

Jonah 1:1-2

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[0 : 0 0] in the modern-day city of Mosul in Iraq. At the time, Nineveh was the capital of this vast Assyrian empire. And in Jonah's day, in the middle of the 8th century, Assyria was on a bit of a downswing in terms of its imperial ambitions.

And so this was a good time for the people of Israel. Israel was expanding while Assyria was weak. But in about 40 or 50 years after Jonah's ministry, Assyria will be strong again and they will crash down through the desert, down through Israel, destroying the northern kingdom of Israel.

So maybe the most surprising part of the book of Jonah is simply this, that God looked on Nineveh with compassion. These are the existential threat to the people of God, the greatest enemy in their world.

God saw that they were part of his missionary strategy. God's compassion is glorious in Jonah, and that's what we get to see.

And boy, let me tell you, it's a whale of a story. It will swallow you up. It will rock your boat. It's not going to let you off the hook.

[1 : 2 4] I could do this all day. All day. It's a great story because it shows the compassion of God, and then it sends you out to engage the world with God's heart of compassion.

This is what I want to talk about. God's heart of compassion. Where do you see it? What does God see that gives him this compassion? First thing he sees is beauty, then he'll see brokenness, and then he'll see grace.

That's what I want to talk about. So the beauty that's there. God saw something beautiful about Nineveh. Verse 2. Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city.

Now by great, he didn't just mean size. He meant something more. But it was actually known for being a huge city. It was probably the largest city in the world at that time. The main part of the walled part of the city, of course it's spread out beyond that, but the walled part of the city was probably equal to the size of central Chattanooga.

It was built on the Tigris River like we are built on, like Chattanooga is built on a river. It would have extended through all of the downtown area, probably through south side, maybe out over by Highland Park and back up to the river.

[2 : 3 5] That was about the walled area of Nineveh at this time. It's said that it would take you multiple days, maybe three days, to see the entire city on foot.

It was a great city, but there was more to its greatness than that. It was a wonder of the ancient world. The British Museum actually has done, you can find this online, they've done like a travel guide of Nineveh, as though you were on vacation, you could visit there.

Here's what you should see, and here's what you should look for. It was a place that was known for, it had multiple libraries. It was a place of curious people. There was a lot of learning that was going on there.

They cultivated these beautiful gardens and parks. We know that along the Tigris River, there was this walking way and park where families would play, children would be out on afternoons.

They made beautiful art, they invented, and they played games that you can still play today. There's interesting videos about that as well. You get the sense that the people of Nineveh were actually real people.

[3 : 43] They had hopes and dreams. They had desires. They had potential. They had learning, and they were building a culture and a society that would influence the entire world.

And that's what God saw in Nineveh. You know, God saw the value and the dignity and the honor of the people there that were creating beautiful things.

God saw His divine image stamped on each of the people that lived there. When God looked at Nineveh, He didn't just see an enemy to His people.

He didn't just see a wicked and rebellious city. He saw a great city full of value and dignity and beauty. That's really important.

We have to start there because if God sees Nineveh of all places as something of beauty, how should that influence the way that we see our neighbors in our own city?

[4 : 44] You know, shouldn't that inform the way that we look? That there are fellow image bearers who are walking their dog on your street. There are fellow image bearers, people who are beloved of God, who are shopping next to you at Walmart, even if you don't believe it.

There are people who have infinite beauty, who are creating beautiful things, who are doing beautiful things, who are loving beautiful things.

There are people who are worshiping and longing for transcendent glory, even if they don't seek it in the one true God. They build houses and they invest in their families so that they can invest in something meaningful in the world, so that they can find a true home.

They build businesses and institutions so that they can have a legacy that will live beyond them. The people here have tamed the mountains that we all drive around.

There are engineers who are creating energy right on our river. There are engineers who are making cars that are being sent all over the world.

