

God's Sovereign Concern and Ours

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder, what is it that concerns you in life? What is it that matters to you? Often the way we react about something will tell us what concerns us the most.

So if you were to tell a bunch of 12-year-olds that for their birthday party, they were having vegetables for the food only, how do you think they might respond?

It's pretty obvious, isn't it? They would let out a loud groan because what concerns them about parties is lollies and so on. Well, take this coming Tuesday night, my commissioning service.

I told my family that as part of the service, they would have to get up the front. And one of my members of my family said immediately, oh, what am I going to wear?

It wasn't Michelle. It was one of the kids. And so again, that reaction showed what concerned them the most. See, reactions reveal something of our hearts, what really concerns us, what matters to us.

[1 : 10] And as we return to Jonah today, we see that Jonah's reaction reveals something of his heart, what concerned him. But as we'll see, Jonah's reaction also acts as a contrast to reveal God's heart and what concerns God.

And therefore, what ought to concern us as God's people. Before we get to all that, let me just quickly recap the story so far. In chapter 1, verse 2, Jonah was told to go to the great city of Nineveh, you might remember, and preach against it because of its wickedness.

But he decided to disobey God and set sail in the opposite direction. And then came the storm, which saw Jonah get tossed overboard. But as he sank down to his death, he called out to God and God saved him by sending a big fish, who then vomited him in the right direction towards Nineveh. Then after reaching the city, Jonah preached that God's judgment was coming in 40 days, which, as Doug said rightly last week, was an act of grace on God's behalf, you know, giving Nineveh so many days to repent and believe.

But as it turns out, they only needed one day. Because after one day of preaching, the whole city, chapter 3, verse 5, believed God. And they repented. And as Doug said last week, that's the great miracle of the book, not the fish.

[2 : 33] And throughout all three chapters, we've seen that God is a God who saves all who call to him. And so in chapter 1, verse 14, the sailors literally called out to the Lord.

Chapter 2, verse 2, Jonah called out to the Lord. And again in chapter 3, verse 8, the whole city called out urgently to God.

And every time someone calls out in repentance and faith, God saves. And so this brings us to chapter 4 today and Jonah's reaction to the city of Nineveh being saved.

Point 1 in your outlines, verse 1 in your Bibles. But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong. And he became angry.

In fact, verse 1 in the English is a little soft. It literally says, This was evil to Jonah. Great evil. And he was angry.

[3 : 33] Jonah considers God's compassion to Nineveh as evil. And that's not the normal response you usually get when you hear someone becomes a Christian or is saved, is it?

I mean, the other Wednesday night, Peter Adam was telling us, the speaker called Peter Adam was telling us a story about what happened to him about three weeks ago now. He was rung by a friend and asked to go and visit someone in hospital who was dying.

Peter didn't know this person, but he knew the friend who called him. And so he went to the hospital. And the lady who was dying there was asking questions of Peter.

And Peter was talking about life and death and what happens next. And during the course of their conversation, the lady became a Christian, committed a life to Christ. And the reaction of the people

in the room, as Peter told us that story, was, I could hear it, it was this sigh of joy and contentment, not anger.

But that's Jonah's reaction, anger. Why? Why is he so angry? Well, it seems he wanted Nineveh to be judged because they deserved it. And they did, after all.

[4 : 45] As we heard last week, Nineveh was renowned for his violence, so it did deserve judgment. After all, that's originally why God had sent Jonah in the first place, to preach against its wickedness.

Chapter 1, verse 2. But Jonah knew that God's natural tendency, his default position, if you like, is to show grace and compassion to all who turn to him.

Do you see verse 2 and 3? Jonah 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.

I knew that you were 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.

Now, Jonah's reaction is a bit of an overreaction, and we'll come back to it in a moment. But first, notice how Jonah's angry reaction actually reveals God's heart, doesn't it?

[5 : 49] His character. He says, In fact, notice how Jonah assumes that God would show compassion.

Jonah assumes that God would show grace. That's why he ran away in the first place. You see, for all that Jonah gets wrong in this book, he got God's character very right, didn't he?

He ran away because he knew God prefers to act with grace and compassion rather than judgment. I mean, I don't know about you, but when things go wrong for me in life, when there's suffering, or my prayers aren't answered the way I want or when I want, it's very easy to feel like that God, well, he's a bit stingy with his love.

You know, his default position is actually a lack of compassion, and maybe you have to pray a bit harder or something. But it's not the truth, is it?

Jonah understood that God's default position, his preferred way to act, is to show compassion and grace, especially to those who repent and call on him.

