

Do You Do Well to be Angry?

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[0 : 00] This is God's holy word starting in Jonah chapter 3 verse 10. When God saw what they did, Nineveh's repentance, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them and he did not do it.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry and he prayed to the Lord and said, Oh 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 were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding instead of fast love and relenting from disaster.

Therefore now, oh Lord, please take my life from me for it is better for me to die than to live. And the Lord said, do you do well to be angry? This is God's holy word.

It is so good to be with you tonight and I'm happy to see so many people in the building. We are continuing our series on Jonah. It's only tonight and then one more and then we've squeezed Jonah dry as it were.

An individual last week told me I need to bring in more fish-related puns. That's the only one you'll get. Tonight's chapter is all about anger.

[1 : 25] Anger is something that concerns us all, I think. People have very different ways of expressing anger. There are some people who are really loud and they shout and become aggressive. There are some people who are a bit like a hedgehog and they just try to get away from everyone.

But everyone gets angry, we all know it, we all feel it, we all have experienced it. So I think tonight's passage is important and relevant for all of us.

The good thing is that, well, the good thing is not that Jonah is angry, but the good thing is we can learn something from Jonah because he is really giving us a how-to-be-angry in a very unbiblical way tutorial.

It's a great opportunity to talk about anger, unrighteous anger, where it comes from, what it looks like and how God seeks to redeem it. We could preach a whole sermon series on anger if we wanted to.

We only have half an hour tonight, so I'll try to get to the core of it. I'll give you some pointers, but by no means will I give you everything you need to know about anger, righteous anger, unrighteous anger.

[2 : 36] But we will just get started so we don't lose any more time. In chapter 2, Jonah was in the belly of the fish and he prayed a prayer, a prayer of faith.

He had an experience, an encounter with God, he experienced his faith. God saved him from the belly of the fish and when you read the book you think, oh, okay, Jonah has learned his lesson.

Jonah is fine, everything's good. In chapter 4, after Jonah went to Nineveh and preached and the people in Nineveh repented, you can actually now see that Jonah is backsliding.

He hasn't changed for good. He's still really, really struggling with his big anger issue that he has. He's struggling with the sinful characteristic that he has.

So first of all, first point, what does unrighteous anger look like? Let's go to the text, let's have a little look in the text. In chapter 4, verse 1, it says, But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry.

[3 : 46] And to be honest with you, that is, it's an accurate translation, but it doesn't really get to the point of how angry Jonah really is. It says, it displeased him exceedingly.

But actually, the Hebrew in this sentence, it says, It was evil to Jonah, very evil, and he was burning hot with anger.

That's what it says, he was furious, he was actually about to explode. I don't know if any of you have seen this animation movie called Inside Out. It's a movie where the emotions in our heads are personified.

So it portrays joy and sadness and disgust and also anger. And anger is this small, short little man with a shirt and tie, and he has this big red button and just smacks it and his head goes on fire like a reverse rocket.

That's what Jonah is. He is absolutely furious and angry that God had mercy on the Ninevites. It displeased Jonah and it infuriated him.

[4 : 56] And it's very, very interesting, this word evil, it's used throughout the book. God has dealt with Ninevites' evil and he has forgiven their evil and that has now exposed Jonah's evil that he has inside of him.

He burns with anger. So the last words in chapter three is, God relented of the disaster, literally God relented of the evil.

And then the next thing it says, but it was evil to Jonah. Do you see the irony? Do you see the contrast that is created in here? Yahweh's anger, God's anger is quenched and Jonah's is kindled. The same event that calmed God's anger, now kindles Jonah's anger. The same mercy that caused Jonah to praise God now causes him to complain to God.

What is good for God, Jonah calls evil. And what is evil to God, Jonah calls good. And that's really where we get to the root of the problem, who has unrighteous anger stems from.

[6 : 07] Throughout the Bible we do find passages that say that there are people who are calling evil good and call good evil. And it's very clear, it can be seen in our day and age everywhere, everywhere you look.

That precious life, the wish to preserve life is called evil. And getting rid of innocent lives is called good.

We can see that in our society and it's not good. That is actually at the heart of this, calling good evil and evil good. Righteous anger, righteous anger called good good and evil evil.

Righteous anger gets angry at what actually is evil, not the way Jonah is angry, where he gets angry at something that is good. Unrighteous anger, it does the opposite of righteous anger, obviously.

It stems from an attitude in our hearts where we say, I know what is right and I know what is wrong. Nobody has to tell me what is right and what is wrong because I know I'm my own God.

