

A Twist in the Tail!

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[0 : 00] If you have a Bible will you turn back with me to Jonah chapter 4 page 928 in the church Bible. We all love happy endings. We all love fairy tales and stories where the good guy wins and the bad guy loses. All the meeting gets the person that she wants always to marry. I'm sure all of us even the hardest of us have been moved over the last couple of weeks as we've heard the story of someone who's come through personal trauma or has faced a family crisis and has achieved some kind of medal at the Olympic Games and the standing there and the flags going up and the commentators you know telling us that this is a happy ending. We all want a happy ending. Great philosopher Hannibal Smith the leader of 18 summed it up so well. I love it when a plan comes together and

Jonah chapter 1 to 3 is a plan that comes together. God called Jonah. Jonah runs away. God sends a storm. Jonah goes to sleep in the boat. The sailors throw Jonah overboard. The storm ends. The sailors worship God. A big fish or whale comes along and swallows up Jonah and he spends three days and three nights in the great fish. Eventually Jonah goes to Nineveh. He preached a sermon of eight words not bad. The whole city repents. God the lents and the greatest revival known in history happens on that occasion. What a Hollywood movie and if that was good news you would stop there because you've got your happy ending. Jonah has been restored. Nineveh is safe and God has the glory but the Bible is not a fairy tale. The Bible is not some kind of work of fiction. It's about reality. It's about human nature. It's about our relationship with God and others and Jonah chapter 4 is a book as a chapter that reminds us that Jonah didn't think like God. We read in verse 1 but Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

The New Living Translation translated this way. This change of plan greatly upset Jonah and he became very angry. I underline the change of plan because that is actually the key to chapter 4. God seems to change his plan. The fact that God is no longer going to destroy Nineveh makes Jonah really angry. You see Jonah has been constant throughout the first three chapters of the book. He is quite happy, quite delighted that the people of Nineveh are all going to be destroyed. He thinks this is a really good idea. After all he's an Israelite.

He's a true worshiper of the true God. God only cares about Israel. He doesn't care about the other nations. So as long as God is constant and sends all the people to hell then Jonah really is quite happy. But the fact that God showed mercy was a great evil to Jonah. The literal translation is he was greatly displeased. When God shows great grace Jonah sees it as great evil. You see Jonah probably knew how the story was going to end. That's why we end up with verse 2. He prayed to the Lord, oh Lord this is not what I said when I was still at home. This is why I was so quick to flee to Tarsus. And then he goes on to quote from Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 to 7. One of the greatest statements in the

[4 : 45] Old Testament about God's gracious character. Here's the irony of the story. Jonah was fine with mercy when he received it but he couldn't handle it when God showed mercy on Nineveh. One writer preached it this way. You can tell you've made God in your image when he turns out he hates all the same people you do. So Jonah responds almost like a toddler. He stamps his feet and he says I wish I was dead. When he was in the belly of a fish in chapter 1 and then in chapter 2 he prayed the great prayer, oh God let me live. But now he's had his greatest triumph.

He says God let me die. And interestingly I think this is the key to the book. You see Jonah as a story about what God is going to do about the people of Nineveh. But the real question turns out actually in chapter 4 what is God going to do about Jonah? You see God knows how to deal with wicked sinners.

That's why Christ came into the world. He wants to save them. But perhaps God's biggest problem is what are you going to do about you and me as believers in Christ? What's he going to do with

angry filled church members? What's he going to do with those of us who have no compassion or no love or no mercy? That I think is a bigger problem. Again one commentator puts it this way. There's a little Jonah in all of us and a lot of Jonah in most of us. And so God needs to teach Jonah a lesson. We read that he leaves Nineveh and goes to the east of the city. I suspect he's still hoping in the back of his mind that God will actually turn his turn changes mind again and bring fire and brimstone and destroy the city. And that's why he wants a front row seat offered. But God has other plans and three things happen in short order verses six seven and eight.

All of them caused by God. The Lord provided a vine. He provided a worm and God provided a scorching east wind. The vine was good because it gave Jonah shade.