[7 : 13] That's why Jonah ran away in the first place. I don't know about you, but I can sometimes forget that about God, that his default position, his preferred way to act, is love and grace.

Of course, Jonah didn't want God to show such love and grace to Nineveh. And now that God has, Jonah is angry. That's why he says in verse 1 that God's actions seem literally evil to him.

It seemed unjust for God to show grace and compassion instead of judgment. And if that's the world Jonah has to live in, well, he says it's not worth living anymore.

I'd rather die. Now, this is certainly a childish overreaction, isn't it? I was going to say something about one of my kids, but I think someone's here, so we'll just skip over that illustration.

But his overreaction not only reveals God's gracious heart, but it also reveals Jonah's childish and selfish heart, doesn't it?

[8 : 16] You see, Jonah was happy for God to save him in chapter 2, even though he clearly disobeyed God, didn't deserve it. But he's not happy for God to save others. Jonah is happy to say salvation comes from God alone, when he is the one being saved.

But not so much when it comes to others. You see, his angry reaction reveals a childish and selfish heart, like a child that selfishly doesn't want to share the toys he or she has received.

So Jonah does not want to share God's compassion and salvation that he has received. But before we're too harsh on Jonah, we need to remember that sometimes we're not all that dissimilar, actually.

I mean, if someone hurts us, we want them judged, punished. If someone cuts you off on the road and speeds off, and then a few minutes later you drive past, and that same car has been pulled over by the police and getting a ticket, you drive past and go, good, good.

Don't we? We want... But when it comes to us, we're much happier with grace and compassion at that point, aren't we?

[9 : 32] And for Jonah, this was especially true, because he was an Israelite, one of God's chosen people. So surely it was right for God to show him grace. But those Ninevites, they are wicked foreigners.

So for Jonah, it's not right. It's evil for God to show them grace and compassion. So Jonah is angry. He's like the older brother in our second reading, who is angry with the prodigal son, the wayward son, angry at the father for the father showing love and compassion.

And so God now teaches Jonah what is actually right, which brings us to point two in verse four.

God begins by asking in verse four, the Lord replied, is it right for you, Jonah, to be angry?

Is it right for you to be angry? I need to say at this point, there are actually times when it is right for us to be angry. Some Christians think Christians should never be angry. That's not the case in scripture.

There are times when it's right for us to be angry, when we hear about Christians being persecuted or murdered for their faith, when we hear about ISIS using people as human shields to collect the bullets.

[10:42] When we hear about a man running down people in Bourke Street. It is right to be angry at such evil actions. But is Jonah right to be angry in this situation is God's question.

God will ask the same question in verse nine in a slightly different situation. But here in verse four, is Jonah right to be angry in this situation, especially when his anger is directed at God for showing compassion of all things.

But instead of just telling Jonah off, God is again gracious and teaches Jonah a lesson with a plant so that Jonah might realize for himself that his anger here in verse four is not right.

So have a look at verse five. 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.

By the way, I think verse five here is a bit of a flashback. Do you know how in the movies you get a scene that flashes back to what a character did earlier on? I suspect that's what verse five is.

[11:49] You can translate it in past tense. And so I suspect Jonah went through preaching in the city and then he went out, built a shelter and waited those 40 days to see if God would bring judgment or whether he would show compassion as Jonah suspected.

But either way, it seems like he's not a very good builder of shelters because he's still in some discomfort. And so verse six, 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. And when the sun rose, God provided a 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. Now I want you to notice something in these three verses. There's a word there that's repeated in every verse.

Verse six, Then the Lord God provided. Verse seven, At dawn the next day, God provided. Verse eight, When the sun rose, God provided.

[13:06] Do you see that there? And I suspect the narrator is reminding us that all this is from God. In other words, it's God who controls and rules over his creation.

The narrator is reminding us that God is sovereign. Just as we saw in chapter one of the book. Why does this matter? Well, if God is sovereign over his creation, if he is the one who made it, then God has every right to be concerned for it.

Whether they be an Israelite or a Ninevite. And that's the big lesson God now draws. See verse nine. But God said to Jonah, Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?

And then somewhat sulkily, It is, he said, I am so angry. I wish I was dead. Poor little plants gone. Verse 10, But the Lord said, You've been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow.

It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And so 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.

[14:21] Did you see God's point here? If Jonah is concerned for a plant, and if it's okay for him to be concerned for a plant, even though it's a gross overreaction again, I mean, we need to be concerned about creation and people and so on.

