and back again. So what's going on there, Jonah?
- But even the way it's written is weird. And I got my daughter to do some research this week. I helped her with a Viking longship project.
- She helped me with my Jonah research. Both maritime projects. I think the similarities end there. But I got her to check all her storybook Bibles to see how they tell the story of Jonah.
- To check the ending. So if we look at the shape of the story, at point 1, Jonah is sent to Nineveh. At point 2 in the narrative arc, the story takes a nosedive.
- Literally, Jonah does a runner and ends up at the bottom of the med. Point 3, Jonah is rescued. And two of the kids' versions of the book end right here.
- [5 : 55] Simple shape to the story. Jonah lives happily ever after the end. But most of my daughter's books end at point 4, which is the end of chapter 3.
- Jonah goes to Nineveh. The people turn back to God. Everyone lives happily ever after. Brilliant. Great way to end the book. But that's not where Jonah in the Bible ends up.
- And chapter 4 of Jonah is bonkers. But this chapter is key to the book. And we shouldn't be too quick to try to tie up loose ends when it comes to Jonah.
- It is the chapter, chapter 4, that should really challenge us to consider how we respond to God's grace. His kindness and His mercy towards us.
- And it's a key question if you're here this evening, perhaps for Tri-Church, exploring the Christian faith from the outside in. God's grace.
- [6 : 59] Will you embrace it or will you resist it? And chapter 4 closes with a huge unresolved question in verse 11.
- God asks, should I not have concern for the great city? God asks Jonah. But really, we are the ones being addressed by the question.
- Do we share in God's compassionate heart for the city around us? Do we share in God's compassionate heart for the spiritually lost?
- For the original readers of Jonah, this would have been something of a wake-up call. Like Jonah, the reluctant evangelist, the nation of Israel had been an unwilling light to the nations.
- For us tonight, especially if you're here and you're a Christian, the danger is that we dismiss Jonah as just being cartoonishly angry.
- [8 : 12] A temperamental man-child. But I think this chapter really challenges us to reflect on God's call on our lives.

To be disciple-making disciples of all nations. Are we fully on board with that?

Are there ways in which we resist God's call? Are there ways in which we even resent God's call? We've got two headings this evening. They're in the notice sheet if you find that helpful.

First up, Jonah's anger at God's grace. Plenty of people, I'm sure, would give their right arm to see what Jonah saw in Nineveh.

Just imagine a city that's turned its back on God, doing its own thing, pursuing its own agenda, hostile to the God of the Bible.

[9 : 12] A city that's turned its back on God, turns back to God in repentance. But chapter 4, verse 1.

To Jonah, this seemed very wrong. And he became angry. I told you he's weird. I mean, it's extraordinary.

Jonah's been preaching, and now it's full-on urban revival. Billy Graham, eat your heart out sort of thing. Just imagine what would it be like? How would it feel? How would you feel? People from all walks of life gathering in George Square, gathering in Glasgow Green, a citywide outbreak of repentance.

Surely at this point, we'd surely been expecting Jonah to be moved to praise God. Instead, Jonah is, as we say here in Glasgow, pure raging.

And if we look at the structure of the book, if we look at the way it's structured, the whole thing's designed to make us feel the shock of it.

[10 : 19] It's a book of two halves, the ABC pattern in each half of the book. That's a quick recap, ABC. A, Jonah's commissioned by God to go to Nineveh.

That's mirrored in chapter 3. He's recommissioned. This time he goes. Then B, the pagan sailors are saved in chapter 1. That's mirrored by the Ninevites saved in chapter 3.

That's the A and the B. And then C, in the first half of the book, in chapter 2, we have Jonah's thankful prayer from the belly of the fish. So what are we expecting in C in the second half of the book?

Surely we're expecting another thankful prayer from Jonah. Everything tells us that this should result in Jonah praising God. But instead, shockingly, we get Jonah's angry prayer.

It goes against the grain. He mouths off to God in this extraordinary way in verse 2. Jonah prayed to the Lord, I told you so, I told you.

[11 : 26] Isn't this exactly what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? So right here, right here, finally, this is the big reveal of the book.

In chapter 4, verse 2, we find out the reason why Jonah did a run out from God in the first place and went in the opposite direction. So just look at it, verse 2. That's what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish.

