

Should I not Care for this Great City?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 November 2021

Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 0 0] I fled him down the days and down the nights. I fled him down the arches of the years. I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind, and in the midst of tears I hid from him.

And under running laughter, upvisted hopes, I sped and shot, precipitated, down titanic glooms of chasmed fears from those strong feet that followed, followed after.

Those lines begin a poem called The Hound of Heaven, and the poet Francis Thompson, he looks back on his life and sees his life as one long chase. He runs and runs, but however hard and fast he runs, he finds that he is followed by the strong feet of God. You will not let him go.

He hides, but God finds him. And in the end, well, you'll have to wait and see how it ends. But as I read those lines this week, I wondered whether Jonah could not have written them himself.

The whole book of Jonah, the story so far, has been one long chase, has it not? God's first words in this book, like a starting pistol that got Jonah sprinting away from him. The Lord sent Jonah the prophet with a message for a faraway evil city, and Jonah fled. He ran to sea, and the Lord followed him with a storm. He ran down into the ship, and the Lord found him with the sailors who discovered his sin. He ran down to the depths of the sea, and the Lord sent a fish to swallow him and bring him back. The Lord has chased his prophet all the way to the city of Nineveh to see his words spoken at last. And we saw last week they landed with great effect. God's warning was heard and believed by the great evil city of Nineveh.

[2 : 1 8] The whole city, from the king in the palace to the fruit pickers in the fields to the sheep on the hills, turned from their evil ways and threw themselves on the grace and compassion of the Lord.

Who knows, said the king of Nineveh, God may yet relent, and with compassion turn from his fierce anger, so we will not perish. They repented when they heard God's word. The whole city turned 180 degrees overnight, and so God indeed turned away his fierce anger. He didn't bring the disaster that he had threatened, because the city had turned away from its evil. The end? Well, not quite, because there is still one person left in this story, isn't there, who has not repented.

God's undeserved kindness to Nineveh confirmed what Jonah had suspected all along, that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity, yet Jonah is still running. Because to Jonah, we read, this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. In full view of God's incredible grace, he now prays, verse three, now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.

But to the bitter end, we find the Lord still chasing, still chasing his one runaway prophet. He is to Jonah the hound of heaven, and so he is still chasing us tonight. And his question for Jonah and for us as we close at this book is, do we share his concern? Questions are great for heart surgery. And the Lord asks three questions in this passage, beginning with verse four. The Lord asks Jonah, is it right for you to be angry? Firstly, then notice God's heart concern for Jonah.

If you'd read with me from verse five, Jonah had gone out, and he 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.

[4 : 51] Now, people deal with anger in different ways, don't they? Some quickly boil over and lash out with harsh words. Other people just bubble away quietly. Let the bitterness grow, sink in, let those grudges form. Well, Jonah's response to his anger is to take himself away, and there to silently will destruction on those who offend him. That's what he's there doing, watching over the city. He's found the best view. He's built himself a little gazebo, and he's not going anywhere, because he's still hoping to see destruction. He's still hoping that God will at last give this great evil city what it deserves. He's consumed by vengeance, but powerless to carry it out, so he waits. But notice that he's left God's question unanswered. Is it right for you to be angry? It's the question of a master heart surgeon, because the thing with anger is it often feels right? Anger is our emotional response to what we see as a failure of justice. Anger rises in us when there's something that we just don't think is right. So, in that sense, anger can be a very satisfying and comfortable feeling to hold on to, because it's the feeling of being right, and someone or something else being wrong. Sometimes we imagine, as Christians perhaps, that we live in a world in which there is no more right or wrong. But that's shown not to be true by the level of anger we see and hear around us in social media, in the news, on campus. You sometimes hear our society described with the phrase outrage culture. Why the outrage? Well, because our cultures form such a strong sense of what is right, but reality does not conform to it. And the response is outrage, indignation, anger. Even as Christians, we can sinfully take refuge in our anger, perhaps at the sins or the failures of others as a way of hiding from our own failures, our own sins.

