

Compassion For The Great City

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[0 : 00] Why is Jonah so angry? So angry that he wants to die. He has just been used to ignite one of the greatest spiritual awakenings in the history of humanity.

He's a prophet. Prophets preach. They live to preach. They live to speak the life-giving word of God, the word that makes things happen.

Jonah goes to preach to one of the greatest cities of the world of his day. Jonah gets to preach to the city of Nineveh, the leading city of the Assyrian Empire.

And when he preaches, the city responds. Big time. The whole city repents, turns from their thinking at fundamental levels, turns from their misery-causing decisions, and calls on the living God.

I mean, what's not to like about that? There he is, sitting in the sand, in the desert, just outside the city limits, waiting to see if what he had hoped would happen will happen.

[1 : 15] He sits there, angry. So angry, he wants to die. That he would sit in the sand, so exhausted, that he feels like dying, I can understand.

I know that feeling. Sunday afternoon, so depleted, I wonder if I can do it again. So tired, it feels like I am dying. But anger, after witnessing the life-changing power, power of the preached word of God, angry, so angry he wants to die.

Why? Because the God he thinks he knows, is not being the God he thinks he should be. God is not being God, the way Jonah wants God to be God.

Know anyone like that? He is not simply confused about God, and God's ways in the world. He is not simply disappointed with God, and God's ways in the world.

All of us have experienced confusion, and disappointment with God, at one time or another. It's that Jonah does not like, the God he is encountering.

[2 : 32] Jonah does not like, what God feels for this city. Jonah does not want to feel, what God feels for the city. God's feelings for the city of Nineveh, make Jonah angry.

To put it in terms of the text we just read, especially chapter 4, verses 10 and 11, God's compassion for the city, makes Jonah angry.

So angry he wants to die. I mean, something's wrong with this picture, isn't it? A whole city turns from its sinful ways that have gotten it in trouble.

120,000 people have decided to turn away from their deceit, and corruption, and injustice, and immorality, and violence. And then they experience mercy and grace, rivers of mercy and grace.

The very thing God promises anyone who will repent. The very thing Jonah knows to be at the heart of the God of Israel. The very thing Jonah declares to God, you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness.

[3 : 44] One who relents concerning calamity. Jonah sees the heart of the heart of God displayed before his very eyes. A miracle of mercy and grace.

An entire city changes its mind about how to live, and then experiences a new lease on life. Jonah should have run back to Jerusalem with the good news.

Hear ye, hear ye. Nineveh heard Yahweh's word and turned. The people are changing. They're becoming human again. Let us celebrate how much God loves the world.

But no, Jonah's angry. So angry he wants to die. Jonah 4.1. But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry.

Or as the version we read this morning renders it. But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. Literally, it is. It became evil to Jonah as a great evil.

[4 : 48] Or, it became wrong to Jonah as a great wrong. Why? Why does what God has done for this great city seem so evil to Jonah?

So wrong to Jonah? Again, because the God Jonah thinks he knows is not being God the way Jonah thinks God is supposed to be God.

And in the back and forth interaction in Jonah 4, between the true and living God and this reluctant prophet, we see the true and living God seeking to bring Jonah into a true and living understanding of the true and living God.

I like how Bible teacher Ron Klein outlines the book of Jonah. Chapter 1, Jonah running from God. Chapter 2, Jonah running into God.

Chapter 3, Jonah running with God. And chapter 4, Jonah trying to run God. And just as Jonah learned, again, that he cannot run from God, he learned again that he cannot run God.

[6 : 10] Jonah cannot make God be God the way Jonah wants God to be God. Now, you have likely noticed, as we read Jonah 4, that God asked Jonah a question twice.

The same question twice. Verse 4, do you have good reason to be angry? And then verse 9, do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?

Jonah does answer God the second time about the plant. Yes, I have good reason to be angry. But Jonah does not answer God the first time about being angry of God's mercy and grace for Nineveh. He just sits there in the desert sand, looking at the city in silence. He gives the Lord of the universe the silent treatment.

Nothing. But silent though he may be, knowing Jonah, as I have come to know him, Jonah had to be answering God in his soul, right?

[7 : 25] Do you have good reason to be angry? Although he does not speak out loud, I think he does think he has good reasons. So just for a few moments, let me suggest some good reasons to be angry with God.

