

A great compassion

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[0 : 0 0] Jonah 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? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish.

I knew that you were gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it's 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 to his head and ease his discomfort.

And Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm which chewed up the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint.

[1 : 2 5] 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, he said. I'm so angry, I wish I were dead. But God said, You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend to it or make it grow.

It sprang up overnight and it died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are many more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals.

This is God's word to us. Last week I was up in Dublin, up in Grosvenor Baptist Church, and they send their greetings. It was lovely to be there and I'm grateful that I've had the opportunity to go to Grosvenor and to bring God's word there.

And they send their love and their greetings. They asked me, Do you prefer Dublin or Cork? Which is a tricky question to answer when you're in Dublin.

[2 : 3 8] But now that I'm back in Cork, it's a very easy question to answer. So it's good to be back this morning. And it's good to spend time in God's word together.

I don't know if you've ever heard this quote, the saying, I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.

Now, we could spend a long time discussing that quote. But you can understand the sentiment behind the quote. What it's highlighting is this gap that is there sometimes between Jesus and his followers, between Jesus and his disciples, between Christ and Christians.

It can be a gap in terms of the way Christians think or speak or act. That it isn't in keeping with how Jesus thinks and speaks and acts as we read about him in the Bible.

And maybe this morning, as you hear that quote, and you hear about this gap that is there between Jesus and his followers, you would be the first one to agree with that.

- [3 : 45] And maybe you would readily agree. Maybe you're really aware in your own life of how there can be a gap between the character of Jesus and your own character.
- I certainly am in my life. Maybe you'd love it to be different. Maybe you'd love to be more like Jesus. Maybe you can resonate with the Apostle Paul when he says, I do the things I don't want to do and I don't do the things I want to do.
- Oh, wretched man that I am. Maybe you are very conscious of that gap and want to see the gap closed so that you might be more like your Savior.
- Maybe you're conscious of it as you encounter people who are very different to you or even a little bit different to you. Maybe we are conscious that we don't love them the way we could or the way we should.
- When we come across people who are not like us, who are different, who are from the other side of the border, the other side of the street, the other side of the river, that we find it hard to be concerned for them.
- [4 : 51] There are other ways we see that gap as well. Maybe we don't see the gap so much. Maybe you're not aware of it this morning or not as aware of it. Maybe it's visible to people around you and not to you.
- I found that at times that somebody will say something to me, do you realize this is happening in your attitude, in your mind? And I'm thinking, wow, I didn't even see that. I was chatting to a solicitor friend during the week, and he said that when a client comes in asking for the solicitor to represent him, one warning sign is when the client in conversation always says that they're right, that they're right about everything, that the other person was always wrong.
- And perhaps there are times when we don't see a gap between how we're living or thinking or speaking and the character of Jesus, the character of God.
- And in Jonah chapter 4, there's a gap. There's a gap between the character of Jonah and the character of God. And what God does for Jonah is he kindly points out to Jonah the gap that is there, and then he points out to Jonah what he needs to bridge the gap.
- And the way God does this is through questions. He asks Jonah some questions. And so let's reflect on these questions that we too might have this gap bridged a little more between our character and the character of God.
- [6 : 26] And so the first question for us this morning is, is it right for us to be angry? You see that question in verse 4. The Lord replied to Jonah, is it right for you to be angry?
- And you could kind of unfold that a little bit and ask it like this. Is it right for us to be angry towards people that God loves? Because that's what's going on for Jonah.
- Back in verse 1, it says, to Jonah, this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. And what he became angry about is the fact that God had lovingly warned the city of Nineveh that they were going the wrong direction.
- They needed to turn back to him, turn away from the evil things that they were doing. They do this, and God relents from sending disaster on them. And Jonah is angry about this.
- He is angry that God has not destroyed them. Jonah will not be kind to the city of Nineveh because they don't deserve it.
- [7 : 30] They don't deserve Jonah's love. And so he won't give them what they don't deserve. Instead, he wants to treat them as they deserve. He wants them destroyed. He wants them wiped off the face of the planet.
- He wants justice, is what Jonah wants. And you can see that Jonah, as a result, is quick to anger. In verse 1, he became angry.
- In verse 2, he prayed to the Lord, Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is why I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish.

