

The Consistent Love of God

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Preacher: Peter Kenny

[0 : 00] love, your consistent love and your prayers and your support for us personally and for the work. We really do appreciate it. So we're going to jump in in Jonah chapter 4, but there's been three chapters before chapter 4.

So what happened in Jonah chapter 1 is that God says to Jonah, go to Nineveh and call out against this for their great evil has come up before me. So God commissions Jonah, tells him to go to Nineveh and Jonah doesn't go.

He instead tries to get to Tarshish on a ship. So he gets on the ship and he falls asleep and doesn't go where God wants him to go. And while he's on the ship, God sends a storm and the sailors start freaking out.

But Jonah stays asleep and they tell him, Jonah, you need to start calling out to your God. And he eventually tells them who he is, what he believes, who he believes in.

And he convinces them that if they throw him into the sea, then God will stop this storm, which they do. The storm stops and then God provides this great big fish to swallow Jonah.

[1 : 12] And when Jonah is in the fish in chapter 2, he prays this amazing prayer to God from the belly of the big fish. In chapter 3, then, God gets to say to Jonah again, Jonah, go to Nineveh.

The same thing that he had said in chapter 1, but this time Jonah goes. And he goes to Nineveh and he proclaims to Nineveh this thing that God has told him to say.

And when he does that, there is an incredible revival, for want of a better term. So the Nineveh, who are a very evil people, all turn back away from their evil ways to God.

It's an amazing thing. And so Jonah, we pick up with him in chapter 4, and we start to see how he responds to what is essentially a revival that God has brought about.

So the start of chapter 4. But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord, isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home?

[2 : 19] That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.

But the Lord replied, is it right for you to be angry? Jonah had gone out and 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.

Then the Lord God 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.

[3 : 26] 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.

But God said to Jonah, is it right for you to be angry about the plant? It is, Jonah said. And I'm so angry.

I wish I were dead. But 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 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.

I wonder who was the last person who wronged you. Maybe you don't have to think too long and hard.

[4 : 30] Maybe it was the person who cut you off in traffic this morning. I hope it wasn't me. Maybe it was the noisy neighbours who keep having house parties until 4am, who keep you awake all night, and the kids awake as well.

How does it feel when that person gets away with it? When you flash your light and they just drive on and they're oblivious to the fact that they have nearly caused an accident.

How does it feel when you call round to the noisy neighbours the next day at a reasonable gentlemanly hour, civilised hour, and you want to explain to them just the reality of the situation. And they don't answer the door. And they never answer the door. And it just seems they always get away with it. It can be pretty hard going when you feel that somebody has done something wrong and nothing is done about it.

Justice is not done. Or maybe a bit more seriously, what about the bankers who have misled people? The ones who have moved 7 billion euros around in order to mislead their investors?

[5 : 41] Who have caused countless arguments over dinner tables? Who have put families under huge pressure as a result of their actions? The penny pinching and the sacrifices that these men, and they're mostly men, have caused as a result of what they have done?

How would you feel if they got away with it? Or what about somebody like Jihadi John, the infamous terrorist who we saw in the last couple of years online, posting videos of the most horrific things you could imagine?

What if he had got away with it? Is it right for you to be angry in such circumstances? We're going to ask four questions today.

Is it right for Jonah to be angry about Nineveh? Is it right for Jonah to be angry about the plant? Is it right for God to be concerned about Nineveh?

And is it right for God to be concerned about Jonah? So first, is it right for Jonah to be angry about Nineveh? I was really tempted to ask everyone to answer these questions out loud to see what you would say just out of interest.

[6 : 56] Is it right for Jonah to be angry about Nineveh? When we come across Jonah in chapter four, he is certainly very, very angry. In verse one, it says that Jonah became angry.

And in verse three, it says, it is better for me to live. Sorry, it is better for me to die than to live. He is raging. Why is he so angry?

Why is he so angry that the Ninevites have repented and not been destroyed by God? God had warned the Ninevites of the danger they were in.