Let me suggest what Jonah could have said. He doesn't speak up, but what he could have said. Jonah could have said, you wasted my time and energy.

See, I go to the city, to the city that wants to destroy me and my people. I tell the city that you are planning to overthrow it and then you do not do it.

I travel all that way. I risk the possibility of being stoned and then nothing. So yes, I have good reason to be angry. But that reason is really no grounds for anger for the simple reason that God had not sent Jonah to announce destruction.

God had sent Jonah with a word of warning. And as I've been emphasizing, a word of warning is a word of grace. The word of warning means that God is not finished with us. The word of warning means there's a possibility for things to change.

[8 : 45] Another reason for being angry. Jonah could have said, you made me look like a fool. I stuck out my neck. I risked my reputation to speak a word of judgment and then nothing.

You don't even follow through. I look like those who declare the world is going to end on such and such a day like December 21st, 2012. And then it doesn't. And now I look like a fool.

But again, God had not declared that Nineveh was going to end. Yes, God had warned the city that if it did not repent, if it did not turn from the ways that led to inherent trouble, it would collapse as it did a few generations later in 606 B.C.

when that generation did not repent. But God did not say that the city was going to implode in Jonah's day. Jonah misunderstood God's word.

The people of Nineveh, however, did hear God's word correctly. And they didn't look at Jonah as a fool. They look at him as a hero because it was through their preaching they found mercy and grace.

[9 : 56] Nineveh no longer exists. It's now just a mound of dirt on the opposite side of the Tigris River from Mosul, Iraq. But interestingly, that mound of dirt is called Nabi Yunus, the prophet Jonah.

Because Nineveh remembers one day he brought a word of grace to them. Moving further into Jonah's anger, he could have said, what bothers me even more is that you made yourself a fool. You did not say what you said you were going to do. You were now going to have a reputation for being inconsistent. You were now going to be known as a wishy-washy God whose word cannot be trusted.

Jonah the prophet is angry because God seems to shame his name. He seems to tarnish his whole glory, his own glory. Prophets live for the glory of God.

They live to preach for the glory. That's the goal of preaching, to glorify God. And Jonah's angry because God does not seem to honor his own glory. But again, God had not said that he was going

to destroy Nineveh at that time.

[11:14] But even if he had said it and he had changed his mind, God does not lose because the fact is God is willing to tarnish his glory to save sinners.

He told Israel that again and again. I mean, after all, had not Israel again and again put God in the place where for God to keep loving Israel he would tarnish his glory?

Which is what Jesus teaches us in his most famous parable, the parable of the prodigal son or prodigal sons or better yet prodigal father. The father in Jesus' parable goes against all cultural expectations about how a father ought to treat his sinful sons and risk his reputation to get his sons back into his heart.

Besides, Jesus tells us the reputation his father wants to have in the world. The father wants the reputation this man welcomes sinners and eats with them which he's going to do with us at this table in just a moment.

Go deeper into Jonah's anger. He could have said this is not being fair. All my life I have tried to live to please you.

[12:36] I have studied Torah, your law. I have tried to be obedient. I have tried to be holy. And then you let this wicked city off scot-free just because they repented.

You give them a newly son life without making them measure up first. You're not playing fair. Now interestingly, in the churches that follow a strict calendar of liturgical readings for each Sunday of the year, the text that is paired with Jonah 4 is Matthew 20 verses 1 to 16 Jesus' parable of the laborers.

A landowner hires a set of workers at sunrise for a certain fee. Then he hires another set of workers later in the day for the same fee working less hours.

And then at noon he hires another set of workers for the same fee working a lot less hours. And then later in the afternoon he hires yet another set of workers for the same fee who work hardly at all.

And those hired early in the morning say, this is not fair. to which the man who hired them says, I did you no wrong.

[13:48] I gave you what I promised. And besides, can I not do with mine what I want to do? Or is your eye envious because I'm generous? Dig deeper into Jonah's anger.

What makes me so mad, he could say, is that it's not any old city you are giving mercy and grace. You are being generous to my enemies, to the enemies of my people and your people.

It's a fact of history. No empire treated Israel the way Assyria did. No empire was as cruel and evil to Israel. God, you are not just sparing any old empire.

you are sparing an empire that wants to destroy your people. The issue not only being revenge, but the whole matter of security.

