

No! we must fight if we would reign:
 Increase our courage, Lord;
 We'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
 Supported by Thy Word.

Thy saints in all this glorious war
 Shall conquer, though they're slain;
 They see the triumph from afar,
 And shall with Jesus reign.

When that illustrious day shall rise
 And all Thine armies shine

In robes of victory through the skies,
 The glory shall be Thine.

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Footnotes

1. John 1:4f, 9.
2. Romans 7:7ff.
3. Ephesians 1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10.
4. John 6:51ff.

Jonah 4:1–11

'Nineveh City Mission' leader resigns in angry protest! . . .

ANDREW WHITMAN

The book of Jonah is a familiar enough story! But what is its relevance for us today? In the West as a new millennium looms on the horizon culture-watchers are telling us that society is becoming increasingly 'post-modern' in its outlook. The old certainties are rapidly disappearing and a new generation is emerging composed of morally confused people who 'cannot tell their right hand from their left' (4:11). Alongside this, many in the Christian church have an increased expectation of revival—a God initiated movement yearned for as much in the Reformed tradition as in other quarters. The hotly debated questions of the hour are: 'Will we experience heaven-sent revival in the near future?'; and perhaps more poignantly: 'If so, what will it look like?' One question that doesn't seem to have surfaced as yet is: 'How will it affect us if and when it comes?' Perhaps naively many of us assume that our response will be one of delight and gratitude. Like Jonah, though, God's grace may not have got under our skin yet.

In Chapter 4 of this intriguing prophecy we find 'the second-chance prophet' in the throes of citywide revival and yet, ironically, in the process of bursting a boiler in anger; resigning not only from his job, but also from life itself! The entire book ends with a power-

ful question: 'Should I not be concerned about that great city?' (4:11). Did Jonah eventually come through to share more of God's compassionate heart for outsiders or not? It seems that the question is left hanging in mid-air for us to answer in our day.

In this chapter there are three distinct references to the prophet's anger. First his attitude of 'We are not amused' produces a volcanic eruption of emotion and frustration, ('Jonah was greatly displeased and become angry'—verse 1) resulting in a moody prayer. God then asks him on two successive days if he has any right to be angry (verse 4, 9). On the first occasion the Lord is given 'the silent treatment', while twenty-four hours later a disgruntled 'I do' is the response. Jonah is so filled with fury that he is 'angry enough to die' (verse 9). He presents a startling contrast to the God whose character he correctly refers to in his earlier prayer as one 'slow to anger and abounding in love' (verse 2).

With apologies to Doctor Luke and his famous fifteenth chapter we find here the Old Testament equivalent of 'How *not* to rejoice with the angels. . .'. There may be joy in heaven over just one sinner repenting (Lk. 15:7, 10), but there are also mutterings on earth (Lk. 15:28–30). Thus, grace from God uncovers its absence in us! No wonder Proverbs 4:23 says: 'Above

all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life'.

In this study of Jonah 4 we will look firstly at the nature of anger; secondly at the reasons for anger; thirdly at the symptoms of anger; and fourthly at God's response to anger—using this chapter as a 'mirror' (Jam. 1:23–25) to hold up in front of ourselves and our ministries.

Nature of Anger

Getting back to our 'Nineveh City Mission' leader it is vital to notice at the outset that the Hebrew verb translated 'to get/be angry' is *chārāh*. It could be literally translated in this way—'to become heated'.—Jonah then was displaying a blazing temper. To say he was 'hot under the collar' would be an understatement. The prophet was fuming!

The same root word is used of both God and human beings. In the early days of God's covenant people Abraham felt he was testing God's forbearance too far in interceding for Sodom. As his prayer session progresses he becomes increasingly aware that the Lord may lose his patience and get 'angry' with him (Gen. 18:30, 32). Many centuries later when Jerusalem was being rebuilt following the Babylonian exile we find Nehemiah becoming 'very angry' about economic injustices within the community of God's people (Neh. 5:6). Creator and creature alike are capable of getting angry about wrongdoing!

True to human nature, Jonah's own powerful feelings were demonstrated in both word and deed. First there was a disgruntled and almost suicidal prayer (verses 2–3). Then there was a march (not for Jesus!!!. . .) out of the city—to wait a month or so for the fire to fall from heaven (cf Lk. 9:51–56). Eventually what is going on inside must 'out'. Anger can stay locked up only for a while before finding release. The minor redeeming feature (or is it perhaps more?) is that Jonah was not a typical Englishman, bottling it all up inside. Maybe we can learn something from the Jews and their anthropology in terms of growing towards emotional wholeness!

When we survey the book as a whole we see God's grace demonstrated to a disobedient messenger. The God of the second chance rewinds the video to the start again—offering Jonah a fresh opportunity to bring the Lord's profound one-sentence message to the Assyrian capital. Then the Lord responds in compassion to a genuine change of heart taking place from the boardroom right down to the shopfloor. There is no destruction from heaven, but there is great displeasure on earth! But why *did* Jonah get into such a rage?

