God, Grace and the City
Jonah 3:10-4:11

Have you ever heard a talk, or read a book, or watched a film and wished it had finished earlier than it did. It was going so well, and you were enjoying it, but then it went on just a bit too long and you wish it had stopped earlier, when things were good. Or think of one of those films where the first film was great, but then they produce a sequel, and then another sequel and then another, and you think, they should have stopped at number one.

Well, why didn't the writer of Jonah finish at the end of chapter 3? Because that would have made a great ending! Our hero, Jonah, is called by God to preach to his people's arch-enemy, but he runs away. As a consequence of running away, he's on the verge of dying when he realizes the error of his ways and gets dramatically rescued. And now, when given a second chance, full of gratitude for his own salvation he does go and preaches to this enemy city, and the whole city repents! Jonah's moment of triumph! Stop the cameras, cue the credits, and leave the cinema with a warm glow.

But the story doesn't end there. It goes on to 4:1, 'but it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.' So angry, in fact, that he wants God to kill him. And you think, 'What!?'

Shouldn't he be happy? Shouldn't Jonah be over the moon? Surely, he'd be delighted, wouldn't he, that sinners like him have been spared the death he has so recently been spared? This guy's just enjoyed incredible, jaw-dropping success. And yet, rather than rejoicing in it, he makes what is probably the most jaw-dropping speech of the whole Bible.

And yet it's through that that we get to the whole point of this little book: That God is a God of grace and compassion – for individuals, sure, but also for cities. And yet religious people, people like Jonah, people like us, can be so comfortable with our own lives, and be so locked into a certain world-view, that we can stand in the way of that. And as we're going to see, the book remains unfinished, it finishes with a question left hanging. And that's because it's for us to write the final chapter. Three points: a god in our own image; a God of Grace; and a God who loves the city.

A god in our own image
As Jonah watches the Ninevites respond to his message and repent, he becomes increasingly angry until he's incandescent. The first time we heard Jonah pray was back in chapter 2, after a fish had eaten him up. But now it's his anger that's eating him up, and it all tumbles out in this incredible prayer. And this prayer's revealing for two reasons. It shines a light on what's going on in Jonah's heart and it tells us why he ran away in the first place: v2-3, "O Lord, is not this 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 are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. "

You see, all along Jonah knew that if God was calling him to preach to the Ninevites, there was every chance God would grant them repentance, and Jonah

did not want that. So, ironically, the very qualities that Jonah appreciated about God in his own life, and back in his own country, the very same characteristics that meant Jonah could rejoice in salvation in chapter 2, that God has been gracious to him, he now sees as major character flaws when they are applied to his enemies.

And the reason behind that is that one of Jonah's fundamental problems is that he wants God to be like him. Jonah wants to create God in his own image, in Jonah's image. He wants God to be a god who shows grace to the likes of Jonah and Jonah's people Israel, but he also wants God to show the same enmity towards Jonah's enemies that Jonah feels. Jonah has experienced his own need of grace for himself, and yet he can't accept that for those unlike him, but who also need grace. And Jonah wants God to be as partial and as prejudiced as Jonah is. He wants God in his own image.

Now, to a greater or lesser extent we all do this. Whether you see yourself at the more conservative end of the spectrum, or the more liberal, we want to shape God to be like us. We want a god who does things the way we want, according to how we see things. We want him to approve and disapprove of what we approve and disapprove.

After all, Jonah knew that this repentance by the Ninevites would never last. He knew that when the threat of destruction was withdrawn they'd just slink back to their old ways, and he knew what that would mean for his own people living under their shadow. And Jonah was right. They did return to their evil ways and within a generation or so, they had invaded Israel and razed it to the ground. So this is not that suddenly the Ninevites have converted to Judaism. Do they repent? Yes. Do they turn, yes? Is this sincere, yes? But it doesn't last. And Jonah knows that, and God knows that. And Jonah can't bear with God's liberality towards them, to just let them off the hook on some token repentance, when he knows what's going to happen down the line. He doesn't want that kind of God. He wants the conservative God, his god, who's threatens judgment and executes it.

Now of course, you've got to remember, it's not that God turns a blind eye to their evil. Nineveh does return to her old ways, and in 612BC she is ultimately destroyed. So this is not forgiveness without repentance. Either their culture must be overturned or they must be.

And yet, when God does exercise his right to destroy, Jonah doesn't like that either. He goes outside the city to sit and watch, no doubt hoping that destruction will come. And just think of the irony, the king of Nineveh is sat in sackcloth and ashes, inside the city, hoping that God will be merciful; and God's prophet is sat on the hillside outside, hoping God will be vengeful. And to shield himself from the sun he builds a little booth. And to give him more shade, God causes a plant, a vine of some sort, to grow up quickly and cover the booth with its leaves. And Jonah's mighty happy about that. But when he wakes up the next morning, all he sees is a fat little worm, happy from breakfast, wriggling away into the sand. The plant's dead and Jonah can't believe it. And then the scorching

wind gets up, and the sun beats down on his head, and no doubt like all the best preachers he was bald, and his head is starting to fry. And once more he wants to die.