In Jonah's eyes the worm was bad because it chewed up the vine. And again in Jonah's eyes the east wind was very bad because it caused him great discomfort. Yet the passage is very clear that all these things came from God. The same God who provided the vine also sent the worm and then he sent the wind. And the real question for Jonah is will Jonah only be happy with God when God makes him happy?

[8 : 28] So when God provides the vine Jonah's happy with God. But when the other two things happen again done by God Jonah's less happy and more angry. I wonder what the question for you and me this morning is what will we do when God doesn't live up to our expectation? When God doesn't provide what we expect him to provide? Does our attitude, does our view of God change? Or do we see all things brought from God? The interesting sub-narrative going on here that the commentators go on in great detail about. I just want to touch on very briefly.

The man is why is Jonah really ever saved? Didn't Jonah ever repent truly? Because in chapter one he runs away from God. The second time he's called in Jonah 3 he obeys and so the answer seems to be maybe yes. And certainly if we start reading at chapter 3 we would say yes he truly has repented. But the time we get to the end of chapter 4 the answer becomes maybe no not sure. Because there isn't interesting anywhere in chapter 4 the slightest statement that shows any final hint of repentance. Again picking up from one of the commentators he said God never said go and have a good attitude. He simply said go and preach to Nineveh. And I think this leads us to a slightly frightening and solemn conclusion. You see it's perfectly possible for those of us who are believers to obey God but have a rotten attitude. We can obey God but in our heart we're angry or frustrated or kicking against him. And that seems to be the attitude of Jonah from beginning to end. At no point is there seeming to be a willing to obey God out of joy and out of compassion for the lost. Even in the belly of the fish when he plays the great player in chapter 2 it's almost if God is back to me to a corner and to return his heart to God because he's actually got no other choice. And again I think we can conclude from this that we were sometimes or perhaps often we serve Christ with motives that are far from pure. I remember many years ago an order pastor saying to me that he really did anything in his life without mixed motives. I was a young person then still I'm young but I was younger and I thought this is a bit strange this is unwise. But as I look back on my life and as I look at my life at the moment and perhaps if you look at your life I wonder this side of heaven even our besties even our noblest acts are maybe always tainted with self-interest. Tim Keller writes this we must learn how to repent of the sin under all other sins and under all our righteousness the sin of being our own saviour. You see Jonah 1 to 4 the book of Jonah is not actually about Jonah it's not about a whale it's not even about Nineveh the key theme of Jonah 1 to 4 is the grace of God. That God was gracious to Jonah and God was gracious to Nineveh and God is gracious to us. God loves you beyond measure and God wants a relationship with you. God wants to get to know you more and more. I've been quite hard so far on Jonah as a prophet and perhaps deservedly so but it's worth just concluding on this part of the story how did we end up getting the story of Jonah into scripture? Well only one man knew all the details and that man cared enough to write his story down. Jonah put this down for future generations. If you like this is almost like Jonah's own spiritual journey his journal into his life how he saw God and how God saw him. I wonder how honest are we in our spiritual journey. If we journal if we write if we take comments about our attitude to God how honest it's interesting that Jonah isn't criticised for being his attitude what God would do is want to change that attitude but God wants to hear where he is at that time and God wants to know how we are doing God doesn't want us to hide from him but then we go on and we see in verse 11 that Jonah writes these words but Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left hand and many cattle as well should I not be concerned about that great city. Jonah's story ends not with a statement but with a question should

I not be concerned about that great city and it's almost like of a tolical question the answer of course is yes God is concerned about that great city therefore Jonah should be concerned about that great city. By ending it in a question and not with a declaration the book leads the issue hanging in the air. I wonder do I have