And so, on one level, God's question is a very important question for us all, isn't it? Because our anger often feels right. But the question is, is it right? Is Jonah's anger right? What is it he thinks he is right to be angry about? Well, that's what the Lord is going to help us to see? If you're a parent, probably you'll recognize this scenario. Your child has a meltdown in the supermarket. What do you do next? Well, there are two main ways, I suppose, of dealing with it. One way is to fight fire with fire and drag them kicking and screaming up and down the aisles. But the other way, I suppose, is to gently, calmly pick them up, calm them down, see what's wrong. And I find it incredible that God chooses the second option at this point in this book. It is incredible, isn't it, how patiently and gently God deals with this runaway prophet. Because by this point in the story, the Lord would be quite right, wouldn't he, simply to do away with Jonah, to have had enough of him, his complaints. But he doesn't do that.

Sometimes we can imagine as Christians that God is overwhelmingly angry. Perhaps we wonder sometimes whether he is in fact angrier than is really needed. But this book shows us that in fact, God is far slower to anger, far more ready to forgive, far more patient than we can possibly imagine.

God's anger is, of course, perfect, for he is perfect. Yet he does not destroy us when we sin. He does not give our sins what they deserve. The scandal of Scripture is not that God is angry.

It's that he is anything but angry towards us. His grace is outrageous. His patience with us when we are slow like Jonah to see and to turn from our sin. His love for us when we were least lovable.

[9 : 37] His kindness to us that does not have an expiry date. Friends, it is not God who has an anger problem. Jonah is vindictive and vengeful and at heart he is deeply hostile to God. And yet the Lord chases him and chases him with a love that will not let him go. And the way he does that here is with a kind of live action parable. We might call it C.S. Lewis style, the plant, the worm, the wind, and the prophet.

While Jonah is raging under his makeshift shelter, verse 6, the Lord 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. 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. Now, what's going on here?

Well, notice the story that God is telling to Jonah and telling to us through this parable. God providing good things for Jonah makes him very happy. The last time, of course, that God provided something for Jonah was in at the end of chapter 1 where he provided a huge fish to rescue him from out of the sea.

Now, God provides for him plants to literally deliver him from his discomfort by shading him from the sun. Jonah gets good things. Jonah is very happy. But when God provides a worm so that the plant dies and then provides a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah, well, verse 8, he wanted to die. Now, we might think this guy is a little bit overdramatic. But the parable is giving us a window into how this prophet's heart works. See, he is never more happy than when God is being kind to him. But he is never more angry than when God takes his kindness from him and gives it to somebody else. He's like a jealous older brother, isn't he? He can't stand seeing mom or dad cradling the new baby instead of playing with him. In fact,

[12 : 15] Jonah is very much like the older brother from Jesus' parable that we read earlier in our service, isn't he? The wild younger brother comes home after spending all the money, splashing out the years, sorry for rebelling against the father. The father throws a party, but the older brother was angry and refused to go inside. He thinks he has a right to the father's love far more than that really evil sinner of a brother. And he can't stand by and watch the father shower love on him instead of me.

Now, who does that remind you of? Think back, if you can, if you were here to our first sermon in the series. What was going on back home in Israel where Jonah has come from? God had given Jonah a wonderful job to do, hadn't he in Israel promising a time of growth? The borders would grow, the kingdom would be strengthened. God had given Israel very good times. But as Craig helpfully showed us last week, Israel had never been more sinful than it was then. Ignoring God's words, turning to other gods, sacrificing their children. They took God's good gifts very gladly and threw it back in his face.

And yet soon when God would take his kindness away, they would complain and sulk bitterly. Feeling entitled to God's grace, complaining when it is taken away, resenting it being given to anyone else. Friends, that is the story that this parable tells, because that is where God's people were at heart. And so God's question is really, do they have any right to be angry if he chooses to take his love away and to save their enemies instead?

This is not the fairy tale ending we know and love, is it? Nineveh's wonderful change of heart isn't the end of the story, because now God is holding up Nineveh's wholehearted repentance like a mirror to Jonah, to Israel, to Jonah, to Israel, and asking, what about ye? What about ye? Brothers and sisters, this book does not let us get away with thinking that it's those people, that person, whoever it is who needs to repent and not us ourselves. Perhaps that parable, that story resonates with you. You recognize it in your own life. Perhaps this evening you know that you are hustling God, taking his good things, but not giving him your heart, your life in response.

Let me ask you, would it be wrong of God to take those good things away? If you're living as if you were entitled to God's grace, perhaps because of your upbringing or a past record of faith or faithfulness, please know that we cannot go on in sin and rest secure in God's love.