And here's the reason. Get a load of this. Again, it's shocking.

I hope you find it shocking. It's not that Jonah doesn't know about God's grace. Jonah knows all about God's grace.

And yet, he doesn't like it. I think that's sobering. It's possible to have head knowledge about God's grace and not be moved.

[12 : 37] Jonah had head knowledge about God. But Jonah's heart is hard to the gospel of grace. It's possible to know stuff about God. But when it comes down to it, we can still turn up our nose to God's grace and reject it.

And I think it's even more striking when you consider that everyone else in the book except Jonah hopes God is gracious.

But actually, they don't really know. So let's just think about that. Let me show you that in the text. So back in chapter 1, there's those pagan sailors.

They don't really know God. And just look at how the ship's captain speaks in verse 6. So chapter 1, verse 6. The captain goes into Jonah and says, Get up and call on your God.

Maybe he will take notice of us so that we may not perish. Or look at chapter 3, verse 9. It's the pagan king of Nineveh.

[13 : 40] This time he says, Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish.

Who knows? Maybe. Maybe. These people are basically clueless when it comes to God. Just hoping somehow that God is gracious and compassionate and might just save them.

But the one person in the book who does know the truth doesn't like it. Jonah's problem isn't that he doesn't know enough about God. Jonah's problem is that he doesn't like what he does know about God.

So why is Jonah so angry about God's grace? Why would he rather die than live with a God like this? And it's good for us, I think, to reflect for ourselves.

Anger at God's grace is the particular poison that's eating away at Jonah. Deep inside, that's his poison. But poison comes in different strengths and varieties.

[14 : 56] And it may be that some of you here tonight are dealing with anger at God. But for others of us, it might be a low-dose version of the poison.

More subtle, perhaps. Lurking beneath the surface. Resentment that God chooses to save someone who hurts you. Resentment that God hasn't saved someone you love.

Or apathy. You've just lost touch with how amazing God's grace is. Poison comes in different forms. For Jonah, the poison, it's anger.

Jonah, why on earth would anyone be angry about God being gracious? Who on earth would hate God's mercy? Who would resist it?

I think there's basically two things that we need to know about grace. Two things about God's grace that Jonah doesn't like. And here's where it can get under our skin.

[16 : 03] Because if we scratch below the surface, we might find that we're more like Jonah than we care to imagine. The first thing is God's grace.

God's grace. It belongs to him. God gets to choose. God is the boss. You see, Jonah likes God's grace when it rescues him.

Jonah hates God's grace when it rescues others. It's not up to Jonah. It's up to God. Jonah doesn't like that. He's got a bit of a God complex, maybe.

But the second thing about grace, it's completely undeserved. That's the whole point about grace, isn't it? You can't earn your own salvation.

It's unmerited. It's undeserved. And we don't like that, some of us. We want to bring something to the table. We want to do something to deserve God's grace.

[17 : 07] That's not how God's grace works. Maybe one or two of you here this evening have been resisting God's grace in your life because you're simply so ashamed, so burdened by your past.

You feel that you want to do something about it. Maybe you want to sort your life out first before you come to God. Well, that's not how it works.

You don't earn your salvation. You come to Jesus empty-handed. It's not something you can earn or deserve.

Jonah is angry because evil Nineveh is shown grace when they deserved judgment. That's why Jonah is angry.

It isn't fair. And you know what? It isn't fair. He's right. It's unfair. Nineveh is undeserving of God's grace. But so is Jonah, undeserving of God's grace.

[18 : 15] That's what he's forgetting. And so are you. And so am I. Undeserving recipients if we're trusting in Jesus of God's grace.

But just before we move on to the second point and see how God responds to Jonah, I want us to see the irony of Jonah's attitude.

It's deeply ironic. So when Jonah says that God is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, he's giving a classic definition of God.

Robbie cited it from Psalm 103 earlier. It actually comes originally from the book of Exodus. At the worst moment. The worst moment in Israel's history.

Moses has been up Mount Sinai, receiving instructions from God on how to live. Moses then comes down the mountain and finds the people worshipping the false God.

