

Jonah 4 sermon – Running behind God

**** “When concern turns to anger” (+ picture of seal – then killer whale!)**

III – After the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska in 1989, when over 10 million gallons of oil were spilled, there were a lot of people concerned about the impact on the environment. And there was especially a lot of concern over saving the seals that were so badly affected. The average cost of rehabilitating a seal after the oil spill was \$80,000. At a special ceremony, two of the saved animals which cost the most to save were released back into the wild with cheers and applause from onlookers. A minute later they were both eaten by a killer whale.

Now there’s nothing wrong with being concerned about the plight of seals. Nothing at all. But sometimes, perhaps, are there more important things to be concerned about?

I’m concerned about poverty in our world – millions of children who die each year from Hepatitis or Tuberculosis because they don’t have simple medicine. By 2010, 25 million children will be orphans because of the AIDS virus.

I’m concerned about the war in Iraq. And I even get angry about that because I don’t know who’s telling the truth any more.

And I’m concerned about rising petrol prices, and I get angry because it costs me more money!

I’m sure these are things that I should be concerned about, sometimes even angry about. But what concerns me the most? Are there other things that should concern me more?

Jonah was concerned in chapter 4. In fact, he is so concerned about something that he is very, very angry. Angry at God. What is he concerned about? God was saving Ninevah, Jonah’s enemies. And Jonah wasn’t happy about it.

After running away from God, Jonah finally turned around and went to Ninevah to do what God had told him to do – he warned Ninevah that God would destroy them because of their wickedness. For three days he walked through Ninevah saying *“Forty more days and Ninevah will be overturned”*. And surprise surprise, the Ninevites listened to God! They repented! And God saved them! And Jonah’s response is in verses 1-3:

*“Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 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. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.’”*

Jonah is angry enough to die, because God is being gracious and compassionate. He’s angry because God has chosen **not** to destroy the people of Ninevah. We can see Jonah’s anger at God – “I know what you’re like. You like to save people. Well, not these people. They are disgusting people. They are violent enemies of Israel. They have done horrible things to our people. And even though I know you are slow to anger and prefer to save people, you shouldn’t have saved **these** people!

And God says to Jonah in verse 4:

“Have you any right to be angry?”

And so in verses 5-11, God teaches Jonah, and us, a lesson. And this lesson causes us to ask the question, “Are we concerned about the right things? Are our priorities right? Or are there things we should be **more** concerned about?

So Jonah has preached God’s warning throughout Ninevah, and now he goes out to the edge of the city and waits to see what will happen. Perhaps waiting to see if Ninevah slips up and God destroys them anyway! And as he sits out there in the hot desert and watches Ninevah, he makes himself a shelter with some sticks and twigs and leaves lying around, to protect himself from the desert heat.

Then God provides three things. First, verse 6, God provides a vine to grow up **overnight** around Jonah's shelter. It covers over his head and gives him some very comfortable shade. And Jonah was very happy about this vine.

Second, the very next day, after only one day of shade, God provides a worm to eat the vine and it dies. Jonah is not happy about the worm.

Then, third, God provides a scorching east wind and the sun blazes down on Jonah's head and he grows faint. Jonah is now very angry. Angry enough to want to die. Again!

He had a beautiful shady vine, then it disappeared and now he's very, very hot! Jonah has had enough! He never wanted to go to Ninevah, and he never wanted to see them saved. And now, after he's been through a huge storm, nearly drowned, spewed out of a big fish, and then gone and preached to Ninevah, now it's finally over, now he's relaxing in the shade, he's lost the one bit of comfort he had. And he snaps.

****** And God says to him:

"Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do" he said. "I am angry enough to die."

And God says, "Well, let's think about this vine for a moment... You're angry about this vine because you're concerned about it. But why are you concerned about it? You didn't plant it. You didn't make it grow. You didn't care for it or water it. It came up overnight. You said "Hooray for the vine" and then it died overnight. YET, you care about this vine! You are concerned over it enough to be angry about losing it. Angry enough to die!

"Now", says God to Jonah, "think about ME and the people of Ninevah."