Listen, Lord, if you treat our enemies this way with mercy and grace, what kind of security can we have in the world? If you do not wipe out our enemies, how can we feel secure in the world?

[15:00] But what was the message of all the other Hebrew prophets? Yahweh is your security. The destruction of your enemy doesn't bring you security.

Yahweh, the great I am, makes us secure. Dig deeper into Jonah's anger. He could have said, you are unraveling the moral fabric of the universe.

And I think this is the heart of the matter for Jonah. God's way with Nineveh makes Jonah feel that the universe no longer makes sense.

No doubt about it, Nineveh was an evil city. And if God is a God of justice, how could he let Nineveh off without being brought to justice?

What kind of universe is this when evil is not punished? And Jonah is angry because it appears that God does not care about evil. I like how J.

[16:00] Barry Shepard puts it. Jonah could not handle a world in which it seems that God does not care when the poor are trampled down, when widows and orphans are exploited, when the murder of children and rape of women is an everyday event upon our city streets, when nations and races are subject to slavery and genocide, when God's own children heap bombs upon bomb and are capable of extinguishing life from the planet in one flash.

What kind of universe is it if the creator does not punish evil? And when God relented, when God repented and did not destroy evil, Nineveh, as Jonah expected, it seemed as the moral fabric of the universe unraveled and he was angry.

So angry he wants to die. He no longer wants to live in a universe where there is a God who doesn't know how to be God. But as we have seen in our series through the book of Jonah, God does not give up.

Yahweh goes to work right away to bring his prophet into deeper understanding and thereby into deeper relationship. The true and living God wants Jonah to know him as he is and come inside his heart.

Now, notice what God does not do. God does not do what I would be tempted to do. God does not say to Jonah, you disobeyed me, didn't you?

[17 : 34] You turned your back on me and you tried to run, didn't you? What makes you think you are any different than the Assyrians? Jonah, what did I do with your disobedience and your sin?

Did I destroy you? I could have let you drown in the sea. That would have been the just thing to do. But what did I do about you? I pursued you.

Jonah, where would you be today if I treated you the way you want me to treat Nineveh? But God did not take that tact with the angry prophet because I think it would have just made him more angry.

And then Jonah would have said something stupid like, well then go ahead, treat me as I deserve. Instead God takes another tact.

God appointed. God appointed. Where have we heard that verb before? When Jonah was trying to run from Yahweh, God appointed a great fish to come and rescue him from certain death.

[18 : 36] We're going to hear the word appoint two more times. God appointed a plant to grow up and make shade for Jonah sitting in the desert.

Likely a castor oil plant. I'm told that they come up very quickly within just a few days. They can rise to eight to ten feet. They have very large leaves making for really cool shade.

And the plant changed Jonah's mood from very angry to very happy. The text says greatly happy.

What a picture of the living God. I mean, I'm sure God had other things to do that day, bigger things to do that day, but he cares about this one man, about bringing this one man into his heart.

The plant, says the text, relieved Jonah of his troubles. Where have we heard this word troubles before? In God's initial call when he said to Jonah, arise and go to speak to Nineveh because its troubles have come up to me.

The plant relieves the troubles of the angry prophet. But then God appoints again, this time a worm, a worm that attacks the plant that had made Jonah so happy.

[19 : 52] The plant withers and dies. What is going on? One commentator says, Jonah is being given a taste of what destruction is like.

Then God appoints one more time, this time an east wind with scorching heat and dust. The wind blows and the sun beats upon Jonah's body.

He begs to die. The death of the plant is just too much. He's so faint he begs to die. Death is better to me than life, he says.

Then God asked him again, do you have good reason to be angry about the plant? death. And this time Jonah does speak out loud.

Yes, I do have good reason to be angry even to death. And it's the last word we hear from Jonah. At least in the story.

[20 : 54] For hopefully he moved on. But we are not told that he did. Probably because the story is asking us if we will move on. And if we will learn to let God be God the way God wants to be God.

Then comes the climax of the story. God has Jonah focus on his emotions, on Jonah's own emotions. You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight.

And although Jonah does not respond out loud, I think he would respond internally, yes, I had compassion on the plant, right? Please so. And then God asked, and should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hands as well as many animals?

Do you hear God? God is asking Jonah, do I not have the right to feel what you feel? Do I not have the right to have the same emotions you have?

Can I not feel for people what you feel for plants? They do not know their difference between their right and left hands.