And so I guess it's right for him to be a little bit concerned. But if it's right for him to be concerned about a plant, then how much more so is it right for God to be concerned for a people? And if Jonah is right to be concerned for a plant that he did not create or care for, then how much more so is it right for a God to be concerned for a people he did create and does care for?

He sends the sun and the rain on both the righteous and the wicked, we're told. In other words, since God is sovereign over all he has created, then he has every right to be concerned for all his creation.

including the Ninevites and even the animals, he adds. It's kind of like when children make things. Our children make lots of things and bring them home.

And then we put them on the fridge. We have a select time period that they last on the fridge before they move somewhere else. But it does depend on what they make.

[15 : 40] One of our daughters made a project on France. I think I've got a picture of it on the next slide. She put a lot of effort into this one. And because it was a lot of effort and she made it, then it was important to her.

She was concerned for it. So much so that we had to put it up on the wall of our house and treat it like a priceless work of art. Her brother and sister were not allowed to touch it. They could only admire it from a distance.

You see, our daughter was concerned for this project because she made it. It was hers. Well, how much more so has God got the right to be concerned for his creation?

Because he made it. It's his. That's the point God is making. Of course, my daughter's concern for this project did wane. And I think it's now in the bin.

I'm not sure. But God's concern for his creation never wanes. Never wears off. And so if Jonah is right to be concerned for a plan he did not make or care for, then how much more so is it right for God to be concerned for people he did create?

[16 : 45] In verse 11, God describes them as a people who cannot tell their right hand from their left.

That doesn't mean they're not very smart. What it means is when it comes to God, they're lost. They don't know they're right from their left. They're lost, you see.

They are wicked, yes, but they are also lost. And they are still made by God in God's image. And so God is rightly concerned for them and longs to show compassion towards them.

And let me say, thank God he is like this. Because the reality is we too were once lost. And we're not Israelites.

We too did not know our right hand from our left once. We too deserve judgment for our wickedness. But because God is a God who is concerned for us, his creation, because he's a God who prefers to show compassion, he sent his only son Jesus to die for us, for you, for me.

[18 : 02] Remember that famous Bible verse in John 3, 16? I've got it on the next slide just in case. For God so loved the world, his creation, that he gave his one and only son, Jesus, so that whoever believes in him, Israelite, Ninevite, Australian, Chinese, whatever, whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Whoever, like that generation, Ninevite 2, chapter 3, verse 5, believed the word of God. And in chapter 3, verse 8, repented and called out to God for mercy.

And so God joyfully showed compassion towards them, his creation. And let me ask, have you done that? Have you turned to Christ and put your trust in him?

That's what we prayed for Hannah today, that she would grow up always doing that for herself. Do you believe, though, yourself in Jesus? That he really did die for you and rise again?

That he really is the son of God, the king? Because if you do, then God will joyfully show you compassion and forgiveness and bring you into his family now with heaven to come later.

[19 : 30] Do you believe? For us who do, then, two final points of application. First, do we continue to thank God for his grace and compassion towards us?

Do we marvel at his abounding love and concern for us? That he would actually prefer to give up his only son to die for us rather than see us suffer judgment.

That's extraordinary, isn't it? He'd actually prefer to go, give up Jesus than let us go. It's extraordinary. Great love.

Deep love. A little over a year ago, a lady in the US called Cara Coombs was diagnosed with cancer at age 38. The only problem was she was pregnant with their fourth child.

On the next slide, I think it's a picture, with pregnant Cara in the middle. And rather than have chemo and see her child lost, she preferred to put off treatment to save her child.

[20 : 36] And she did. She gave birth to a little girl. But then Cara died three days later from the cancer. But you see, she preferred to give her own life than to see her child suffer and die.

It's extraordinary love, isn't it? But so too is God's. God preferred to give up his only son and Jesus preferred to give up his own life rather than see us suffer judgment and eternal death.

It's great love, isn't it? It's love that's worth continuing to ponder and be thankful for. That's the first point of application. The second point, and this I think really is the big application for this passage and perhaps the whole book.

Do we, as God's people, share God's concern for the world? That's what Naomi started with at today's service. Do we share God's concern for the lost?

I mean, there are many things that concern us in life. Some are right concerns. I mean, the physical health and well-being of our families is important and it's a right concern to have. But do we also share God's concern for the lost?

[21 : 51] If we are his people, then we are to reflect his likeness, including his heart. And so we, like God, are to see people as wicked, yes, but also as lost and in need of compassion and grace.

And we're not to be indifferent towards non-Christians, nor are we to be like Jonah who wanted them judged for that matter. And again, lest you wear too harsh on Jonah, I think, well, I myself found myself like Jonah last week.