And in verse 3, You can see the anger eating away at Jonah, that he thinks it is better for him to die than to live in a world where the Ninevites are forgiven.

And so Jonah is quick to anger. And you know, anger can be a good thing if it is anchored in love. If it moves us towards people, if it moves us towards resolution and towards reconciliation.

[8 : 39] But anger, in the case of Jonah, is not good because it is moving him away from the Ninevites. He didn't want to go there in the first place. And so he has this kind of passive-aggressive attitude towards them.

He tries to avoid them. He barely speaks to them, it seems, in chapter 3. And then, in verse 5, he goes out and sits down at a place east of the city. So he leaves as quick as he can, it seems, so that he doesn't have to engage with these people any more than absolutely necessary.

And so he is quick to anger. And he puts boundaries on his love. Okay? So Jonah is an Israelite. There would have been borders, boundaries around the land of Israel.

And for Jonah, the borders, the boundaries around the land of Israel are exactly where his boundaries of love lie.

And his love will not go one step over those borders, over those boundaries, into a different nation. He has no concern for the city of Nineveh, no attachment to them whatsoever.

[9 : 49] And so he waits in verse 5. He makes himself a shelter. He sits in its shade, and he waits to see what would happen to the city. He waits in the hope that they will be destroyed.

And so that is a little of where Jonah is at. Now, it's not all bad. Jonah recognizes how shocking it is that God would relent from sending disaster in the city of Nineveh.

He recognizes how shocking this grace of God is towards this city, that yes, they do deserve justice. So he recognizes that. And it's also not all bad in the sense that Jonah prays.

So let's not overlook the fact that Jonah actually prays in this chapter. He turns to the Lord. He prayed to the Lord in verse 2. And so at least he's praying his anger to God in the right direction, which is not an easy thing to do.

One author says, it is easy to be honest before God with our hallelujahs. It is somewhat more difficult to be honest in our hurts.

[11 : 05] It is nearly impossible to be honest before God in the dark emotions of our hate. So we commonly suppress our negative emotions or when we do express them, we do it far from the presence or what we think is the presence of God.

Ashamed or embarrassed to be seen in these curse-stained bib overalls. But Jonah does pray his anger to God.

He's not ashamed or embarrassed about his anger. He brings it to God and perhaps there's some good in that. And yet Jonah, he does not want the Ninevites to be treated kindly.

He wants them to be treated as they deserve. He is quick to anger. He has put boundaries on his love and he waits to see if they'll be destroyed. That's Jonah.

And then we encounter God in this chapter. Jonah knows about God. In verse 2, he says, I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love.

[12 : 18] A God who relents from sending calamity. Calamity. He knows this in his head that this is what God is like. He had learned about it when he would have been growing up from what we call the Old Testament, earlier on in the Old Testament.

He knows that God is gracious. So Jonah won't treat the Ninevites kindly and yet God treats them kindly though they don't deserve it.

He knows that God is compassionate in verse 2 or we could say merciful. That Jonah wants them treated the way they deserve.

God doesn't treat them the way their evil deserves. He knows that God is slow to anger in verse 2 unlike Jonah who is quick to anger.

God is slow to anger and he's abounding in love in verse 2 unlike Jonah who puts boundaries on his love.

[13 : 31] Now this idea of abounding in love, this word abounding, it's like waves that are not just lapping the shore but are coming over the edge of the storm barrier, this surge of love from God.

Jonah knows that God is abounding in love. His love overflows boundaries and borders. His love knows no bounds, no boundaries, no borders.

And Jonah knows that God is a God who relents from sending calamity. God had given them 40 days to turn back to him.

So while Jonah would wait and see if they would be destroyed, hoping that they would be destroyed, God waits, hoping, if we could put it like that, to see if they would come back.

Like the father in the story of the prodigal son who is craning his neck to see if his son is going to come up the road any day. And this is what makes Jonah so angry that God is like this, that he is compassionate and merciful and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

[14 : 51] The God of the Old Testament, he's like this. That's what Jonah is angry about. And you realize the vast gap between God's character and Jonah's character and now Jonah has an opportunity to bridge the gap to join the dots.