[22 : 20] Can you hear God's compassion in those words? They do not have the ability to discern right from wrong. They have lost the capacity for sound moral reasoning.

They are not able to get themselves out of trouble. People in trouble pull at the heart of the true and living God. Especially people who are in trouble and cannot get themselves out of trouble.

Not that the people of Nineveh are innocent sufferers. They are not. They are not innocent at all.

They had made as we have made sinful choices with inherently troubling consequences.

what pulls at God's heart is that people are trapped unable to free themselves. Down and outers helpless and trapped unable to free themselves and up and outers helpless and trapped and unable to free themselves more deeply trapped because they live with the illusion that they can free themselves.

And God is not saying to Jonah that the people of Nineveh are innocent. He is not excusing their sin. God is angry with their sin. Just read the prophet Nahum.

[23 : 34] God abhors the sins of the city. Make no mistake about that, Jonah. But God cannot bear the loss of sinners. God hates the sins of the city, said Jonah.

But God cannot bring himself to blot out the sinners of the city. Blessed be his name. Can I not have compassion on Nineveh?

And the story ends unresolved. We're left with the story unresolved. But only for a while.

So let me suggest how the story gets resolved. Jonah chapter five, if you will. Knowing Jonah as I have come to know him, I think he would have objected.

And I think he should rightly object. But Lord, surely the repentance of Nineveh does not even the score.

[24 : 46] How can their repentance, repentance, how can their turning from sin and sorrow ever make up for their terrible atrocities? Knowing God as he has revealed himself to be in the Hebrew prophets, I think God responds, it cannot.

Their repentance cannot even the score. Nothing they can do can ever make up for their sinful deeds. knowing God as he has revealed himself to be, I think God would then say to Jonah, your wrestling with me is taking place in the context of a larger story.

In my extending mercy and grace to Nineveh, I am not ignoring my justice. And you are going to have to trust me now to move the larger story forward.

And what we discover as the larger story unfolds is that God had planned to execute justice at another time and in another way.

As it is said in most synagogues on Saturday morning, the goal of all prophecy is the days of the Messiah. God planned for someone to come and stand in Nineveh's place.

[26 : 17] And God planned to execute Nineveh's deserved punishment by executing that punishment against that someone. And amazingly, God planned to be that someone.

Jonah could not see. How could he? God's compassion for trapped people, where God's feelings for sinners would take him.

It would take him to the cross. God became one of us. God became us. God became us in our sin.

As Jesus, the only truly innocent one who knew no sin, the Holy One chooses to become sin.

And then on that cross, God takes on all the justice, all the punishment Nineveh's sin rightly deserves. Listen to how the Apostle Paul puts it.

Romans 3, 23 to 26. Words that are jam-packed with good news for every city. For we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, being made right with God as a gift of his grace, through the rescue which is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith.

[27 : 39] And why does God do this? Listen to this. Listen carefully. This was to demonstrate his justice because in the forbearance of God, he passed over the sins previously committed.

For the demonstration, I say, of his justice at this present time, that he might be just and justifier of the one who has the faith of Jesus. Little did Jonah know, I mean, how could he know that when God relented, in the face of the city's repentance, God was not changing his mind.

The French sociologist Jacques Elu helps me at this time. He's wrestling with God relenting or God repenting as it is sometimes rendered. And Elu writes this, listen, God suffers the very suffering which in his justice he should have laid on us.

God causes the judgment to fall on himself. This is the meaning of his repenting. Jesus Christ is precisely the one upon whom falls all the judgment and all the suffering decided for each of us.

The judgment and the suffering of the world. In reality, God's repenting in the face of human repentance is Jesus Christ. Every time there's any question of God repenting in scripture, we thus have a new prophecy of Jesus Christ who puts into effect both the justice of God and the love of God without doing damage to either the one or the other.

[29 : 02] And then this line, God's purpose has not changed. From the very beginning, his aim has been to save the world from his own wrath.

Yes, Jonah, I did forgive your enemies. And yes, I had compassion on them when they repented. But Jonah, I did not violate my justice. I executed my wrath against Nineveh and my wrath against you by executing it against myself.

In 33 AD on a Roman cross, Jonah, the universe is on solid ground. I have taken myself the punishment Nineveh's sin and your sin deserves.

I can, therefore, without any reservation, extend compassion to you and to any city of the world. Thank you.