So, when it comes to Nineveh, Jonah objects to God's right to deliver. But when it comes to the plant, he objects to God's right to destroy. Why? Because Jonah wants to be the boss. He wants to call the shots. He wants to decide what God can and cannot do.

Now, Jonah's religion works well back in his own country, where everyone thinks the same as him, where he was one of a kind, but take him out of that, away from what was comfortable and culturally familiar, and he's struggling. His religion, his moral self-righteousness, isn't working anymore. In fact those things are blinding him to what God is doing. And Jonah wants his old god back, the god *he wants*. He wants the certainty of who his enemies are; the certainty of who he can look down on. And Jonah's prayer here in chapter 4, just like his prayer from the belly of the fish, is really all about him. On the surface it seems to be about God, and yet, in just two verses he uses the word 'I' or 'my' 8 times. Jonah's religion, his faith is all about Jonah – it's got Jonah at the centre.

In the first book of the Bible, in Genesis, we're told that we're made in the image of God, but so often we try and turn that around, and make God in our image: the conservative god or the liberal god; the god who sees things the way we see them; who does things the way we want; the god who dances to our tune. When all along God is the Sovereign Lord.

But as you watch Jonah reacting, you realize that this matters at a deeper level than some superficial theological correctness. Just consider his emotional instability. One moment he is running away from the Lord's presence, the next he's rejoicing out of gratitude for salvation. When he gets a second chance it seems as if everything has changed, and he goes to Nineveh, but when things don't go his way there, he explodes in anger. But then when something does go his way, and this plant grows up, he becomes as happy as he once was mad, but when it dies away he descends into a pit of sulking rage and bitterness. In chapter one he wanted to escape to the oblivion of sleep, and now he seeks the oblivion of death.

And that emotional instability, that surging up and sinking down depending on his circumstances, is absolutely understandable when you realize that what Jonah has built his life upon is being shaken and undermined. The cracks appear because Jonah's built on an insecure foundation. When things don't go his way he seethes with anger, when they do, he's exceedingly glad. His mood, his inner wellbeing is conditional on his comfort.

You see, when we build our lives on a god of our own imagining, the result is always going to be inner, emotional instability. If we think God is a god who owes us because of our good behavior, when things go wrong in our lives we become angry and turn on God – because we don't deserve this, this wasn't the deal, this isn't the god we thought we were serving. Or if we think God's role is to bless us

and do our bidding, when things don't work out the way we want, we're rocked, because our foundation is shaken.

And Jonah's world falls apart because his world view is being challenged, and God isn't doing what Jonah wants Him to do, and he can't live with that. And, of course, Jonah will stay miserable until he yields to God. You see, it's only as we bring our world-view into line with God's and see things the way He sees them; it's only as we build our lives on the foundation of His character, what He says about Himself, that we will know the emotional stability that can weather the instabilities of life.

And rather than conforming God to our image, Jonah and you and I need conforming to God's image – and the image of His Son, the one greater than Jonah. And by His Spirit that's what He does. As we saw last week, you become like what you worship and as we yield to and build our lives upon Christ and His character, allowing Him to work in us by His Spirit, so He will daily conform us to His image.

But what can we learn of the character of God here to help us think rightly about Him? I want to pick out just two: a God of Grace and a God Who Loves the City.

A God of Grace

And what is so remarkable about this story is that God is compassionate and gracious to both the religious and irreligious; both to his moralistic self-righteous prophet and to the brutal, law-breaking pagans. And yet none of them deserve it. And neither do we.

Just think about how he handles Jonah. Jonah's in a foul mood. He's called God's character into question. He's thrown his toys out of his pram, he's gone off in a sulk, and yet God doesn't get angry with him. When Jonah says, accusingly, in v2, 'I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger,' he's right, and Jonah gets to experience that for himself. God is slow to anger. Jonah isn't, but God is. God is patient. Jonah isn't, but God is. And He deals incredibly tenderly with Jonah. First he engages Jonah and asks him, "Do you do well to be angry?" (4:4). But Jonah makes no reply, instead once again he turns his back on God and stumps off out of the city. Then, as Jonah is roasting under the sun, God 'appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort' (4:6).

And there's another wonderful play on words there, because that phrase, 'to save Jonah from his discomfort' can also mean 'to deliver him from his wickedness.' You see, first God relieves Jonah's discomfort, but then He proceeds to get to the root of His discomfort. And the next morning God sends a worm to destroy the plant so that He can begin to deal with the underlying issues in Jonah's heart. It is as much God's compassion at work in the destruction of the vine as it was in causing it to spring up in the first place, because He wants to bring Jonah to a deeper understanding.

You see, Jonah is more concerned about his own discomfort, the top of his bald

head burning, than all these thousands of Ninevites perishing. And God is lovingly showing Jonah how a religion empty of grace works out. Hey Jonah, you want me to burn that city to the ground, well, how do you like it when your head burns? How do *you* like the scorching east wind Jonah? How do you like how your religion plays out when it's you on the receiving end of it? And through this plant and the worm and the wind, God is teaching Jonah – Jonah, I am the God of justice, and the God who uproots and overturns, but I am also a God who is compassionate and gracious to those who don't deserve it. To people like Jonah and to people like us.