[15 : 36] We cannot not come to him for forgiveness, not be putting off sin, not be putting on Christ, and then complain if God should turn away from us. We've seen in this chase with Jonah, God's patience is extraordinary. He chases us farther than we would ever dare to believe, but there is no guarantee that he will chase forever if we keep running from him. And so if that is you, let me urge you to turn from your sin to turn to him, to thank him every day for his undeserved grace in saving you, to live wholeheartedly by his word again. For lots of us, that will already be our story. We will be turning from our sins of Christ each day and living out of God's undeserved grace to us in saving us.

But then here's the challenge for us. If we know how deep our heart concern is, how extraordinary it is that God would rescue us from our sin, well, how much more should we share God's great concern for the thousands of those around us who don't yet know him and his salvation?

Here's God's second concern then in this passage, his great concern. The scalpel gets a bit sharper with the second question, verse 9. God said to Jonah, is it right for you to be angry about the plant? It is, he said. I'm so angry I wish I were dead.

Jonah is angry that the plant is gone. It was a small kindness perhaps, but it was his comfort, and now it's gone. He's ready to die. But the Lord is about to widen the lens for Jonah and offer some perspective on his anger. If you would read with me from verse 10, 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 it died overnight. And should 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? Jonah is concerned about his plant being taken away, but how does a plant compare to the 120,000 people who Jonah wishes could be taken away? How should Jonah feel about the great city compared to the plant? Notice the first comparison God is making. You didn't tend it or make it grow.

Well, that could be said, couldn't it, of the plant and the city. It's God's plant. He made it grow, and perhaps more surprisingly for Jonah, it's God's city that God made to grow. He is the creator of everything, every person in every time and place. Who tended Nineveh over the centuries? Who gave it life? Who made it grow? The Lord did. It certainly doesn't belong to Jonah. So is Jonah right to be angry about what happened to the plant? Well, no, because it's not his plant. He didn't create it, tend it, give it growth. He enjoyed its shade for a time, and then it was gone.

[19 : 09] But of course, the plant is only an image for God's far greater kindness, isn't it? Jonah was angry about the plant, but even more so about the great city that God had spared in his love. So the question behind the question is, does Jonah have a right to be angry about what happened to Nineveh? Well, no, because it's not his city. It's God's city. And that is how he has chosen to deal with it. But now we come to the final and pointiest question, if you like, of the three. Again, God says, you have been concerned about the plant, and should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh? The plant and the city both belong to God, but the difference between a plant and the city is that the plant lasted less than a second in the grand sweep of world history.

It grew and it died in less than a day. But all through this book, God has described Nineveh as a great city that is big, populous, grand. It has a long history and lots and lots and lots of people, 120,000 people. To put that in perspective, only four cities in Scotland today have more people than that. Think a similar sort of size to Dundee. Two and a half thousand years ago, that was a mega city.

And it also had lots of animals. People wonder why God's questioning ends in such a strange place. You know, animals, perhaps it's a sign of the city's wealth. Animals were big money back then.

But probably it's another reminder in this book that the Lord is God of the whole world and of everything in it. He throws a storm on the sea. He can calm it with a word.

He gives instructions to a sea monster and it obeys him. He grows and kills a tropical plant in the space of a day. God is indeed, as Jonah knows, the God of heaven. He made the sea and the dry land.

[21 : 21] He cares for what he has made and a city with so much life. So many people, such a civilization. Does he not care for it all? Animals included. You are concerned about a plant, says the Lord.

Well, scale that up a hundred million times. And should I not be concerned for this great city? A hundred and twenty thousand people who don't know their right hand from their left.

Yes, they were evil, but they were also, says the Lord, lost. Wondering, blind, confused, could never have found their way to God. Not knowing their right hand from their left.

For all their evil, the Lord looks on them with compassion and sees that they were sleepwalking helplessly, helplessly, helplessly into hell. Should I not have a concern for them, says the Lord?

How much more concern should I have for that city than you have for your plant, Jonah? Friends, think of our city. Two hundred thousand, six hundred and eighty people.

[22 : 34] Also, the internet says. So many people, so much culture, so much life. Does the Lord not have concern for this great city? The people that we walk past to get here.

The people who live on our streets, that eat and drink in our cafes, in our workplaces, in our classes. How does the Lord view them? I knew it, says Jonah. I knew it.

