

# God's Lesson in Compassion

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[ 0 : 00 ] Would you just turn back to Jonah? That's where I'm going to be spending my time tonight. There's an outline as well that you should have received on your way in.

That will help you follow along. I must say it's nice to have some people in the front row. It's pretty rare. Sammy, I'm disappointed.

We had an agreement. It's too late now, mate. I promise that what I just said is not related to what I'm about to say.

But have you ever held a grudge? Have you ever held a grudge? Ben and Phil were holding a grudge once with each other.

These were two guys in my high school. It was pretty hilarious, I thought. The group was divided. You know how high schools are in groups. I heard about it one lunch when I saw Ben sitting on his own.

[ 1 : 18 ] I thought it was a bit strange. I asked him, what's going on? He looks up at me very serious. I'm fighting with Phil. Heavy.

Whenever they passed each other, they got their backs up. Purse their lips. Would they fight? No. It was only a pose.

Grudges are rarely so funny, are they? Often they're pretty hard going. Maybe you're holding on to one right now.

Has someone hurt you? In this passage, there's a bit of grudge holding going on.

Now, as I read Jonah chapter 4, as I read it, I'm a bit surprised because after reading, you remember from last week, the greatest miracle in the book, not the fish, the amazing repentance of an entire city.

[ 2 : 31 ] Why does chapter 4 in Jonah even exist? Surely we've already heard the climax. And how encouraging was it? God changes the hardest hearts.

Even the king sat in the dust and begs for mercy. What an incredible outcome. Surely this is the reason we know this story of Jonah.

Yes, a shaky start, but a wonderful end. Can't you see the credits rolling? But it's not the end, is it? It's not the end because Jonah is not primarily about Nineveh, but it's about Jonah. And true to fashion, Jonah provides a pretty shaky end to match that shaky beginning.

So let's take a look at what's in store. I'm not sure how you feel about the miraculous backflip from Nineveh, but Jonah is not happy.

[ 3 : 39 ] Karen started from chapter 3, verse 10. If you've got a Bible, if you've got a Bible or you can see one, I'm going to read again from there. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened for one.

But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong. And he became angry. Whoa. Now, I wonder what you think of this.

Why would Jonah be angry at God's mercy? After all, Jonah was the one who carried the message. Jonah is the prophet who God chose to preach.

He comes from the nation who worships God. They know his blessing and his Lord. Jonah knows God. In verse 2, he says, I already knew that you were like this.

I knew that you would do this because you're gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. And Jonah says, this is why I tried not to come.

[ 4 : 46 ] Maybe Jonah is annoyed that he had to travel so far. Remember last week, Dave told us walking from like Geelong to Newcastle? That would suck, wouldn't it?

But no, that's not it. It's because of who Nineveh are and who Jonah is. That is, an Israelite coming to Assyria, the enemy of Israel.

If you think back to chapter 3, you'll remember Jonah's message was simply, destruction is coming. And when Jonah says, this is why I tried to bestow, because I knew what you were like, he expected this outcome, but he didn't want it.

So he's really not happy about this turn of events and even more about his role in them. Just imagine how word will spread about Jonah's hand in the salvation of their enemy.

It's a bit like when you score an own goal. It doesn't go down well, does it? But I'm thinking, come on, Jonah.

[ 6 : 04 ] Cheer up. It's not really that bad, is it? But maybe I just don't understand the political dynamic. Because Jonah's got an extreme reaction, doesn't he?

He goes on to say, it is better for me to die than to live. Now, understanding culture and history is important. But God responds when Jonah says this.

And what's interesting is that God doesn't reprimand him, even though he could. Instead, he responds quite gently. Is it right for you to be angry?

I wonder what you think. Is Jonah's anger justified? Does the complex relationship and history between these towns, Assyria having sieged Israel in the past, warrant such a response from Jonah?

How would you respond in a similar situation? Who might your Nineveh be? A city? A government? An organisation?

[ 7 : 18 ] A group of people? A boss? A bully? Jonah is angry enough to die. He doesn't answer God's question.