[19 : 15] Worshipping the golden calf. And engaged in sexual immorality. Literally just being told, no idols. But I want us to see that there are striking similarities with what's going on in Exodus and what's going on in Jonah.

And it's worth paying attention to this striking parallel. So in both cases, following the intervention of the prophets, following the intervention of Moses in Exodus, the intervention of Jonah in Jonah, God relented and didn't bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

You can see that there on the screen. Exact same words in both accounts. But then, get this.

In both cases, in both cases, in both Exodus and Jonah, the prophet gets angry after God relents and shows mercy.

Moses gets angry after God relents and shows mercy. Jonah gets angry after God relents and shows mercy. Well, here's the difference.

[20 : 31] Moses is right to be angry. Jonah is not. Moses is angry because God's people copied the pagans in their idolatry.

Jonah is angry because the pagans copied God's people in repenting and turning back to God. And it's ironic. Jonah is jealous.

Jonah is angry because he wants to keep God's grace for himself and his friends and for his people even though they are just as undeserving of it as Nineveh.

Secondly, God's gracious response to Jonah's anger. Jonah liked being saved by grace. Miraculously delivered from the depths of the sea.

But we're going to see that he's more resistant when it comes to being transformed by grace. And it's worth us considering that. We are saved by grace. We are also transformed by grace.

[21 : 34] Once you become a Christian, God doesn't just leave you to it to get on with it yourselves. God is at work in you by his spirit making you more like Jesus.

We can resist that like Jonah. But Jonah is stubbornly and frustratingly resistant to the transforming power of grace in his life.

As God gives him in chapter 4 a counseling session he'll never forget. Three questions and an object lesson with a plant.

And what God's doing is he's drawing out the poison. He's drawing out the poison of anger in Jonah's heart. When I was growing up me and my brother got really confused when my grandpa used to get us to count the number of fingers on his hands.

No matter which way we tried every single time we could only ever count nine fingers. It turns out as we later found out years down the line he was playing a trick on us.

- [22 : 42] He'd lost a finger during the second world war in North Africa. A shell had exploded nearby and taken off his little finger had been looking through the binoculars that's basically what saved his life.

But as well as his finger lots of tiny little bits of shrapnel got embedded in his legs buried deep under the skin. And every so often apparently tiny fragments would come to the surface and this would go on for years and he'd say it needs to come out because it's poison.

It's lead shrapnel and the body needs to work the poison out of the body bit by bit. That gives us a bit of a picture I think of what God is doing here with Jonah drawing out the poison.

And God asks him in verse 4 Jonah is it right for you to be angry? In other words is this the right response Jonah? Is it right to be angry that the same grace you received from God is shown to other people?

No answer. Radio silence from Jonah. Jonah's next move in verse 5 is to take the huff. So chapter 4 verse 5 he goes out and sits down to the east of the city.

- [23 : 58] There he makes himself a shelter. See how stubborn he is? And he waits to see what would happen to the city. He already knows that God has shown grace and mercy.

But he hopes against hope that God's judgment will still come upon the city. From Jonah's perspective that's exactly what should happen here.

But God responds instead with an object lesson. He wants to show Jonah just how ridiculous he's being. And the lesson begins with familiar language.

So just as in chapter 1 verse 17 God provided a huge fish to deliver Jonah from the sea. So here God provides a bunch of stuff to deliver Jonah from himself.

So chapter 4 verse 6 just have a look. Then the Lord provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head.

- [25 : 04] Imagine the relief he'd have felt from the Mediterranean heat. Robbie who's leading tonight just got back from Malaga. Sunburnt though it was the end of March.

Tim who's recently arrived from Sydney Australia was actually saying it's a relief not to have to slap on the sunscreen every day. Although we should take care of this weather.

But just look at how happy Jonah is. He's ecstatic. He goes from being very angry to very happy about the plant. Right at that moment in verse 7 God provides a worm so the plant withers.

And then verse 8 God turns up the heat of the sun and provides a scorching east wind. In other words God gets Jonah angry again. He's poking at the bear because he wants to deal with Jonah's anger.

Draw out the poison. God provides all these things. You might call severe mercies that he introduces into Jonah's life.