Jonah may want to give up, Jonah may want to end it all. But God does not feel the same way towards Jonah, and He keeps on engaging Jonah because He wants him to 'get grace'. Jonah was shown grace in his own rescue, and he's shown grace as the plant goes up, but he can't bear the thought of that same grace being shown to his enemies. He only wants grace when it comes to him; and when it does, it makes him happy – exceedingly glad - he loves God's grace when Jonah's on the receiving end of it. But when it comes to showing the grace of God and the compassion of God to his enemies that is another matter all together.

But are we so very different from Jonah? Don't we all find forgiveness difficult – at least at times? You may or may not get as angry as Jonah, but when someone hurts you, or betrays you, forgiveness and letting go of bitterness can be hard. But the answer to that is the same as for Jonah: it's understanding how God has been gracious to us. Jesus told a parable about two servants. And one of them had a massive debt that was forgiven him, but rather than then go out and forgive his fellow servant who had a much smaller debt to him, he threw his fellow servant into a debtors jail. And Jesus' point is – we're the ones with the massive debt and God has forgiven it. And when the depth of that dawns on us – just how much we have been forgiven through Jesus paying it for us, we can forgive others their sins.

Now one of the problems we can have with that is to think, 'yes but surely this hurtful thing they have done should still be paid for. How am I supposed to pretend this never happened?' And the answer is, it will be paid for. You see, you forgiving someone is not saying it never happened, nor is it saying it doesn't matter. It does matter – in fact it matters so much Christ died for it. And it will be paid for: either the person themselves will pay that debt if they don't repent, or Christ has paid it for them. So both the payment for sin and the grace to forgive sin is found in Jesus giving His live for us.

And it's those who know deep down in their hearts that God is a God of grace who will be able to show grace to their enemies.

But the second thing we can learn about God from this passage is that God is a God who loves the city.

A God who loves the city

Now, Religious people tend not to. Religious people tend not to love the city because they see the city as the place where stuff happens that they don't like.

And as a consequence Christians and churches can have a tendency to withdraw from the city. And instead we like the country, because it's not messy and dirty – in both senses of that – like the city is. We're like Jonah – we love the plants – but God is more interested in the people. And here in Jonah we see a God who has a heart for this city of Nineveh. A God who has a heart for our city of Lausanne, and your home city – wherever you're from. A God who wants the city to turn and be saved.

V10-11: And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

And God wants Jonah, and you and me, to extrapolate: you care for the plant that you didn't make, so shouldn't I care for the people I did make; you care for your own comfort, and I care for the city. And God describes the people as not knowing their right hand from their left. They're like people staggering about in the dark. Their sin, their idols have blinded them to truth and reality. But their moral blindness does not mean they aren't morally responsible. They are – or else the threat of judgment is meaningless. No – they are responsible, but they are also blind and they need someone to go and show them the way.

But maybe if Jonah doesn't care for the people, maybe he will for the cattle. Now what's all that about – why end the book with, 'there are 120,000 people there who need to know the truth, and also much cattle'? I mean has God gone soft? Is this just to tell us that God loves fluffy animals? That He loves cows and sheep and donkeys? Now, sure he does. But that's not the point, is it. The point is that the animals are their livelihoods. In those days there were no multinational companies trading in coco beans, or making coffee in itsy-bitsy little plastic packets. The economy, the finance, the business world was on four legs and went moo. Now some of you, I know, struggle with the value of what you're doing in business, but God has a heart for the city and the economy of the city and is in the business of redeeming it for His glory.

And the book ends with God drawing this distinction between Himself and Jonah. He has asked Jonah to go to a city and minister God's grace to them. And Jonah stumbles. But the One Greater than Jonah didn't stumble.

Jonah sat outside the city, angry at its deliverance. Jesus stood outside Jerusalem and wept over it. Jonah looked over a city and despised it. Jesus looked over a multitude and saw that they were like sheep without a shepherd and had compassion on them. Jonah goes outside the city and sits down, hoping that it will yet be destroyed. Jesus went outside the city, carrying his cross, to die for its inhabitants. Jonah has to be told, 'they don't know their right hand from their left.' As He is crucified Jesus cries out, 'Father forgive them, they do not know what they do.' And it's at the cross, in Jesus dying in our place, that we see the grace that can transform and redeem us and our cities.

And the book ends with God's question hanging there. Will Jonah let God's grace sink into his heart and then take that same grace to the city? Will he build his life on the foundation of a God of grace and then reflect that same grace out to the world. Will Jonah get it?

Well, the book doesn't say, does it? And yet how do we know the story in the first place? How do we know Jonah runs and gets thrown overboard and gets swallowed by a fish, how do we know his prayer from inside the fish and this jaw-dropping prayer of chapter 4? We could only know that if Jonah told his story. And the only way he would tell this story would be if his heart had been changed.

And yet the book still ends with the question, because now it's for us to answer. Will we see the depth of grace He has shown us in rescuing us in Christ, and then take that same grace to the city? Will we allow the grace of God to transform our hearts and then bend that outwards. And only you can answer for yourself.