[7 : 14] I can decide. I don't need your Bible, your book, your God to tell me what is right and what is wrong. But how do we actually know what is right and what is wrong?

If you put God out of the equation, why should I actually be a good person? What's the point? Why shouldn't I just go and enrich myself and treat people badly if I wanted to?

Who cares? There are no consequences. The truth is we don't know what is right and what is wrong without God. The truth is we are all corrupted by sin and we actually are very much like the Ninevites.

Not knowing our right hand from our left. How do we know what is good and what is bad? The word of God. Reading it, growing in spiritual maturity, we will be able to distinguish between good and evil because God will tell you in His word what is good and what is evil.

I'm from Germany. I'm not sure you can hear that in my accent. In Germany, people shout a lot. That's how they express their anger. I've seen some people shout here as well in Scotland, but some other British people are quite quiet.

[8 : 30] It's not that they're not angry. I think the issue of anger really is in our hearts. Maybe you're not aggressive or loud, but maybe you're resentful.

You talk behind people's backs. There are no consequences to that. It's easy to do. Maybe you struggle with bitterness like Jonah.

Bitterness really is nothing else but a long-term anger towards a person or a group of people that have sinned against you and you struggle to forgive them.

Even if they have confessed their sins and repented and God has forgiven them, you struggle to forgive. That is long-term bitterness.

In German, we have a word for this. Of course we do. It's called nachtragend. Literally, that means carrying something after the other person. See, if you struggle to forgive someone, then it's you actually who is exhausted from carrying all that weight with you.

[9 : 38] Jonah, the Ninevites, they're fine. They've repented. They've been forgiven. God has forgiven them. There's freedom there. What's with Jonah? He can't let it go.

He's carrying this weight with him. He's carrying after... He's walking behind the Ninevites. He's carrying it with him. He's walking to God carrying all that weight with him.

He can't let it go. That's what anger does to you. It's exhausting. And it actually slowly will make you miserable, resentful, bitter.

What is it in your heart, in my heart, that makes you think that you deserve God's grace more than other people? Why is it okay for you to accept God's grace like Jonah did in the belly of the fish, but you struggle to forgive other people who've done evil as well?

If you think that you deserve God's grace, that's an oxymoron. It is precisely the problem Jonah has. So what is unrighteous anger? Unrighteous anger calls evil good and good evil.

[10 : 52] It is angry at good. It's indifferent about evil. It burns hot with rage. It's a strong emotion and it's directed in the wrong direction.

If you struggle to call good what God calls good good and what God calls evil evil, then that's not a good sign.

That's actually pretty serious. How do we change that by praying and reading the Bible? By aligning our hearts with God's heart.

By becoming people after God's own heart. By making sure that we love God. Like we read in the call to worship to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your will, with all your mind wholeheartedly.

Becoming more like Him, that will change the way how we see the world, how we see what is good and evil. And that's difficult sometimes. And we shouldn't be just pretending that everything's fine just, ah, I read my Bible, but ask the hard questions.

[12 : 05] Come to God, talk to Him, tell Him that you're angry. That will change something. It's fine. God dealt with Jonah. I'm sure he can deal with your questions as well.

That's how we change our attitude. Coming to God and wrestling through these questions.

Secondly, self-righteous anger versus righteous anger.

So we've got unrighteous anger, which is self-righteous anger, and we've got God's righteous anger. In this chapter we see the first real dialogue between Jonah and God.

So in chapter one, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah doesn't respond, he runs away. In chapter two, Jonah prays to God, but we don't really have a verbal answer from God.

In chapter three, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh again and he does it. And now in chapter four there's the first dialogue between Jonah and God. And it is an ironic dialogue.

[13 : 06] It's supposed to make you laugh a little bit because what does Jonah do? Jonah prays to God. But it's so, so different to the prayer we read about in chapter two.

Jonah says, Allah's, please God. It's the exact words that were used by the Mariners in chapter one.

When there was a crisis, there was a storm. They were in danger. And now Jonah uses these words when the crisis is actually prevented. God has dealt with his anger and the Ninevites.

And Jonah comes to God and says, please, why are you doing this? Help me. For Jonah, God's mercy is a disaster.

And that's very, very ironic. Jonah went to Nineveh and he preached to the people and they actually responded to it. He actually repented.

[14 : 02] And as a preacher, I read this and I think, what are you complaining about Jonah? I wish people would respond to my sermons like that. Be happy. They're listening to you.

But actually Jonah is not happy. It's a disaster. In chapter two he's happy. He's happy that salvation belongs to God as long as it concerns him.