He just goes out of town, finds some shade, and waits to see what will happen. Maybe he'll get lucky. And there'll be some destruction after all.

Before I said that, the book of Jonah is more about Jonah than Nineveh. And not to say that the mercy and repentance we saw wasn't significant. But here we see that, despite Jonah coming from the city of God's people and God's law, he was as ignorant and as far from God as they were, despite what he said about God.

What we see again in this chapter is patience and kindness from God towards someone who doesn't deserve it. Because instead of God scolding Jonah, just like he would a child who refuses to say sorry, God takes this opportunity to teach Jonah a lesson.

If you've got your Bibles there, verse 6, otherwise, just have a listen. Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort.

[ 8 : 46 ] And Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind so 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. As Jonah watched and waited to see what would happen to Nineveh, God gave him some shade.

He made a plant grow up over him. It must have been very hot because it made him very happy. But this plant and Jonah's happiness was short-lived.

God was teaching Jonah a lesson, not just easing his discomfort. So God sent a worm to chew the plant so that it withered and then sent a particularly hot wind.

You know those ones, you felt those ones. And so Jonah grew faint, sitting in the sun, blasted by the wind, no shade in sight, no retribution for my enemies.

[ 10 : 01 ] How could things get any worse? Jonah wanted to die. I just imagined him stamping his foot. It would be better for me to die than to live.

Poor Jonah. Does anyone understand? When I grew up, there was a trend that emerged in a region near me.

These kids who grew up in middle-class families, relatively wealthy, went to private schools, had everything they really needed. They wore black skinny jeans and they wore their hair down over them, their faces like this.

And they just had it so tough. They were so misunderstood. Always angry. You just don't get me, mum! I'm going to my room!

I know that that never made its way down to Melbourne. Jonah is a bit like this. Nothing's going the way that it should.

[11:12] And so he's angry enough to die. But isn't it good that his conversation is with God? Not with me. Shut up, Jonah. God who is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

And so God patiently asks again, verse 9, is it right for you to be angry about the plant? And this time, Jonah answers, the time for reflection, having changed nothing at all.

It is, he said. I'm so angry, I wish I was dead. Here we are back at Jonah's go-to. But before I pile on again, I wonder if we can sympathise with him.

His expectations have been shot. And I wonder if Jonah is not a cruel person. He just thinks that justice hasn't been done.

You see, out of the whole world, Israel are God's people. They are the ones who know how to live right. They're not perfect, but they have God as their guide, as their help.

[12:30] Assyria, on the other hand, they are not good. They do whatever they see fit. They conquer. They destroy. They hurt. Do you remember what God said about Nineveh in chapter 1?

Preach against it. Their wickedness has come up before me. They were a wicked city. They deserved judgment. Why didn't they receive it?

Well, God's lesson to Jonah is not quite over. He uses the plant and Jonah's concern for it to help him understand that God has concern for this city.

I'm going to read from 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.

Should not I 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?

[13:28] Jonah has had a pretty strong emotional reaction to these events. And not just the mercy God has had on his enemies, but even the plant that eased his discomfort the day before.

And now he's played right into God's hands. He was so sad that the plant was gone. But like God said, he did nothing to care for it. It appeared one day and the next day it was gone.

And so God puts another question to Jonah. Shouldn't I have concern for this great city? Shouldn't I care about the 120,000 people who can't tell their right hand from their left and also many animals?

Huh, Jonah? Shouldn't I care for them? When God says they can't tell their right hand from their left, he doesn't mean they're stupid. Assyria was just as advanced as any other city of the time.

He means to him, to God, they are responsible for their actions, but they don't know it. 120,000 people who blindly live in rebellion to God, but don't know it.

[14:42] 120,000 people who deserve God's judgment. The book ends so interestingly, doesn't it? Partly because God includes animals, a reminder that God has concern for all of his creation, but also interesting because it ends so abruptly.

What did Jonah think? Did he listen? Did he realize? Did he repent? Well, Jonah chapter four isn't only for Jonah.

It's also for the reader. Before I asked if you were holding a grudge. Maybe it's hard for you to get into the mind and heart of Jonah in that anger.