[5 : 54] That's what's happening right here in this place is filled with glorious people who have ideas and who have hopes and loves and passions and are doing work.

Good work. And it's not just in Chattanooga. It's our neighbors who are all over this country. It's the coastal elites that you might not like a whole lot, that are different from the people here, people in New York and D.C. and San Francisco.

And it's not just people there. It's people who are all over this world in countries that you might not be in favor of visiting. You see, a key aspect of grasping God's compassion in Jonah is to grasp the fact that he sees greatness in Nineveh.

And I think we have to ask the question, do you see the greatness of the place and the people in which you live around? Do you see the dignity, honor, and beauty of the people who reflect God's image all around you?

You can't have God's compassion if you fail to recognize that. Okay, I'll move on. Beauty, there's brokenness as well, though. God's compassion doesn't only see beauty.

[7 : 12] God is not confined to a polarity of black and white, all good, all evil, friend, foe. That's not how God works.

He sees the beauty, but he also sees the brokenness in sin. Verse 2, For their evil has come up before me.

Not just their small faults, their evil. This is really important. God sees more than their beauty. He sees brokenness in sin. See, God doesn't merely come along and affirm us, pat us on the back and say, You know what?

Man, you have been trying so hard. I see what you're trying to do there. Great job. Keep it up. Maybe you'll be a little better next time. No, God comes and he is honest and completely truthful with us.

He sees where we hurt one another. He sees where we take advantage of one another. He sees where we give ourselves over to lies and to division and to suffering.

[8 : 20] And he confronts us. And that is truly compassionate. Because evil is just that. It's evil.

Our wickedness destroys our communities. It destroys the truth. It destroys what we love. Ultimately, our sin destroys us. And if God is truly good, then like a good parent, He is going to confront and condemn evil and wickedness.

Both in Nineveh, but as well as in us. Now, don't get me wrong. Nineveh may have been a great place, but it was also a violent and ugly place in a lot of ways.

You can find all kinds of stories about what people in this day did, especially when they were the victors after battle. But there's a couple of things that I thought were illustrative.

Number one was they would take those that they conquered and they would cut off the legs and one arm of the soldiers so that as they died, the victors could come and stand over them and shake one of their hands as they were dying to show their dominance.

[9 : 33] They would decapitate the other military leaders and then they would get their families and make their families parade around their defeated and broken down cities with the decapitated heads on poles or on chains around their necks.

Brutal. And this gets to the fundamental surprise of Jonah that God would have compassion on people like that.

Now, if you're reading closely, you might have looked at verse 2 and said, well, okay, hold on. He did tell Jonah to call out against Nineveh, didn't he?

Well, most commentators will tell you that the way we ought to read that is that God has sent Jonah there to warn them. And why would God send Jonah to warn them if he didn't also offer repentance?

There is the possibility of repentance. And in fact, the very last part of the book of Jonah, here's how it reads. And should I not pity Nineveh?

[10 : 44] Or a better translation would be, and should I not have compassion on Nineveh, that great city? No, you see, what God is doing here is God is sending Jonah to Nineveh so that they would repent of the evil that they had been doing.

And that's what compassion looks like. Compassion doesn't look at the suffering and the pain of the world and the results of their own wickedness and kind of stand back and fold their arms and look condescendingly and say, well, you know what?

You deserved it. Look at what you chose. You're getting everything that you deserve. You know, compassion isn't like Taylor Swift's song, Karma is My Boyfriend.

I don't know if you know that one. It's great. But she imagines, what she says is, I keep my side of the street clean. She imagines that things go well for her because she handles her business.

Here's what she says. Because karma is my boyfriend. Karma is the breeze in my hair on the weekend. Karma is a relaxing thought, sweet like honey. Karma is a cat purring on my lap because it loves me.

[11 : 52] Me and karma vibe like that. The other side of that song, though, is how on the other side of the street, karma is pursuing her boyfriend because he's nasty and bad.