Back in chapter one, when Jonah ran away from this commission, we weren't told exactly why he ran away. But Jonah here makes it abundantly clear in verse two.

I knew, God, that you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

[7 : 54] A God who relents from sending calamity. This is why Jonah is angry. He knew that if he told the Ninevites to repent, that God might relent from the disaster that he would bring on them.

And that's exactly what's happened. The Ninevites have repented on a massive scale. And so God has relented. It's hard to convey, I think, the extent of Jonah's rage.

Why precisely is he so angry? The answer is hinted at in verse one. To Jonah, this seemed very wrong. Or as a more literal translation puts it, to Jonah, this seemed like a great evil.

It seemed wrong that the Ninevites should get away with all that they have done. And the Ninevites were extremely evil. When you walked into the Ninevites' city, what you would see on banners was not welcome to Nineveh with smiley faces or Nineveh fair trade city for ten years.

What you would see was the Ninevites' enemies impaled on poles, dying slow and agonizing deaths. These people were evil.

[9 : 11] And so Jonah is angry. I wonder, would you be angry? Do you think Jonah should be angry that the Ninevites have apparently got away with it?

That they haven't been destroyed by God? He has good reason, I think, to call them enemies. God asks them in verse four, is it right for you to be angry?

And Jonah doesn't give an answer. And so the story moves on. Our second question, is it right for Jonah to be angry about the plant?

The fact that the Ninevites have repented and seemingly got away with it isn't the only thing that angers Jonah. So after leaving Nineveh, he goes out and sits on the east side of the city and he builds himself a little hut.

And I imagine the hut was something like I would build, totally inadequate for the job that it was built for. It's supposed to shade him so that as he all but grabs his popcorn and watches and hopes that God will destroy Nineveh, that he is in some kind of comfort.

[10:23] But humorously, I think, the hut doesn't do what it's supposed to do. And so God miraculously, supernaturally provides a leafy plant in verse six.

And the plant grows up over Jonah and this does the job. And Jonah is happy. He is very happy about the plant in verse six. A little bit of shade from the scorching sun.

It seems like he's out there all night. And then in verse seven, morning has broken and his plant is going to be broken as well by this worm that God appoints.

So God appoints a worm. It chews the plant in verse seven. And the plant withers and dies with the result that Jonah's shade is gone.

Not only that, when the sun rose in verse eight, God appointed or provided a scorching east wind, the kind of wind that has never been felt in Carigalheim.

[11:24] It was scorching hot. And the sun blazed on Jonah's head. And for some reason, I can just imagine him sitting there, bawled and getting sunburnt on his head.

No factor 40. And you can nearly see the steam starting to come out of his ears once again as his anger rises over this situation.

And he says it would be better in verse eight for me to die than to live. And again, God presses this question, the same question that he had back in verse four.

Is it right for you to be angry this time about the plant? But back in verse four, Jonah didn't respond. But now Jonah does respond.

And he makes it very clear. Yes, it is right, he says in verse nine. And I am so angry. I wish I was dead. It is emphatic.

[12:25] And even in the circumstances, it is incredibly disrespectful. It is incredibly insolent towards God. When you compare this to the way in which other prophets react to God, Isaiah in chapter six, that he realizes just who he is in light of this incredible holy God.

And yet Jonah answers back to God like a petty little child. It is right for me to be angry about this plant. I'm so angry. I wish I were dead.

As I've read through Jonah and every time I read this chapter, I never really know whether to laugh or to cry at Jonah at this point.

Because he has had a rough time of it. He's had the whole storm thing, the whole big fish thing, the whole Ninevites repenting and not getting destroyed like he wanted thing.

And he's been sleeping rough all night. And his one apparent comfort in life has been taken away. It would be like as I brew my coffee on the counter and my elbow flies and knocks it all over the floor.

[13:36] My one comfort in life has taken away. And I am angry. He's angry that the Ninevites have not been destroyed. And he's angry that the plant has been destroyed.

And the question for us is, is it right for him to be angry about the Ninevites? And is it right for him to be angry about the plant? What do you think? Our third question is, should God be concerned about Nineveh?