Some of the boys' join the dots books are very complicated. You're on dot number 147 and you're looking for dot number 148 and you can't find it.

The dots that God wants Jonah to join are much more simple. There's three dots. There's God, the Ninevites and Jonah. Now, Jonah has joined the dot from God to the Ninevites so he's had compassion on the Ninevites.

Jonah has joined the dot from God to Jonah because God has rescued Jonah from drowning earlier on in the book. And now the last dot that God wants Jonah to connect is from Jonah to the Ninevites.

It's not too difficult, Jonah, logically, to make this connection that what you know in your head to be true, I want that to sink down into your heart towards these people.

[16 : 06] And so God asks the question, is it right for you to be angry, Jonah, in verse 4? Is it right for you to not be kind to them?

Is it right for you to want to treat them the way their sins deserve? Is it right for you to put boundaries on your love? Is it right for you to be angry, Jonah? And the answer is, yes, if Jonah is in a position where he did not need the mercy of God, where he did not need the grace of God, where he did not need the compassion of God, a resounding yes, it's right for me to be angry.

But of course, God had shown him kindness. God had shown him mercy and compassion, and God was abounding in love towards Jonah. We spent half of the book waiting for Jonah to do what God had asked him to do.

God's love knew. God's love knew no boundaries towards Jonah, that he sends his son not from one nation to another nation, but from heaven to earth, overcoming this boundary, this barrier, in order to rescue Jonah.

Jonah didn't seem to realize that he was as much an enemy of God as the Ninevites were. But God shows his great love for Jonah in this way. Christ died for him while he was still a sinner.

[17 : 36] And so God wants Jonah to realize, to answer this question, is it right for you to be angry, Jonah? Of course not. Of course it's not right for you to be angry.

You have needed the compassion and love and kindness of God as much as the Ninevites have. And you have experienced it tangibly. And so when we see a gap between our character, our attitude, and God's, and especially when it comes to our attitude towards other people who God loves, we need to ask ourselves this question, allow God to ask us this question, is it right for us to be angry?

Is it right for us to want to not treat people kindly, even if they don't deserve it? No, it's not. Is it right for us to want to treat them as they deserve while they got what they were looking for?

They got what was coming to them? No, that is not how God has treated us. Is it right to put boundaries on our love? Well, these people I can love, these people I can be concerned about, these people I can empathize with, but not those over there.

that's not good or right. Is it right for us to be angry? It's not. It is not. We have a God who has shown us great love, compassion, kindness, grace, who is slow to anger towards us.

[19 : 11] And so God gently asked Jonah this first question, is it right for you to be angry towards people that God loves? the answer is no. And when we allow him to ask it of us, and when we find ourselves being angry, if we ask it of ourselves, and we dwell on his love for us, it has to be a resounding, no, it is not right for me to harbour this anger.

A second question we want to reflect on is this question down in verse 9. It's kind of similar, isn't it? Is it right for you to be angry about the plant? We're definitely angry about this plant.

It's a wonderful plant, and we praise God for it. What would be an equivalent question for us? How about this one? Is it right for us to be angry when the world doesn't revolve around us?

Is it right for us to be angry when the world doesn't revolve around us? So Jonah is setting himself up for a movie night, verse 5.

He goes out, sits down at a place on the east side of the city. You can see him there with his big bucket of popcorn, his oversized drink, and he's just kicking back, waiting for the show to begin.

[20 : 30] He is just sorted. He's got himself nice and comfortable. He's happy now. Jonah looks after number one. Jonah looks after Jonah, and all he needs now is for God to rain fire and brimstone down from heaven, and he will be delighted.

And it would be hilarious if it wasn't so horrifying that Jonah is acting like this, waiting to see what would happen.

Where should Jonah be? Jonah should be inside a Nineveh having follow-up conversations with the people who have turned to God. Well, God doesn't send fire and brimstone down on Nineveh.

He sends a plant in verse 6. In verse 6, the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head, to ease his discomfort.