Maybe it's not so hard. Maybe you've been hurt. Maybe you've seen or experienced terrible things. I wonder how you feel about those perpetrators. Jonah's feelings were very clear.

And very often we also desire justice, don't we? And justice, it's not bad, is it? How might you feel if God acted toward them as he did toward Nineveh?

[15:59] Would you feel cheated? That they didn't get what they deserved? I reckon I could understand that feeling. I've been hurt.

Sometimes you might wonder if God should forgive the violent or the particularly evil, even if they repent. Evil needs to be punished, doesn't it? And doesn't evil even triumph in some regard when it escapes judgment at the last minute?

Aren't its victims neglected if it escapes punishment? Just consider the oppressive regimes, those committing genocide or war crimes.

What about those people in the US recently who were responsible for all those deaths? What about the people who compromised our Christmas and New Year? Doesn't sound like much compared to those other things, but we were doing so well.

Can we really pass up on justice when such hardship and pain is caused? And so I wonder what your decision would be in these cases.

[17:08] What do they deserve? Retribution. But before we get to judgment, I wonder if we should take another look at Jonah's attitude throughout this ordeal.

Disobedient. Reluctant. Hard-hearted. Cruel. Is he really the righteous one? Is he really the one who should be making judgments?

And if we consider Jonah's attitude, maybe we should consider our own. Because if God made both the person you'd like to call to account as well as you, what might he say about your life?

Are you a Ninevite? Living ignorant of God? Well, God has concern for you. Turn back to him now because destruction is coming.

You might think, why should I? I'm not a conqueror. I'm not a war criminal. The reason is because the standard of your goodness doesn't come from people.

[ 18 : 20 ] It comes from God. The answer to God's question, have you any right to be angry, is no. No, you don't. You have no right to be angry.

Because the mercy I've shown them, those terribly evil people, is the mercy I've shown you. No one deserves a relationship with God. No one deserves God's mercy or grace or love.

No one is righteous. No one does good. All fall short of God's glory. And the punishment for our rejection of God is death. Just like the destruction coming to Nineveh, but worse even.

So why is anyone saved? Because the punishment we deserve for our evil, God graciously took away when Jesus died on the cross.

He took it upon himself because his concern for his creatures was so great. That's God's compassion and love.

[ 19 : 26 ] That's God's justice. So if you haven't yet responded to God's call to repent, can I urge you to do it now? God loves you.

It doesn't matter what you've done, but it does matter if you do nothing. If you have responded to God, this passage presents a real challenge.

Because people hurt us, don't they? Just like Jonah was hurt. But Jonah's attitude, it wasn't right, was it? Jonah was not right to be angry that Nineveh was saved.

Just think back to the parable that Jesus told from Matthew 18, the unmerciful servant. He had been shown mercy, but he refused to show it.

It might seem strange to think about not wanting to share the gospel with someone, though it might be something that you're struggling with. I wonder if there are other ways that we might hesitate to show mercy, like who you're willing to talk to or befriend, who you might have over or include into your life, not wanting to forgive someone who has or is willing to forgive you.

[ 20 : 53 ] Jesus teaches that those who have been forgiven yet refuse to forgive from the heart will suffer.

Friends, our God is merciful. He is merciful. And because of Jesus, he doesn't treat us as our sins deserve if we repent and trust in him.

But if we refuse to recognize what he's done for us, whether you've responded to his call or not, Jesus' warning is very real.

So don't be like Jonah. Don't be like the unmerciful servant. Respond to God's call. Receive his mercy and forgive as he has forgiven you.

Shall I ask for God's help to do that now? Gracious Father, we thank you for the example of Jonah and we thank you for your marvellous and wonderful forgiveness.

[ 21 : 58 ] We thank you that you forgave the wicked Ninevites and we thank you that you forgive even us. We thank you that you make that possible through the death of your only son, Jesus, who took away our punishment.

Help us to continue trusting in you and help us, Father, to forgive and have mercy just as you forgave and had mercy upon us. In Jesus' name.

Amen.