- [26 : 12] To teach Jonah and teach us a lesson about mercy and grace. We need to pay attention to what's going on here. God is comparing the plant to the city of Nineveh.

that's why God's second question in verse 9 is phrased exactly the same as the first one in verse 4. Jonah is it right for you to be angry about the plant?

He's comparing the plant to the city. He's drawing a parallel. And at the end of chapter 3 when the city of Nineveh was rescued from destruction Jonah is very angry.

When it comes to the plant that Jonah is rescued from his own discomfort Jonah is very happy.

Do you see the parallel? Do you see the irony? Jonah is all for destruction when it comes to Nineveh. But when it comes to the destruction of the plant which is giving him shade so he cares about it, Jonah can't handle it.

[27 : 26] He's like a toddler having a tantrum. And it's a ludicrous comparison when you think about it, between a little plant and a great city.

God is teasing out what is wrong in Jonah's heart, drawing out the poison. And so having compared Jonah's attitude to the plant with Jonah's attitude to the city, God now in verses 10 and 11 compares Jonah's attitude with God's attitude to the city.

So verse 10, the Lord said you have been concerned about this plant, that you had nothing to do with it. You didn't tend it, you didn't make it grow. And everything about this description in verse 10 is meant to underline how little the plant should mean to Jonah.

It's just a day-old weed, it's 24 hours. But everything about the description of Nineveh in verse 11 is meant to underline how much the city should mean to Jonah, how much the city of Glasgow should mean to us.

God asks verse 11, should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh in which there are more than 120,000 people, people who are lost, people who can't tell their right hand from their left and also many animals.

[28 : 56] You see here God's compassionate heart for people. Notice again the comparison, Jonah, you got yourself all worked up, you got yourself into a tizzy about this insignificant plant, I mean even the animals are worth more than that, Jonah.

But right under your nose, Jonah, 120,000 people who need God's grace and right under our noses friends, 630,000 people in Glasgow who need God's grace, who need to hear the message about God's grace.

1.8 million in the greater Glasgow city region who don't know their left hand from their right when it comes to spiritual things of God. This is how God looks at Glasgow.

Jonah sat outside the city of Nineveh waiting to see what its fate would be. Jesus sat outside the city of Jerusalem weeping over its impending fate.

Jesus is gracious and compassionate. That's what Tim reminded us about earlier on. Jesus loves Glasgow even more than Glaswegians love Glasgow.

[30 : 10] Jonah leaves us. Jonah ends with this question still hanging in the air. Do we share? Do we share in God's compassionate heart for the city?

Do we respond to God's grace by showing God's grace to others? Do we respond to God's call to extend God's gospel of grace to the spiritually lost all around us?

Up and down the streets of Glasgow and the east end and west and the north side of the city? Do we respond to God's call? God's love. We need to wrap it up there.

But let me share with you as we close one of the ways that I've personally felt convicted by this passage this week. So where we live, we live halfway up the Cathcan Brace that gives us a view over the whole valley of Glasgow, a prayerful view over the whole city, a city that's turned its back on God.

Now I'm not standing there at the window looking out over the city hoping that God will bring judgment on it with my two fingers up to the city, like that sort of thing. It's not that I've not been praying for the city at all, but I've needed to look in the mirror and ask myself, have I been praying for this city with God's compassionate heart, with expectancy as earnestly, as frequently as I should have been?

[31 : 44] So I ought to have been praying with expectancy to the God who is gracious and compassionate, who loves this city. Glasgow is not beyond God's grace.

Nobody here is beyond God's grace. It's not for us to decide. So don't resent God's grace. Instead, get on board with God's gracious mission to this city and beyond.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your amazing grace.

Thank you for the amazing grace that saves even wretched sinners like Jonah, that saves even wretched sinners like the Ninevites, that saves even wretched sinners like us.

thank you that you are a gracious and compassionate God, abounding in steadfast love. Thank you that you love the city of Glasgow.

[32 : 55] We pray for your mercy on this city, a city that's turned its back on you. We pray that you would pour out living waters on this city to revive it by your grace.

we pray that if there's anyone here this evening who's been doing a runner from you, would you draw them back to you?

Would you welcome them with loving arms? And so would you help us to respond rightly to your grace and get on board with your gracious mission to this city?

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to respond to God's words by singing together.