Look at that concern on the part of God that he would miraculously make this plant grow just to give Jonah a little bit of shade for his head. A gift from God to Jonah.

[21 : 51] God knows that the only thing that makes Jonah happier than his own comfort is more of his own comfort. And so, like the billionaire who loves his money and he says, I'd give it all away for just a little bit more, Jonah now is very happy.

In verse 6, Jonah was very happy about the plant. I mean, he is grinning ear to ear with his comfort. But you know, God loves Jonah too much to allow him to stay anchored to his comforts.

so God provides the comfort but he doesn't want Jonah to be living for the plant. So attached to the plant. And so, in verse 7, at dawn the next day God provided a worm which chewed the plant so that it withered.

Miraculously, like he made the plant grow, he makes this worm chew the plant so that it withers and Jonah gets angry again. This time at God because the plant is destroyed.

And so, by the time the sun rises in verse 8, God provided the scorching east wind 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.

[23 : 22] He wanted to die when God hadn't destroyed Nineveh. Now he wants to die because God had destroyed the plant. Jonah is living for himself.

He is living for his own comforts. Even the salvation that he has received and enjoyed from God, it's all about him. And we need to hear this because we live in a world where our comfort and our sense of entitlement, what we deserve is all around us.

It's the air we breathe, it's the water we swim in. Last week when I was going to Dublin, I was getting the twenty past three train from Kent Station, Cork, to Houston Station, Dublin.

The twenty past three train left the station at ten past five. So we were nearly two hours sitting on the train in the station with the heating turned up, which wasn't as pleasant as it sounds, the doors closed, going nowhere.

They never came past with tea or coffee, they never came past with a glass of water, they didn't say to us, you can leave the train, you have loads of time, buy something in the shop and come back on.

[24 : 49] And so we sat there and waited and waited and when the lady with the trolley was eventually given permission to go down the train selling tea and coffee, I said, are we going to get a complimentary cup of tea or coffee for being delayed two hours in the station?

And you know, in that moment, I was thinking, I deserve this. Doesn't she realise the inconvenience that I have gone through by sitting on this train, not dawning on me that she too had been delayed two hours and she had to do two hours extra work in her job.

Was it right for me to be angry in that moment? Well, if the world revolves around me, yes, it was right for me to be angry. If comfort is my primary goal, then yes, it was right for me to be angry.

If I take things for granted that they are a given, that I should get a cup of tea or coffee rather than a gift, then yes, it was right for me to be angry.

But the world doesn't revolve around me. And God wants us to realise this. He is concerned for our comfort, he provides for our needs, but that's not his greatest concern.

[26 : 11] That's not his ultimate concern. He wants us to know that the things that we enjoy from him are not givens in the sense that we can just presume to receive them, but they are gifts.

They are gifts. And so in verse 11, God says to Jonah, should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh? You see the difference between Jonah and God.

Jonah has pity on the plant only because it affects him, only because it is a bearing on him, only because it has made him less comfortable that the plant has been destroyed.

But God has pity on Nineveh because that's his character, that he is a God of compassion, abounding in love.

God has concern for the great city of Nineveh. And as we have read all the way through the book of Jonah, we realize that God has concern not only for the city of Nineveh, but he also has concern for the sailors, he also has concern for Jonah, and he even has concern for the cattle in Nineveh at the end of verse 11.

[27 : 36] Also many animals, question mark. This is the God that we serve. He is so compassionate that he cares not only for the people, but for the animals in this place.

His compassion, his concern is steadfast, it's unchanging, it's unwavering. It is not hindered when God faces discomfort or inconvenience the way it is like for us.

This is the way God is. What did Jesus give up out of loving concern for Jonah?

Jesus many years later comes to die for the people of God, to make them his own. Was Jesus concerned for his own comfort?

When he experienced tiredness and hunger, tears and sorrow? Not at all. He left heaven to come to earth. We cannot imagine the borders and boundaries that he crossed to show his compassion and concern for us.

[28 : 53] He gave up his life for Jonah. He gave up his life for us. Can you imagine if Jesus' compassion or concern were anchored to his own comfort?

He would have failed at the first hurdle when the devil came to him in the wilderness and the devil says to him, you're the son of God, turn these stones into bread.