Reasons for Anger

The first reason has to do with God and his ways. From Jonah's vantage point the Lord had apparently 'changed tack' by not bringing upon the Ninevites the destruction he had threatened (3:10). This was all right for God, and fine for the city, but not so good for Jonah! . . . The idea of God 'relenting' (3:9; 4:2) poses questions for some—especially those fond of quoting Balaam's words in Numbers 23:19: 'God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind'. Does God engage in infamous 'U-turns' like some prominent politicians?

In response it has to be said that 'relent' in the Hebrew has none of the pejorative sense that a change of mind has in our language. Also in Scripture God's pronouncement of judgement are often conditional: for example Jeremiah was warned of the possibility of destruction coming upon a godless nation, with the clear proviso that 'if that nation I warned repents of its evil than I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned' (Jer. 18:7–8).

Returning to the text again it is clear that Jonah's problem arose precisely because God is consistent with his revealed character—not the reverse! . . . 'I knew it' says the prophet. Despite his credal affirmation the prophet still struggled to come to terms with the multi-faceted nature of God's character, especially with his freedom to do what he wants when he wants. Our long-held beliefs sometimes take years to impact us personally: and then nearly always in the crucible of everyday life and experience. As for Jonah he was indignant with a God who insisted on being himself!

Secondly and linked to the above, the prophet's lava of anger flowed out of a volcano of deep-seated prejudice towards his non-Jewish neighbours. Indeed the main purpose of the entire book of Jonah is widely recognized as being intended to break the mould of a wrong kind of Jewish exclusivism (cf Peter and Cornelius' extended family in Acts 10–11). In a perverse way it seems that Jonah would have been happier had the whole city and its inhabitants been wiped out. Heaven-sent 'ethnic cleansing' was very much on the prophet's agenda!

Of course Jonah and his fellow-Jews were long used to receiving God's revelation in Scripture. Where else did the prophet get his confession of verse 2 from? By way of contrast the Assyrian pagans were characterized by moral confusion rather than clear revelation: they are people who 'cannot tell their right hand from their left' (verse 11). However, when confronted with God's judgement they are quick to respond (3:5ff)—unlike the vast majority of Jews to whom the Lord said, 'All day long I have held out my

hands to an obstinate people who walk in ways not good. . . (Isa. 65:2).

The prophet then is so hard-hearted towards his neighbours that he cannot bring himself to mention them by name in his sullen prayer. Further evidence for his prejudice is found in Jonah's sharp exit from the city in verse 5. By way of comparison Jesus, without diminishing human responsibility, prays from the cross, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Lk. 23:34). The immediate impact?—a forgiven criminal and a converted centurion. Here is grace reaching beyond the perimeter fence!

Election, properly understood from Scripture, is a glorious doctrine for God's people. Nonetheless in the memorable slogan of Bill Hybels, 'Lost people matter to God'. If they matter to him then they should matter to us too—Jonah yesterday and us today. Real Christian love goes beyond the predictable 'loving our own' (Matt. 5:46–48).

So Jonah shows his anger firstly because of God's 'expected' compassion and secondly because of the Ninevites' 'outsider status'. But, with apologies to the B.B.C.'s Joan Bakewell, we are still not at the heart of the matter. The core reason for Jonah's anger was simply that God had betrayed him. His servant already had a successful track-record in terms of fulfilment of prophecy: Israel's borders *had* been extended (2 Kgs. 14:25). However, that phase of ministry was strictly within his own national context. There is nothing like a cross-cultural experience to show us what we are really made of! . . .

So Jonah was sent with a profoundly simple message (3:4): 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned'. But he had apparently been made to look a fool within hours of the proclamation. To Jonah God seemed more concerned about the well-being of these pagan outsiders than he did about the reputation of his messenger. It was time to hand in the prophetic cards and escape to the grave . . . Jonah was furious because he'd been shown up in a bad light. Hence his obvious self-centredness in prayer: 'I . . . I . . . I . . . my . . . me' (verses 2–3): apparently addressed to God, but actually focused on himself! This is a common problem, especially for those who have begun to grow old in discipleship and ministry—finding personal security in our ministries rather than in God *herself*. But what happens when the ministry doesn't go exactly to plan?

Perhaps a better outcome for Jonah would have been the city justly damned and his ministry justly vindicated! This offers a powerful contrast to the model of Jesus bearing our sins in his body on the tree (1 Pet. 2:24) and *then* being vindicated by the Father in the resurrection from the dead (eg Acts 2:23–24). Rather than his prayer of verses 2–3 the prophet would have

done better to sing Graham Kendrick's song 'Soften my heart Lord'.

