

May 29th 2011: Jonah #4 'A Love Story' Chapter 4:1-11

To call this final chapter of Jonah, 'A Love Story', may at first surprise you, but that is what it is, for in it we find God's love expressed in a wonderfully unconditional way. It is expressed towards God's chosen servant Jonah, and it is expressed towards the people of Nineveh

Jonah is most obviously way out of line in this chapter as far as God is concerned. His story so far is that God sent him to Nineveh but he, in a deliberate act of defiance, had boarded a boat for Tarshish in Spain. God had sent a storm and a large fish to get Jonah on course again and Jonah had eventually preached judgment against the people of Nineveh who had repented en mass, and cried out to God for forgiveness. This however, had not pleased Jonah at all. He had this huge anger in his heart against these Assyrians who had cruelly treated Israel and its people, and he could not bear seeing them avoid their just punishment. Yet he knew that would not happen because of the compassionate nature of God.

Jonah is extremely angry. He can't forgive and he can't forget. He is not remorseful at all about fleeing from God's orders, and feels quite justified in his attitude towards this evil enemy of Israel. In a fit of rage he tells God that this was just what he said would happen, and if God is going ahead with this ridiculous plan of saving the Ninevites, then He should take Jonah's life instead, because Jonah didn't want to be associated with it in any way. Look at Jonah 4:1-3

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee 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, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Now all this doesn't mean that Jonah was a bad guy. A bigoted Jew that hated all non Jewish people. Why, back in chapter 1 we read how he convinced those heathen sailors to throw him overboard so that their own lives would be saved!

What we have here is a deeply religious man who was so overcome with his hatred and enmity of his people's enemies, that he dared to challenge his God, and his God's compassionate and loving nature.

Maybe you can sympathise with Jonah this morning, for perhaps you too have found yourself angry with others and also with God. Out of sync with His way of doing things. Rebellious, cross, disobedient, even wanting to die rather than stick with his plan.

If so you need to note how God continued to love Jonah. He stayed with Jonah in Jonah's angry and bitter phase, and never raised His voice in angry condemnation of him. Jonah already knew that God abounded in love, but now he experienced God abounding in love towards him.

This is the story of a love that never lets us go. As the song we sing says:-

***"There's nothing I can do
To scare your grace away
No foolish thing I do
No foolish thing I say"***

Even as Jonah sat and yearned for the destruction of his enemies to take place before him, God provided a plant, a worm, and a scorching wind, followed by His gentle voice, to let Jonah know that God's love never gave up on anyone, be they disobedient prophet or evil enemy.

It's helpful for us to see in this chapter of Jonah the connection between anger and compassion. Jonah was angry when the plant that gave him shade died. Angry over the worm that had killed it. So there was a sense of him having compassion for that vine. Being sorry for it. But the reason he felt for the vine was because its death affected him. The death of the plant made life extremely uncomfortable for Jonah.

Jonah was a little like that unjust judge in the parable Jesus told. The judge had no compassion for the widow who regularly asked him to seek justice for her, and he totally ignored her. But when her constant pleas started to make life miserable for him, then he cared enough about her woes to fix her problem.

So Jonah only cared about the death of the plant and was angry about it, because it affected him. So he had that compassion for the plant that he didn't have for the thousands upon thousands of people in Nineveh, because the death and judgment of them, would not make life any worst for him. Indeed it could only make life better, because he felt that they deserved God's judgment and he couldn't understand why God couldn't be as angry at

the hated Assyrians who had raped and pillaged Israelite villages for years, as he was.

So here we see God gently and lovingly reminding Jonah, that although He is angry at the sinful ways of the Assyrians. Angry enough to visit them with His wrath if they do not turn from their evil ways. He is by nature abounding love and compassion. And there is not one human being that He has made from any nation or tribe, that He does not love and desire to redeem, if only they will seek Him in repentance and sorrow for their sin.

This is the other great love story in this chapter. That Almighty Holy God is Abounding Love to all people despite their evil rebellion against Him, and He wants us, who are His servants, to aim for that same compassion to all people as well.

I was told by Elaine Baker the other day, about a story on the television relating to a church in America, where the Pastor proclaimed that God is more of a God of wrath than love. Where children were walking around holding signs calling for God's judgment and wrath to fall on certain groups of people. And as I listened I couldn't help but think about Jonah, and how that church had got it just as wrong as he had.

But then I thought about myself, and realized that though I might not be holding up a sign calling for God's judgment, if I am not doing all I can with what I have to reach people near and far with the Gospel, then I am happily allowing them to face God's judgment without, first having a chance to benefit from His love.

We all personally need to work at being as compassionate as God in our approach to those who are not walking close to Him. As compassionate as Jesus.

One of the songs we sometimes sing is a prayer on our part to be More Like Jesus. One of the verses says:-

***Lord, you are compassion, and never-ending love,
For you have redeemed me by your precious blood.
Create in me a clean heart, a spirit that is new,
The joy of my salvation is only found in you.***

One of the best examples of this comes from those hours that He hung upon the cross. With him were the two criminals. Violent men who would have committed horrible crimes to have been so dealt with. Matthew tells us that at first they both called out insults against Jesus, deriding His claim to be the Christ. But then Luke tells us that one recognized his own guilt and Jesus' innocence, and he cried out to Jesus: -"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom".(Luke 23:42)

Now we all know that Jesus didn't then say, "You must be joking, you vile and horrible man. Just think for a moment about all those people you have hurt. Those you consigned to death without a second thought. And what about the things you were saying hardly any time ago about me. They hurt. They were cruel and untrue. You're on your own mate! Burn in hell!"

What Jesus did say was:- ***"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."***

That's the Love of Jesus. It's how He loves you. It's how He loves you even if you are angry and cross. How he loves you even if you have moved away from Him. It's how He loves you, as this very moment He makes you conscious of your guilt and wrong doing, yet draws you to Himself.

And it is because He loves us so much that he calls us to love others as he loves them. To reach out with all that he has given us to share His Gospel with people here and throughout the world.

To be willing Missionaries for Him with our time, talents, money, prayers:- with our lives.