I knew that's who you were, Lord. I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God. That you were slow to anger and abounding in love. Yes, there is much sin and evil, but in the darkness, in the confusion and the blindness of our world, the Lord is so patient, so compassionate, so slow to anger, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

So, says to Peter, chapter 3 and verse 9. Friends, there's a mystery there. He saves some, but not all.

He wishes that none would perish. I'm happy to talk more about that afterwards. But don't get so interested in that mystery that you forget God's unbelievable concern for those who are lost.

[23 : 51] His desire that they would repent. His will to save. A friend sent me this earlier in the week, which he called, maybe tongue-in-cheek, Jonah's alternative to amazing grace.

Frustrating grace. Frustrating grace. How bleak the sound that saved my enemies. They once were lost, but now are found. We're blind, but now they see.

What a contrast that is to Jesus. As he watched over another sinful city and wept tears.

Jerusalem. Jerusalem, he said. You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. How often have I longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

And you are not willing. Frustrating grace. Amazing grace. Amazing grace.

[24 : 59] Friends, should the Lord not care for our great city? And more pointedly, perhaps, do we not share God's concern for our great city?

What do we care about? What gets us angry? What makes us very happy? What makes us want to die? In short, what are the cares and concerns that drive our inner lives?

How many of the things that really drive us really belong to us? How long will those things that drive us ultimately last?

How do those things compare in value to the 200,000 people in our city? How does our care for our own lives compare with God's great concern for this great city?

There are lots of things that we can rightly and legitimately care about and that can concern us. But friends, let God's questions in this book give us perspective on what we most certainly should care about here and now.

[26 : 11] Do we long? Do we long? Do we long? Do we long for even one or two of those 200,000 people of Aberdeen to turn to God's kindness and be saved? Are our lives driven by the care that drives our creator to save such wretches as us?

How can we share that care then this week? There are lots of ways that we can reach out to the non-Christian people around us in our lives.

A simple meal, a conversation. Perhaps it starts, how are you? How's your family doing? The Lord may open that door.

We don't know. But one way is really simple. In two weeks this evening, two weeks from now, this will be our carol service.

And there is no time like Christmas in which people, for some reason, love coming to church. We have some invitations that have been printed. There will be people in your lives who will be delighted to be invited to come to church with you.

[27 : 20] They might not come. They might have good reason not to come. They might be other things on. They might not want to come. But we have no reason not to ask them. Perhaps you have someone you think that you could invite.

Perhaps you don't. Pray. Pray for opportunity. Pray. Invite a friend. Talk about it afterwards. Because the Lord cares for the people of this city more than we could ever know.

We are not told in the end how Jonah answered God's questions. The book finishes, doesn't it, with a question. But I suspect that some years later, a little Israelite would hear Grandpa tell this story and ask, what happened, Grandpa, to Jonah?

Jonah. And with tears in his eyes, Grandpa Jonah would say, in the end, Jonah finally listened to God. And he repented with a broken heart over his sinful pride.

And he came home to tell the story and to write it down so that you would do the same. The chase is finally over, and the hound of heaven gets the last word.

[28 : 35] Alas, says God, thou knowest not how little worthy of any love thou art. Whom will thou find to love, ignoble thee, save me, save only me.

All which I took from thee I did but take, not for thy harm, but just that thou might seek it in my arms. All which thy child's mistake fancies is lost, I have stored for thee at home.

Rise, clasp my hand, and come. Halts by me that footfall. Is my gloom after all the shade of his hand outstretched caressingly?

Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, says God. I am he whom thou seekest. Let's pray together.

God, our Father, we stand in awe before you, the creator of heaven and earth, who would pursue in love to save people like us.

[29 : 46] Father, forgive us, we pray, when we take for granted how very patient you have been, how very patient you continue to be, how much love you have that you pursue us to the very end and not let us go.

Father, help us, we pray, to grow in love for the things that you love, to care for what you care about. Lord, we pray that as we grow in thankfulness for our own salvation, that we would grow to care for the salvation of others to you.

Lord, how we pray that you would be at work in the lives of those we know, to draw them to yourself. We know, Lord, that this is your work. We are merely instruments in your hands.

So we pray, our Father, that you would indeed do a great work in this city. Lord, and through this church would bring many to know you, who as yet do not. Lord, help us, we pray.

Draw us to yourself. Give us a fresh vision in Jesus Christ. Renew our hearts in thankfulness. Help us to love him with our whole heart.

[30 : 58] Who we ask in his great name. Amen.