You see, last Friday there was a minute's silence for the victims of the Bourke Street attack. On the next slide is a kind of long view of the more part there. And on the next slide is those gathering around for the minute's silence.

And my heart goes out to the families of the victims. And we rightly pray that God would comfort them and raise up Christian neighbours to care for them. We rightly thank God that the man who did this has been caught and will be punished because that's right, that's justice for the wicked thing he did.

But do we also pray that while he's in prison, he might hear of Jesus, perhaps through prison ministries, believe and receive compassion. I led the prayers at this service last week and I prayed for the families of the victims.

[23 : 11] I thanked God that the man was brought to justice. But then I hesitated, found myself hesitating before praying that the man might come to faith and be forgiven.

See, part of me wanted him not only to face judgment in this life, but also the life to come for what he had done. It was a wicked thing he did. You see, there was a bit of Jonah in me.

But then I realised, while he may be wicked, he is also lost. Just like I was once. And if I am a child of God, then I am to share my father's heart, which is concern for all people who are lost.

You see, as God's people, we ought to have God's heart, not Jonah's. We ought to share God's concern for his world, which means doing what we can to see those who are lost, found, saved from judgment. God was concerned for the great city of Nineveh with more than 120,000 people in it. Are we concerned for the great city of Melbourne with more than 4 million people in it? Many of whom don't know their right hand from their left when it comes to God. One of our elderly folk here at church lives in a nursing home and is almost always in chronic pain.

[24 : 24] Her body is failing and the place she lives is not a happy place. It's pretty depressing, actually. And so she has lots that she could legitimately be concerned about.

But as I visit her and speak with her, do you know the thing that concerns her the most? It's that her adult children do not yet know Jesus, that they are lost.

That's what she's concerned about the most. And of course, if you've got relatives who are not Christians, then because you're related, they usually don't want to hear from you. It's very hard to talk to them about Jesus.

And so we've started praying, I've started praying with this lady that God might raise up a Christian in the circles that her children live in, to talk to them about Jesus for her, that they might listen to them.

Because she shares God's concern for the lost. And so do we. Will we pray not just for our overseas missionaries, but for our own church outreach activities, including Chinese outreach courses when they run?

[25 : 30] And I'm hoping we can communicate that a bit more, these sorts of things through the bulletin, so that we know when they're on and we can pray for them. Will we financially give to those who have more opportunities to share the gospel?

Will we use things like that CMS gift catalogue? I think it's on the next slide. Where you can buy gifts, but instead of just buying a cow or something like that, which is good to do for those in need,

and also the money goes to supporting missionaries to share the gospel.

Will we do that sort of thing? In fact, would you not commit to praying that God might give you two opportunities to speak to someone this year about Jesus?

So I'm starting right at the beginning of the year, so you've got the whole year ahead of you. But this is my challenge for you. I'm being serious, by the way. My challenge to you is why don't you pray for two opportunities this year to share Jesus with someone who is lost.

It may not happen. I'm not asking you to give a sermon. You don't have to convert them. God does that anyway. And they might not respond positively, but will you pray for two opportunities to share the gospel with someone who's lost this year?

[26 : 42] You've got Easter and you've got Christmas, so there's two big events, two opportunities. Will we share God's concern? Let me finish with a story about a lady from my old church called Florence. I visited her in hospital one time and noticed that she had a Bible out on her bedside.

So I asked if she wanted me to read it to her. She was finding it hard to sit up. And she said yes. And after we read the Bible and prayed together, she said to me, Oh, look, just put it back on top of the bedside because I want people to be able to see it.

And maybe they'll ask me some questions about it. Florence was in her mid-70s in hospital, and yet she was still concerned for the lost.

And then she added, I've already talked to two people about Jesus in the beds next to me. And you know what, Andrew? The great thing is they can't run away. Now, for the record, she did do it sensitively.

But you see, she shared something of God's concern for the lost, even though she was sick in hospital in her mid-70s. We are God's children.

[27 : 50] And so as God's children, we are to reflect our father's concern to share his deep love for the lost in whatever way we can. Let's pray that we will. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you for this book of Jonah.

We thank you for the reminder. It is about who you are, about your character and your concern for your world. And Father, we pray that you would help us as your children to have that same heart that you have, to have that same concern that you have for your world and for the lost.

Now, help us, Father. We pray for those of us who are parents to model it to our children, to perhaps pray with them and ask them who we can pray for at school. For those of us who aren't parents, help us to think about those we can pray for, whether it be at work or relatives or friends. Father, we pray that you would help us in this because it is hard. Help us to have your concern, though, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.