God's heart for Nineveh in our world. This story speaks to all of us who would rather not get involved in our world who would rather not get dirty who would rather not have compassion who don't want to care for those outside of the church. If we'd rather be comfy and cozy and keep it nice and neat inside of four walls of the church then we miss the heartbeat of God. You see the problem of Jonah was his view of God was too small his heart was too small. God wanted to see everyone saved. We sometimes say in a dismissive way that the whole world is going to hell and as a matter of fact that's true the world is going to hell but I'm not sure that's a problem. The problem with the world is not the world the problem with the world is the church. You see the problem is not the sinful excess of the world that we see all around us the problem is that you and I are running the other way. Do we love the world as God loves the world. I wonder is God's greatest problem not with the sinner out there but with the saint in here. I suspect as I look at my own life perhaps as you stop to reflect at your life we're more like Jonah than we'd like to admit. That's why we laugh or we squirm because actually there is a lot of Jonah inside most of us. Let me finish with just three very brief closing remarks. Firstly the key issue here is that God loves Nineveh. Where is Nineveh today? When Nineveh is Philadelphia or

London or Glasgow or Edinburgh. Nineveh is your neighbour at the end of your street. Nineveh is your boss who you really do not get on with. Nineveh is the person that you meet at the gym or at the social club or wherever you meet individuals. Nineveh is your non-Christian husband or wife. Nineveh is your children who seem to have turned completely away from God. Nineveh is your Muslim neighbour or your Sikh banker or your hairdresser who you try to talk to about Christ. You see Nineveh is not just a place. Nineveh is a symbol for the gathering together of the people of the world. Wherever you find people there you find Nineveh in all its splendour and power and glory and greed and brutality and evil. It's all there mixed together the good, the bad, the light, the darkness.

[19:01] Look around your world. Look around your society and see that you and I live and work and play in Nineveh. And the message is clear. God still loves Nineveh. He still loves the people who make their living in the big city. He loves the teaming thousands who work long hours each day. He loves the people who come to this city. God still loves them. But secondly God is still willing to do whatever it takes to get you to Nineveh. For Jonah meant spent three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish. And God will do different things to us to get us to obey him. Again too many of us and I include myself a modern-day Jonah's who have taken a holiday cruise to Tarsus. Maybe God has been speaking to you for weeks or months or even years. And he says I want you to do this. I want you to go there. I want you to stop that relationship or I want you to format relationship. I wonder are we listening to God. Is God bringing things into our lives that need us to change. There's no Gospel song that includes the line. He doesn't make you go against your will. He just makes you willing to go. God won't force you to go to Nineveh but you will make sometimes your life so miserable until you decide to go on your own. I wonder do I need to change. Do you need to change to make us ready to go to Nineveh.

Why because finally Nineveh needs you. You see there are people that you come into contact with that I will never meet. There are people that I come into contact that you will never meet. Jonah was God's man for Nineveh and you are God's man or God's lady for wherever God has placed you. That place that only you can go. That person only you can reach. That opportunity you can only fill. You see what our cord is not just the minister or the elders or the missionaries or those who are really holy and done every possible course. Whether you've been a Christian for 30 seconds or for 30 years. We are all called to go. Why because each of us have people from Nineveh in our life right now. And it's scary. Maybe you're afraid to go. Maybe you're not sure what you're going to say or how you're going to live or what you're going to do. But the great news of the Gospel is that God will provide for us. If we take that step you will hold our hand through it. You see Nineveh is calling you today. Am I are you willing to respond to God's call. Let's come to him in prayer.

Father thank you for the book of Jonah. For its honesty. For its reflection on human nature. And thank you that we can say that you do love the great city. That you love all people that you have created. And Father thank you that we have the good news of Jesus Christ to share. Father I

confess that often I don't take opportunities that come along. And I pray that you would forgive me and forgive others for that. I pray that even this week you would give us opportunities to do acts of compassion. To give words of mercy. To point people to Christ. Father we pray for those that we would love to see to become Christians. Those that we've been praying for for years. For family members. For close friends. For workmates.

Lord thank you that you want no one to perish. Please help us to pray constantly for these individuals. Please help us to live lives which honor you and point to Christ. And please give us opportunities to share Christ. In all our frailty and in all our inadequacy. Would you please through your Holy Spirit give us character and words. And through this may we see individual lives changed. May we see cities turning back to you. Father we thank you've done it in the past and we believe you will do it again. Thank you that you want to use us even though we are weak. Even though sometimes our motives are not correct. Thank you that you still want to use us because you love us and you care for us and you show us grace love and mercy. Receive our praise again in Jesus name. Amen.