In chapter four he's angry that salvation belongs to God. Well, if Jonah is in danger and salvation belongs to God and God saves him, everything's fine. But as soon as it concerns these dirty little Ninevites that he hates so much, it's a disaster.

Jonah is happy to be an Israelite. He's happy to be in the chosen nation of God in Israel unless it becomes uncomfortable for him. You remember what Israel was chosen for?

It was chosen to be a blessing to the nations. And there's an application in there for us as well. If we are in the church and the church is also chosen to be a blessing to the nations, a blessing to others, are we treating it like this?

[15:14] Are we simply saying, well, I'm happy that I'm in the church. I'm happy that I'm saved. I'm fine. Salvation belongs to you, God, but actually we don't treat other people with love and in a way where we want them to be saved.

Do we have that mindset that Jesus gives us in the Great Commission? Go and baptize and make disciples. Maybe we are a bit more like Jonah than we initially thought.

In chapter 2, Jonah experiences this faith and I'm sure he had that encounter that he needed, but it didn't really sink into his heart.

It shows that ultimately he doesn't really care about the Ninevites. He cares about himself. Because one thing that I didn't mention when I preached on chapter 2 is that in the whole chapter, in the whole prayer that Jonah prays, he doesn't admit guilt.

He doesn't actually confess his sins. He never actually recognizes the fact that he did something wrong. And that's very common for us Christians as well, backsliding into old habits, forgetting so quickly what God has actually done for us.

[16:34] Reflect on that. It's true. And we need to be very, very aware of that and pray that God might help us.

And in light of all of that, it's so ironic that Jonah actually longs for death. You see, in chapter 2 he was in the depths of the water, in the belly of a fish, symbolically in the realms of death, and he's crying out for salvation.

He's longing for life. You know, he's high up on a hill, he's in the dry, he's very much alive. God has relented from the disaster and he longs for death.

Where does that come from? It comes from a distorted view of God's character, of overemphasizing one side of God's character over another.

It's so important that we align our hearts with God's heart. I mentioned already by trying to study God's word, understanding who he is, and by praying, spending time in the presence of the Lord.

[17:42] Loving God means loving his plan. It means loving his will. Okay, thirdly, how does God redeem this sinful, unrighteous anger?

He asks Jonah this question, do you do well to be angry? Literally in Hebrew he asks him, is it good for you that you are angry?

Which, it might imply that you can be angry and you can do well to be angry, and we read that in Ephesians 4 as well, don't we? Be angry, but in your anger do not sin.

And the verb that I mentioned earlier, that means, you know, burning hot, it comes from fire, burning hot with anger, it's used for God as well. And we know that God's anger is righteous anger.

So there is a good kind of anger that exists. Jonah here is a textbook illustration of how not to be angry. But it doesn't mean that you can't ever be angry at all.

[18:45] That is unrealistic and it's not true, and there's a reason why we do have that emotion of anger, but it's important where we direct that anger.

Does it make you angry when you read about war and death and slavery and human trafficking and sickness and crimes and when a child gets bullied or sexual abuse, cheating, lying, all these sins and injustices?

That's good. That's good anger. It's important that you feel angry at sin. God feels angry at sin.

Jesus, you remember this story when Jesus went into the temple?

Well, first he cursed a fig tree, he was angry. Then he went into the temple and he flipped over the tables of the money changers and people selling animals and so on.

And he's angry. Jesus was angry. He hated sin. He hated when wrong was done, when sin was committed. It's important to be angry at that.

[19:50] I've got, because we are so limited in time, I've got three questions that you might want to note down or listen back to the sermon if you have time that you can use to test if your anger is good anger.

First of all, are you angry because you're offended by sin? Are you angry because you're offended by sin? That's good. That's okay. That's righteous sin. Thirdly, in the midst of your anger, are you still focused on God and His kingdom, His rights rather than yours?

God's peaceful and patient character that he showed you so many times. Are you focusing on God in the midst of your anger?

Thirdly, when you're angry is the fruit of your anger, godly. Anger always produces fruit. Most of the time when we are angry, it produces bad fruit.

You're in an argument with your partner, with your spouse, with your child, with your father, mother, friend, whoever. Work, colleague, your employer, and you say things you shouldn't have said if you tell your boss something in your anger, he might fire you.

[21 : 01] Bad consequence, bad fruit. If you are angry at an injustice and you do something against that, it might produce good fruits. So these are the things. Are you offended by sin and therefore angry?

In your anger, are you focused on God? And thirdly, is the fruit of your anger godly? Do you do well to be angry?