Well, God is indeed slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And he patiently makes the point abundantly clear to Jonah in verse 10.

Jonah, you have been concerned about this plant. Though you did not tend it or make it grow, it sprang up overnight and died overnight.

And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people and also many animals? So what's the point?

[14:40] Is it that God is anti-plant? That he doesn't like a nice leafy fern? I don't think it's that. I think the point is that, of course, Jonah should be concerned about the plant.

That's okay. That's valid. But should he not be so much more concerned about this city? 120,000 people and many animals, all the commerce, all the business that was going on there, all these souls destined for an eternity in God's anger.

Should God not be concerned about Nineveh? What do you think? Keeping in mind how evil they were. Our fourth question, is it right for God to be concerned about Jonah?

So God asks the question, should I not be concerned about Nineveh? And Jonah knows the answer. In theory, he knows the answer because he has said back in verse 2, I know that you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

So in theory, Jonah knows, well, of course God is going to be concerned about Nineveh. What Jonah doesn't seem to realize, though, is that he is just as deeply in need of God's love and mercy and patience and steadfastness as the Ninevites are.

[16:14] It's true that he hasn't killed a bunch of people like the Ninevites. But if you picked up Jonah from under his plant and plonked him on the throne with the power and the authority to do it, do you think he would wait for one moment before wiping out Nineveh?

Jonah doesn't seem to realize that he is just as deeply in need of God's love and compassion as the Ninevites. Think about what has happened in the story so far.

The first thing that happens is that Jonah openly rebels against God and tries to go to Tarshish. And yet God is patient with him. The next thing that happens is that Jonah is on a boat with a load of people who don't know God.

And rather than sharing his faith with them, he falls asleep in the boat. It would be right, I think, for God to be angry in that situation. And yet God is patient with him.

The next thing that happens is that Jonah gets thrown into the sea. And rather than plunge down to the depths, God provides a big fish to save him. It would be right, I think, at that point for God to let him go.

[17:24] And yet God doesn't. Jonah preaches to the Ninevites. And there's a massive revival. And Jonah's reaction, rather than being overjoyed and thinking, how can we get these folk disciplined, is, I really wish this hadn't happened.

I am really angry about this. And God, rather than being impatient with Jonah, is patient. He could have squashed Jonah so many times so far in this book.

But he doesn't let him drown. He gives him another go at the mission to Nineveh. He doesn't let him fry too much in the midday sun. And he doesn't let Jonah miss this point, that he is as much in need of God's patience and love and compassion as the Ninevites are.

So I wonder, who do you associate with in this story? Do you put yourself in the shoes of the Ninevites?

Or in the shoes of Jonah? Are you like the Ninevites who feel like they have done so many horrendous things, they don't need to be reminded twice. And the minute that the opportunity to know God's love arises, they turn to him away from their evil ways.

[18:46] Or maybe you associate more with Jonah. You know in your mind that God is gracious and compassionate. But you're not entirely convinced that you're bad enough to need his love towards you.

I think whoever's shoes you put yourself in, you're opposed to God. You're an enemy of God. And that God has a right to be angry, whether it's with Jonah or with Nineveh.

He has a right to be angry with those who oppose him. But he is slow to anger. And so we have a conundrum because neither Jonah nor the Ninevites deserve God's love.

He has a right to be angry with both. And yet he is slow to anger. And so we wonder, how does God make his enemies into his friends?

I think this is what's at the heart of Jonah's anger at the start of chapter 4. Is God going to just overlook all the horrendous things that the Ninevites have done to real people?

[19:55] Is God just going to overlook Jonah's rebellion against him throughout this book? Will he just ignore it? Is that the kind of God that we know? When Paul the Apostle is writing to the church in Rome in the New Testament, he picks up on this very question.

He is all too aware of this issue. How is God going to resolve this problem? Because on the one hand, there are all these people, the whole human race, who are deserving of God's anger.