Do you know what I would have said? I would have said, you're dead right. I am hungry and I want to eat something. And it would have been game over. But Jesus is not concerned for his own comfort.

comfort. He pursues his people through thick and thin, no matter what it takes. And what it would take for him is to lay down his life, to save people like Jonah, to save people like me and you.

And so what God does in this second question is he invites Jonah to answer, is it right for you to be angry about the plant? Well, no it's not.

[29 : 59] It's not right for me to be angry about the plant. It's not right for me to be angry when my comfort, my convenience is taken away or hindered in some way. My primary concern is to glorify God, to live for him.

Everything I have is a gift, not a given. And so whether he gives or takes away, I will say blessed be his name. And you know when we realize that, what it will do is it will bridge the gap between God's character and our character.

Because no longer are we anchored or tethered to our comforts. No longer are we anchored or tethered to our convenience. We've a couple who are here just before Christmas.

Many of you know them, Peter and Neus. they're off to a different country for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of sharing Jesus with people. They have gone to a country where they will face discomfort culturally.

They have to learn a new language. They have a little one, little girl who will face growing up in an unusual culture for her. They're far from friends, they're far from family, and you wonder what would move them to move like this.

[31 : 24] And you realize it's because their concern is similar to God's concern, to have compassion on those who have not heard about Jesus, to have compassion on people that they might hear about Jesus.

And so they haven't allowed their comfort, their convenience to hinder them. And the point of all this is not that we all become overseas missionaries. The point of this is to help us just to answer the question, is it right for us to be angry when the world doesn't revolve around us?

It's not. It's not. Jesus has moved heaven and earth in order to make us his own. And so it is not right for us to be angry. We rejoice that he frees us from that anger.

When we feel it bubbling up inside ourselves, we ask ourselves the question, is it right for you to be angry that this comfort, this convenience has been taken away? It's not right.

Forgive us, Lord, when we are more concerned about our comfort than about other people. Let's just reflect briefly on this last question that God asks Jonah.

[32 : 38] This cliffhanger at the end of the book of Jonah. Jonah, verse 10, 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?

God is highlighting this sense of spiritual blindness. He needs to warn them and to draw them to himself. And what we see here is that God pities these people because they have been made in his image.

He cares for those he has made. And do you know what? This compassion of our God is contagious. And so the question for Jonah as the book finishes is this, an unusual question.

Is Jonah going to be a drain or is Jonah going to be a radiator? Is he going to be a drain or is he going to be a radiator? Is he going to be self-centered and receive all the blessing and kindness of God himself?

[33 : 48] Or is he going to be one through whom God brings blessing and love and compassion to those around him? And you know, when we hear that, we start either to feel guilty or crushed or burdened.

That isn't what God wants us to hear. What God wants us to hear is that we serve a God who is abounding in love, who is full of steadfast faithfulness, who is gracious, who is compassionate.

If we know that in our heads, if we've experienced that in our hearts, we answer with a resounding yes, God, it is right for you to be compassionate.

Not just on the city of Nineveh, but on the city of Cork. We have known this for ourselves, we long for others to know it, we pray that you'd give us opportunities to be involved in speaking about Jesus and your great love to others.

And we pray, Father, that we would have the joy of seeing his compassion cross borders, cross boundaries, cross the people that we never imagined would turn to him.

[34 : 58] and so let's ask God now to help us to respond and to allow him to close this gap between our character and his.

Father, as we reflect on who we are, Lord, we sometimes despair and we despair, Lord. I despair at myself that I can be so self-centered, self-motivated, concerned for my own comfort and Father, we pray you'd forgive us when that is so.

We pray, Lord, that you'd have mercy on us. We have experienced your mercy and kindness so many times in so many ways. And, Father, as we reflect on these questions that you gently ask Jonah, awaiting a response to you, Lord, we ask the same questions of ourselves.

Father, we pray that you draw out our heart towards others as we reflect on your heart towards us. And, ultimately, we praise you for Jesus. We praise you that he was not so much concerned for himself, but concerned to seek and save the lost of who we are, those.

And so, Lord, we praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.