One of the greatest challenges to discipleship is the occasion when we feel 'let down' by God. Honestly faced though, this can eventually bring a deeper understanding of him—and a fuller sharing of his heart.

Symptoms of Anger

Having looked at the reasons for Jonah becoming 'hot under the collar' it may be helpful to highlight the main ways in which his anger was displayed before examining how God himself handled him. Four things in particular strike me from this chapter. The angry prophet was:

- spiritually confused: This can be seen clearly by comparing Jonah's two recorded prayers of 2:1–9 and 4:2–3. The first celebrates God's gracious saving of Jonah personally, and ends on a note of thanksgiving and fresh commitment. The second grumbles about God's amazing (but quite expected!) compassion towards the Ninevites. It is devoid of gratitude and finishes up with Jonah 'handing in his notice'. If we step back from our own prayers for a moment it may be helpful to ask two questions: 'Who is the main focus—God or me?' 'What is the overall tone—am I thankful or morose?' The answer could be quite revealing . . .
- personally suicidal: Had Jonah studied Biblical Ethics in preparation for his calling as a prophet he undoubtedly would have concluded that suicide is morally wrong for the believer. (Compare the moving study by G.L. and G.C. Carr, 'After the Storm: Hope in the Wake of Suicide' Leicester 1990). In the present his convictions were rapidly being revised even if he did put the blame firmly on God: 'Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live' (verse 3 cf verse 9). In popular language his response to God's gracious work was 'Over my dead body!'—the ultimate form of protest and the final act of selfishness. Pastorally, unresolved anger of a serious nature often surfaces in the desire to harm ourselves. Although this is easier said than done, the best remedy is to face the actual issue, rather than taking the coward's way out and running from it.
- socially isolated: In anger the prophet intentionally distances himself from the place of mercy and waits for the juggernaut of God's justice to arrive. He 'went out and sat down at a place east of the city' (verse 5). People lacking grace find the recipients of grace difficult to have around them. Even the older brother stayed away from the prodigal's homecoming party (Lk. 15:25–32). Jonah's response can be summarized in the immortal words of Zsa Zsa

Gabor, 'I want to be alone'. As an interesting aside what would have happened if Jonah had been part of a team ministry? (eg an Old Testament 'school of the prophets')—it is certainly easier to remain objective in the company of honest friends who know you well . . . Whatever the answer, unresolved anger can effectively cut us off from those around us. It has a distancing effect. Conversely if we relate closely to the Father we will stay near to his children (eg 1 Jn. 4:19–21).

- emotionally unstable: Finally Jonah's anger was displayed in violent mood swings, in a roller-coaster experience. To begin with the prophet is angry and morbid. Then, following God's provision of the vine, he is 'very happy' (verse 6). Within less than 24 hours he is back to being heated again (in more ways than one!: cf verses 8 and 9). What is intriguing is the fact that Jonah's anger is not at a constant temperature. It flares up a second time when the wrong button is pressed—on this occasion in the form of a 'scorching east wind' (verse 8). Papering over the cracks for a while is not sufficient when encountering deeply-buried anger. Sooner or later it will rear its ugly head again . . .

Regardless of one's approach to counselling it is significant that these four symptoms are highlighted in this chapter—perhaps encouraging us to scan through the following checklist (without undue introspection): Disgruntled attitude towards God?; wanting to give it all up?; keeping well away from other people?; feelings like a roller-coaster?. Eventually though, the angry Jonah is gently but forthrightly confronted by his God—all with a view to sharing more of his heart with the prophet.

God's Response to Anger

Having seen four interlocking symptoms of the prophet's anger, we now turn to see how God met with Jonah right in the midst of this experience. At first glance, we might jokingly suggest that the heat of Jonah's anger was countered by the heat of God's creation!! (cf verses 1 and 4 with verse 8): the prophet being given a dose of his own medicine. The text however reveals God's gracious skill in meeting the prophet where he was. He takes the heat out of the situation in three ways:

He does this by first using a single visual aid—'the Lord God provided a vine' (verse 6.). This of course provided only temporary relief for Jonah: there one day from God and gone first thing the next morning. Strictly speaking it was not even 'a one-day wonder'.

We are given the divine meaning of the vine in verses 9–10:

Essentially God's object lesson moves from the lesser priority of verse 10 to the greater priority of verse 11. The key verb in both verses is that of 'being concerned'. In the process of listening then, Jonah is compelled to compare the importance of a small plant with a 'great city' (verse 11; cf 3.2); an inanimate vine with 120,000 animate human beings (and their cattle! verse 11); a near one-day wonder with masses of people facing life and eternity ahead of them. In effect God is posing the question: 'Are your priorities right? Is your concern properly focused?' His intention is to expand Jonah's vision to conform more nearly to his own. We too need to be rescued from being blinkered and petty-minded in a lost world.