And yet on the other hand, God is slow to anger. On the one hand, you have all these people, the whole human race, who are enemies of God. And yet God is in the business of making friends out of his enemies.

What's the solution? Paul says that while we were enemies, and he's writing to the church, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God.

And how does he say it happened? Was it by God overlooking our sins? Turning a blind eye?

Winking at the things that we have done? The rebellion? No, he says we were enemies, and we were reconciled to God by the death of Jesus.

[21:17] The Ninevites deserved to die. Jonah deserved to die. And we deserved to die. There is no doubt about it. But instead, in our stead, in our place, Jesus dies.

And our sins aren't overlooked. The horrific things that the Ninevites have done are not overlooked. Jonah's rebellion isn't overlooked. Jesus pays the price for all of those things.

As a result, we, God's enemies, are reconciled to him and made his friends. And even death is transformed into a door into his presence.

The book of Jonah ends, as you've noticed, with a question mark. A massive font 72 size question mark.

Should I not be concerned for Nineveh? And we never hear Jonah's answer. I wonder what he said. It invites us to answer the question for us to enter into this story.

[22 : 32] By answering yes, you should be concerned. We don't ignore the fact that the Ninevites are sinners any more than God ignores it. But we know that he's in the business of making friends out of his enemies.

By answering yes, you should be compassionate towards the Ninevites. We are acknowledging that we experience God's love for us as well, that we were once his enemies, that we have been reconciled to him.

By answering yes, God, you should be concerned for Nineveh, for Ireland, for Cork, for Carigalline. We are committing ourselves to the same cause of sharing with others the truth of how God makes friends out of his enemies.

But here's the crucial thing. We don't primarily answer with our lips. We answer with our actions. You remember back in chapter 1, Jonah answered very clearly with his actions.

The question is, should God be concerned for the Ninevites? And Jonah says, no, I'm going to Tarshish. Jonah answered with his actions, and we do the same.

[23 : 43] We say yes when we see others just like ourselves, in need of God's compassion. We say, yes, God, you should be concerned for Nineveh when we long to see others know God and turn away from their rebellion against him.

We say yes when we realize that our greatest concern in life is to see others to come to know him as well. We certainly answer yes when we don't allow fleeting material things like plants or like coffee take priority over people in our lives.

We answer yes when we take the time, we make the effort, we make the sacrifice, and it is a sacrifice, to get to know people, to talk to them, to share our lives with them, invite them into the messiness of our own lives.

As we pray for them, we answer yes, you should be compassionate, God, and we too long to share that same compassion. I think it's an amazing thing that God has not just made us into his friends, but he invites us into this mission with this question, should I not be compassionate?

It's a great and joyful thing for us to be able to answer yes, not just with our lips, but with our actions. Let's pray. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, you have made us your own, and we can call you Father because you have loved us, that we were enemies, but you have reconciled us to yourself by the death of Jesus, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[25 : 43] Lord, help us to realize just how true that is, and help us to move from there, Lord, into rejoicing in your goodness towards us.

And Lord, please help us to reflect your compassion to others this week. Lord, it is difficult, it is hard in the realities of life to make time, to make the effort for those around us.

And Lord, so often we are rebuffed or we are turned away, Lord, but we pray that you would help us to go, knowing that we share your love for people as we speak with them, and welcome them into our lives.

Lord, we look forward to seeing what you are going to do. Lord, how you will continue to make more people your friends, Lord, who were your enemies as a result of what Christ has done.

We praise you for this, and we ask, Lord, that you would help us to worship you. Amen. I think we are going to stand again and sing.

[26 : 54] We are indeed going to sing. Thank you, Peter.

God so loved the world that he gave his son. His concern was for the nations, and he proved that concern by sending Jesus.

So, as we sing this song, if we need to flick it on here, there we go. So, as we sing this song, may it also be a prayer that God's concerns would become our priorities.

God's concerns would become our priorities. May that be our prayer as we remind ourselves of God's amazing love to us. Let's stand together as we sing. May that we sing.

May that be our prayer Good night. May that we sing. Amen.
[28 : 09] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.