She's the good guy. He's the bad guy. He's going to get what's coming to him. Listen to how she describes karma pursuing him because karma is thunder rattling your ground.

Karma's on your scent like a bounty hunter. Karma's going to track you down step by step from town to town. See, God's compassion blows up this kind of karmic sense of justice.

You know where you get what you deserve. Tough luck. If you can make it, fine. If you can come into the church and get rid of all that stuff that you've been carrying, then fine.

Things are going to work out for you. But if you continue to make these bad decisions, you know what? Sorry, I can't help you. God's compassion cuts right through that. God sees the evil.

[13 : 01] It sees the wickedness. It sees the pain and the suffering. And it doesn't just leave it there in condemnation, but it enters in.

God enters into the brokenness to carry it, to heal it. You know, the question is, how do we, do you look at the world with the kind of compassion that God sees?

Do you celebrate the greatness all around us and also weep over the evil and the way it impacts us and our neighbors? See, compassion requires both, the acknowledgement of the greatness and the beauty and the recognition of the brokenness and the pain and the sin that we see in our world.

See, this is super important because right now we live in a culture where the progressive side of this world wants to, tells you that true compassion means that you must affirm the greatness of our neighbors.

You have to affirm how they identify, you have to affirm what they do, you have to affirm what they believe, and that it is unloving to criticize in any way. In fact, if you do not affirm verbally, then you are oppressive.

[14 : 19] You're an oppressor. The problem is, is that the traditional or the conservative side of things tends to focus only on the wickedness of our neighbors.

You must condemn the people that we condemn in order to agree with us. You must cancel people who violate your values. You need to boycott their companies and institutions that differ with you.

You must define them by their guilt, by their sin, by their wrongness. You see, we're living in a world right now that is making you choose.

Either you fully affirm or you absolutely condemn. But see, God invites you into compassion. God invites you into an honest interaction with the world to both celebrate the greatness that is there and to condemn the wickedness, to lament its guilt.

And see, that's the surprise of the compassion that's going on here. God saw both the beauty and the brokenness and entered into this with compassion and grace. This is what's amazing about the first two sentences of the book of Jonah is it is a master class in what grace looks like.

[15 : 40] Look at this. The first and the central evidence of God's grace is that He speaks. The very first action that happens is the Word of God entering into the world.

Life was going on as normal. Jonah was going about his business. He was a well-respected prophet in Israel. He was doing His thing. He knew important people.

And all of a sudden, into the midst of a normal world, the Word of God spoke. God is the one who initiates the action of grace.

And what did He do? Did you notice this? He said to Noah, Go. I wonder if that sounded familiar to you. We've been talking about that around here the last couple of months.

Like God told Abram to go. Like Jesus told His disciples to go. But Jonah wasn't simply called to just move geographically.

[16 : 38] It wasn't that God wanted Jonah to just move his body to Nineveh. There was something more going on. As a response to God's Word, there was an entire whole-souled movement and change.

God wanted Jonah to go with compassion to Nineveh. God wanted Jonah to actually care about these people.

What does that look like? Listen to the way... I don't know if you know the name Henry Nowen. Henry Nowen was a... He was a professor at Harvard. He ended up becoming a priest, Catholic priest, and a caregiver to adults who had mental, physical, cognitive disabilities.

Here's what he says about compassion. Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, and fear, and confusion, and anger, or in anguish.

Compassion challenges us to cry out with those who are in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, powerless with the powerless.

[18 : 02] Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human. God wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh, to live like a man of Nineveh, to proclaim God's grace and his mercy to the people of Nineveh, not to stand above them and just throw down accusations.

He wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh because God knew exactly what he was going to do in sending Jesus. God was going to do this same thing.

What Jesus is called the greater Jonah. He is the one who came from heaven to enter into the actual physical conditions on the ground that we live in, to live with us and for us, to obey in ways that we couldn't obey, to die in ways that we couldn't die, to be raised up and to now reign over this world as king and shepherd.

of all of us. You see, Jonah was meant to be a prefigure of what it would look like for Jesus to come and to rescue us.