I made them. They are my creation. Every one of them. I made the earth that supplies them food and water. They didn't spring up overnight. They're **people**. They're a huge city. A community. And there's not **one** of them, there's 120,000 of them. **And** lots of cattle. And I created the cattle too. And you're happy for me to just destroy them?! If you're going to be concerned about a vine that sprung up overnight, then surely I can at **least** be concerned about the cattle. And surely if I can be concerned about cattle, I should be concerned about the people! If you're concerned about this **one** vine that you had for **one** day, shouldn't I be concerned about 120,000 people? People who can't tell their right from their left! People who don't know right from wrong.

Jonah is concerned about his comfort. God is concerned about his people.

I wonder sometimes if we end up like Jonah does at the end of this book – sitting on a hill and waiting for God to destroy the sinful people of our world? Comfortably safe in our own salvation and waiting for God's judgement on everyone else. Those nasty religions we blame for terrorist attacks and the upsetting changes in our airports because of them. Where is our concern for *them*? Are we sitting on a hill waiting for God to destroy them? Are we concerned enough to want to see them saved? Or are we like Jonah – only concerned when God takes away our comfort?

Often we carry around with us many concerns, every day – about work, family, friends, enemies, neighbours, finances, health, our country, our church, our religion. God has a concern for all those things as well. But his **greatest** concern, his **deepest** concern, the thing that takes up **every page** of the Bible, is God's desire for all people to be saved. How important is that to God? Important enough to send his own Son to earth to die on a cross for the sins of **every** person in this world. Do you think that if saving people wasn't important to God, that he would have sent Jesus to die?

When we were at Katoomba Men's Convention last week, Frank Retief, a Bishop from South Africa, shared with us the turbulence his church went through on Sunday the 25th of July 1993. The St.

James' massacre happened in his church in Cape Town. It left 11 people dead and 50 wounded. As 1400 people were worshipping together, a group of men burst into the church and opened fire with automatic weapons. They burst through the doors and opened fire into the congregation, at the same time throwing nail bomb grenades into the centre of the church.

Inside the church, the tiles in the foyer were smeared with blood. There were several bodies lying on the bloodstained carpets and pews. There was a hole in the floor where one grenade had exploded. Prayer books, music sheets, welcome cards and Bibles were scattered amongst the pools of blood. The ceiling was marked with shrapnel.

Lorenzo's wife died in his arms. Marita died leaving behind her husband and three children. Peter saw his wife murdered next to him. Richard, 17 years old, threw himself in front of Lisa and Bonnie, and died instantly as a bullet went through his head. Twenty-one-year-old Gerard died instantly as he jumped on top of one of the hand grenades. Dimitri lost both his legs and one arm when a grenade fell in his lap.

Frank shared with us that this event had a significant impact across South Africa. And he also told us how it dramatically changed St. James church forever. He said that all of a sudden the trivial things didn't matter anymore. What type of coffee to drink, what cups to use, who's on the roster next week. All the trivial things they used to be concerned about gave way to something far more important. Forgiveness. Forgiveness for their enemies who had ripped apart their church family. This is what made the news across South Africa! A massacre like this – and the response from the church was a message of forgiveness.

They were concerned for eternity. When they saw the blood of their families spread across the church carpet, suddenly the carpet itself wasn't important anymore. God allowed comfort to be taken away and, as Frank shared with us, God lead them through a fire – through a time of great trial and pain. And they responded with forgiveness, because they were concerned for the salvation of the lost, even their enemies.

How many times are we caught up in our own comfort – the shady vine over our head? The comfortable pews, whether we're too hot or cold as we sit here, the money we earn, the house we live in. Well, what if God allows those comfortable things to be ripped apart? What if, like Jonah on the ship, God allows a great storm to pass through us, destroying all that this temporary life offers us? What will concern us then?

If our hearts are where God wants them to be, then we will be concerned about salvation. Instead of being distracted by the temporary comforts of this life, we will be concerned, above all else, for the things that are really important. Eternal lives. Is there **anything** worth being more concerned about?

Don't be concerned about trivial things. There is simply no time for that.