The world we live in, our sinful nature is funny sometimes. We often think we have every right to be angry, but God is not allowed to be angry with anyone.

Have you ever thought that? Have you ever heard people say that? Why is God such an angry God? And they sound so angry when they say it. You see, the Bible teaches us that God's anger is always directed at sin, is always righteous, is always just, which is why Jonah's statement about God's mercy is so interesting.

He quotes something from the Old Testament in verse 2. He's quoting from Exodus chapter 34, which is, when Moses wanted to see God's glory and God tells Moses, okay, I will show you my goodness.

[22 : 15] God's goodness, okay? And what does God say? God says this, the Lord the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

Jonah is leaving that whole second part out. He just omits it. He doesn't mention it. He only talks about God's grace and mercy. But actually all of this together is God's goodness, mercy, but also justice.

God does not forget the sin. He seizes. That's why Jesus becomes angry. That's why Jesus is sad at the sin and he rebukes people, yet he ends up dying on the cross for them, for the same people. That's why Jesus is described as being compassionate, more than anything else, any other emotion in the Gospels. B.B. Warfield, the great Princeton professor, he wrote an essay, The Emotional Life of Jesus.

And in it he mentions that the emotion that we read most about in the Gospels of Jesus is his compassion. He weeps. Jesus actually weeps a lot.

[23 : 43] If anyone ever tells you, real men don't cry, that's a lie. Jesus cried a lot. Why? Because our pain became his pain. Our sadness became his sadness. It actually hurt him to see us struggling with sin so much.

He was so often moved with compassion to his innermost being. He was angry at everything that is wrong with the world. But ultimately he used his compassion to get rid of that anger, to take the wrath of God upon himself so that he could forgive us.

And so we could forgive those who have wronged us. And Jonah is not seeing that. Last week I told this story about Irina Dapazzo, a man in a concentration camp who was treated very unjustly.

And if I could I would tell the story again because it's such a powerful story. Instead I have another instance. From a similar time, many of you will have heard of a woman called Corey Ten Boom, who was also imprisoned in a concentration camp because she was hiding Jews.

She survived it miraculously. And later on she often talked publicly and she preached the gospel of forgiveness. And she tells the story in a book about a church service in Munich where after she had been up on the stage to speak she saw a former SS guard from the concentration camp she was imprisoned in.

[25 : 17] And this man, he had been especially cruel towards Corey's sister Betsy, who later passed away, he tormented her. And then she writes this about the encounter.

She writes, it was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former SS man who had stood guard at the shower door in the processing center at Ravensbrook.

It was the first of her actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there, the room full of mocking men, heaps of clothing, Betsy's pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. How grateful I am for your message, Fräulein, he said. To think that, as you say, he has washed my sins away.

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who preached so often to the people in Blöhmendahl, the need to forgive kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them.

[26 : 19] Jesus Christ had died for this man. Was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile. I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer.

Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness. As I took his hand, the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not in our forgiveness anymore than in our goodness that the world's healing hinges but on his, on Jesus's. When he tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love itself.

These stories are so powerful. It's so difficult. We cannot imagine what she went through. And last week what Irino DiPazzo went through. But these are examples of the healing power of the grace of the forgiveness we can have because Jesus hung on that cross where God's mercy and his justice kissed and embraced and where Jesus, where God himself took the punishment upon himself.

[27 : 49] God does not rejoice in the death of people. God is a God of love and God is a God of justice. That's why Jesus died for you. God dealt with his anger by bearing it himself in Jesus Christ.

That's why Jesus bled on the cross. That's why he was mocked, where he was beaten and why his body was broken. And that is why we remember tonight as we sit around the Lord's table, as we share that meal of remembrance, that the righteous anger of God was laid on his only son so that anyone who believes in him could live and be free and find forgiveness in him.

We will soon sing a hymn called, Man of Sorrows, Lamb of God, by his own betrayed, the sin of man and wrath of God has been on Jesus laid.

My question to you tonight is, if God chooses to forgive people for their sins when they repent, if God chooses to relent from his anger, do you do well to be angry?

Let us pray. Father, we read this story of Jonah when he was so angry and you asked him, do you do well to be angry? And we cannot but take this question and ask ourselves, are we doing well to be angry?

[29 : 10] And it is so, so difficult and we need your strength. We need your forgiveness. We need your love for our enemies, for those who have wronged us, for those who have hurt us and who have sinned against us.

Help us, Father, too. Forgive them as you have forgiven us. In Jesus' name we ask that. Amen.