That's what compassion looks like. That's what grace looks like. This is what the gospel is all about, that God displays his overwhelming grace and compassion to the most undeserving of people.

[19 : 36] People like me. People like you. See, we're going to talk a lot more about Jonah and how Jonah responded to this, but you see, you can't ever understand the compassion of God if you start with the questions that Jonah's going to start with.

The questions of why in the world would you love those people over there? God, why are you calling me to those people? They're the enemies.

They're the terrible ones. Haven't you heard the stories? I hate them. Why are you having compassion on them? See, we find the compassion of God when we turn the question around and we ask first, why does God care about me?

Why has God loved me? Why has God rescued me? Why has God taken me to this place? Because what happens when we ask that question is that we begin to see God face to face.

We begin to see His compassion and His grace is unfathomable and it begins to change us. It begins to show us a compassion and love that we could not have experienced on our own.

[20 : 56] It is the thing that will empower us then to go with the compassion of God to this beautiful and broken up world that we live in with sacrificial love.

I say all the time that grace and peace exists to be a place where people discover God's grace and peace. But one of the core values that we have is this idea is this idea that because we are to be a place where people can discover God's grace and peace we are then to be those who sacrifice for our world.

We sacrifice for our world. That word sacrifice is really important. See in a suburban southern culture we love to serve our neighbors. Serving our neighbors makes us feel good about ourselves.

It is the thing that we can put on our calendar. we can put it in our budget. We can look at our budget each year and think about how we can increase the money that we're serving our neighbors with and that makes us feel like we're making all the right decisions and that feels great.

But that's not what we're doing at Grace and Peace. We're talking about sacrifice. We're talking about practice. We're talking about sacrifice. Some of you will get that from an Allen Iverson video.

[22 : 16] We're talking about sacrifice which sacrifice does not fit into your calendar. Sacrifice is inconvenient. It doesn't fit into your budget.

It's expensive. Sacrifice doesn't make you feel good about yourself. It is not fun to do. And for southern suburban people we need to be reminded that the call for us is not to serve our neighbors in ways that makes me feel good.

Our calling is to give our lives away for the benefit of other people. Welcoming children into your homes. Forgoing relationships that are comfortable for you to build new relationships with people.

Showing up at times and places where you don't really want to be. Doing things that are frustrating to you that don't pay off quickly.

We are called to sacrifice. See, here's the thing. in that sacrifice the compassion of God is born in us.

[23 : 23] As we respond to the compassion of God we see as we move out motivated in sacrificial love towards other people and towards our neighbors what we find is this deep sense of compassion becomes welled up in us.

See, what's interesting is to sacrifice for someone it means that you begin to change the way that you relate to them you change the way that you see them you begin to see their beauty for the fullness that it is.

You don't just overlook that that they have something to offer even if they may need things too they have something beautiful and glorious made particularly about them but then you also see their brokenness in full relief and you find that you can mourn with them instead of just judging them instead of condemning them you find that your heart is drawn in compassion to them see that's what God is doing in Jonah God wants to in showing you this is not just a kid's story Jonah is far more than a story for children Jonah is a story of God's deep compassion that he is inviting you to participate in it's a glorious story because it's a story that points us to the gospel of Jesus and the love that God has had for this world and has had for you and he wants you to be a part of his compassion going to even the worst places of this world even to Nineveh that's God's calling for us okay let me stop there and pray father we pray that you might draw our hearts again to you in compassion that we might as we dive into this perhaps familiar story that we would see in Jonah that we would see your heart of compassion would you show us that so that we might love the way that you love so that we might be the means of your proclaiming your glorious salvation to all the world that the light of your revealing grace would come

Lord we pray that for the glory of Jesus and in his name amen amen