Secondly, God asks a pair of near-identical questions: 'Have you any right to be angry?' (verse 4); 'Do you have a right to be angry . . .?' (verse 9). In terms of human rights Jonah was overstepping the mark and beginning to practise 'the divine right of prophets'! He now had to relearn the fact that fruitfulness in ministry is ultimately God's responsibility not ours. The Lord made the vine grow without any help from Jonah (cf verses 6 and 10). Although called to the privilege of being God's spokesman, the actual response of the Ninevites was 'off-limits' for the son of Amittai. The incident was a prophetic 'demarcation dispute'! . . .

To bring this down to earth, imaging the scene either side of your front door at 8.30 am in the morning. Inside the house a hand-written personal letter is greeted with delight while an electricity bill reminder is met with dismay. Outside the postman/woman is employed merely to be faithful in delivering what he/she is given. Whether correspondence causes laughing or crying on the other side of the door is not the primary concern of the Royal Mail employee.

Effectively then God's message could be summarized like this: 'You do your job and I'll do mine. While I'm calling you to be a "fellow-worker" (1Cor. 3:9) the task is ultimately mine . . .'

Third the rubber of Jonah's creed hits the road in three poignant words: 'slow to anger' (verse 2)—on this occasion not spoken by God himself but by his well-taught servant. The Lord had first revealed himself to Moses in this way (Ex. 34.6), and this 'summing-up' of God's character is found at least six more times in the Old Testament (eg Num. 14:18; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Nah. 1:3; Nehemiah 9:17). Jonah of course is well acquainted with God's righteous judgement being displayed in 'fierce anger' (3.9). What he is not so aware of is that he is often far more gracious than we are! . . .

Jonah 4 then paints a vivid picture of the contrast between Jonah's fiery temper and his 'slow to anger'

God—the prophet's short fuse and the Lord's long fuse! Like Jonah, for us it is sometimes when we are most aware of the hardness of our hearts that we realize the compassion of the Father afresh. To quote Paul's words, 'where sin increased, grace increased all the more' (Rom. 5:20).

So what is God up to as he confronts his fuming messenger? Essentially he is translating Jonah's well-worn confession of faith from the academic into the experiential. God also seems keen to ensure that more of his heart of compassion for the outsider rubs off on the prophet. It is somewhat hackneyed, but nonetheless true, that what he does *in* us is more important than how he works *through* us. Flaming anger becoming a doorway into divine compassion!

Conclusion

What happened to Jonah subsequently? We are told elsewhere of his past experience (2 Ki. 14:25) but what of his *future* life and ministry? It is guesswork, but we are probably on safe ground in assuming two possible directions: First—the demonstration of God's heart, resulted in a broken soft-hearted prophet taking a short walk back to the City Mission in Nineveh. Second—God's divine compassion was met by Jonah's response: 'Next stop Joppa harbour'. Which route *did* Jonah take? That is for you and me to answer in our generation! . . .

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Women in the Church— Ordination or Subordination?

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1. Introduction

'If God could speak through Balaam's ass then no doubt he can speak through a woman.' So pronounced an elderly Christian gentleman in a mid-week discussion on the role of women in the church. This verbal bombshell was followed by lengthy silence as the rest of us in the room digested it and sought to control our reactions. The association of Christian women with Balaam's ass was disturbing but nevertheless, judging from their faces, more than a few found the concept quite entertaining. Uppermost in everyone's emotions, however, was shock at the radical nature of the suggestion. Most of those present had been raised in an environment in which women were not allowed to speak in church meetings involving adults of both sexes. Surely it would be contradicting the clear teaching of Scripture if God were to speak to his people through a woman?

Current Church Practice

The Christian churches are divided in their approach to the leadership and ministry of women. A few churches provide exactly the same opportunities for women as they do for men. At the other extreme some churches do not allow women to lead or teach in any

area of church life, except perhaps in women's meetings and children's meetings. Once when asked to speak at a Sunday school prize-giving, I was taken aback to be told that I could be present in the meeting only while I was actually speaking; for the rest of the service I would have to wait outside, since it was being led by one of the women teachers!

In Britain only a few churches place such severe constraints on the public participation of women. Most of the non-episcopal denominations have for many years admitted women to the ministry, but this does not necessarily mean that all their member churches are in agreement. Recently the Church of England has debated the ordination of women to the priesthood with great vigour, exposing a division of opinion on the issue within its ranks which has seriously threatened its internal unity. The Roman Catholic Church has consistently opposed the ordination of women to the priesthood, as have the Orthodox churches.

The situation within independent evangelical and charismatic churches is less clear, but many, if not most, place some restrictions on the involvement of women in leadership and teaching ministries, defending this on biblical grounds. This is not to say that there is common agreement on the teaching of Scripture on this issue; indeed interpretations of some of the more