

The Exceeding Kindness of God

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Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

[0 : 0 0] And turn back again to page 775 of your Bible so we can look at this last chapter in the book of Jonah.

This prophet, I gather of all the minor prophets in the Old Testament, that either this one or Hosea are the ones that you remember the most.

And it's hard to get all 12 of these minor prophets in order when you're asked to go and turn to it. So I feel the same way.

So you're allowed to as well. Just a bit of permission. But it's a great book, isn't it? I hope you found that these past three weeks and this final fourth one. Lots to learn from Jonah.

And it's a perfect book for the season of Epiphany as well, I find. Because, as you know from the Colic for Epiphany, that we do remember the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.

[0 : 5 8] And, of course, Jonah's message were to those who were not Jews, for which he was really upset about the possibility of that. So we'll look at that today.

But one of the things that I've been learning about Jonah, I hope you two have too, is that really that this book is in two halves. You have chapters 1 and 2, which are a call to Jonah.

Jonah and his own rebellion. And then chapters 3 and 4 of the second half, and chapter 3, as we learned last week, begins much the same way as chapter 1 did. It's also a call to Jonah.

And then we also then have the repentance of the Ninevites. And so the prophecy in both halves starts with a call, but it moves to a complaint in the first half.

And it ends, though, in compliance, that of Jonah. Now, while Jonah starts with a call and moves to compliance at first in the second half of the prophecy, that's chapter 3, Jonah, unfortunately, ends in complaint.

[2 : 0 0] So, oddly enough, it kind of begins where it ends. It doesn't seem like there's been much change in Jonah. But not only does it begin with the complaint of Jonah, but also a question and a challenge of the Lord, which searches Jonah and us as well, with these words, Should I not pity Nineveh?

Should I not be concerned for Nineveh? Which is another way that it's rendered. Where Jonah's complaint, though, is a kind of wine, the Lord's complaint in the end with this question is one of wonder.

Jonah's complaint is driven by feeling. The Lord's complaint, in the end, is driven by his reason, his thought, who he is. And don't you find it interesting that the word complaint and compliant have the exact same letters?

The difference is the order of only two of those letters, that of I and A. And I think in some ways we get to compliance with the Lord and his will and what he's doing in the world, sometimes actually through our complaint when we offer that to him and he brings about transformation in our lives.

So Jonah 4 is a lesson, I think, in moving from complaint to compliance as we concede to the Lord's will. So let's look at this then.

[3 : 20] First of all, Jonah wears his feelings on his shirt sleeves. Don't you find that? He is exceedingly displeased and angry with, we're told, it in verse 1. What explained Jonah's feelings?

He felt this way because of the relenting of God and the repenting of Nineveh. This doesn't keep Jonah from praying, though. Jonah's feelings may get in the way of his understanding what God is doing and why he's doing it, but his feelings don't get in the way of his praying.

He is upset because things simply don't go his way. And so Jonah didn't like the outcome, the results, the effect of the message, and the ministry that he was given.

We can fault him for that, but try to appreciate or at least accept him. You see, Jonah must have thought of all the people, please God, not the Ninevites.

Nineveh was a power and an enemy of Israel. Jonah, while wrong about the grief he feels over the outcome, is at least right to complain to God.

[4 : 27] Furthermore, Jonah is right about God. This is what he knows and says. And he's quoting from God's word revealed to Moses in Exodus 34, verse 6, and prayed in Psalm 86 and 145, and also used by the prophets Nahum and Joel.

This is what Jonah says, You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Jonah acknowledges the Lord's character.

He believes in the Lord's work, and he also concedes the Lord's will. But did you notice this, what Jonah said before, quoting this from Exodus 34?

For I knew that you are. So he's not a cynic or a doubter or a skeptic. He just doesn't like the outcome and God's treatment of the Ninevites.

He knows the Lord, but in this case, the results don't meet with his interests, his desire, what he thinks is right. Personally, then, Jonah's response reaction is that he'd rather die.

[5 : 37] And why? What explains his reaction? You see, now there is no difference between Israel and the Ninevites. Both nations are in sync with the Lord, and that just doesn't seem right to Jonah.

And so the Lord raises the question with Jonah when he doesn't like the outcome and get the point and purpose of God. The question from God to Jonah is this, do you do well to be angry?

Now that's probably a little bit understand. I wonder what you might think by that. But it may mean something like this, what good does your anger do? Or, how will your anger get you what you want?

Or, where does your anger get you? Or, why are you so angry? Do you do right to think this? And the point is, the Lord is good, and his kindness is the point, the priority, the principle, and the purpose here.

That's what this all comes down to. And while Jonah knows, and he knew it, he just didn't want God's kindness to include the Ninevites.

[6 : 47] And this is hard to appreciate, even though some of us wish the same when we don't follow the sovereign logic of the Lord. We don't see the Lord's point.

And so there seems no point maybe in living, or going on. We don't see the point of listening, and then doing the will of the Lord, the Lord's word. And Jonah wasn't the only one like this.

There was a major prophet, Moses, the prophet Moses, who at one point just wanted to die as well, when the Israelites were complaining. And they were coming to him with interpretations, and applications of the law.

He just said, if he didn't have help in this, well, he might as well die. Well, the Lord didn't grant Jonah's wish. Jonah had no plan to take his life.

And when the Lord searches him, Jonah then has a different plan, a kind of a plan B. Jonah plans then to become kind of a spectator, an observer, kind of a researcher.

[7 : 49] And so he goes to the edge of the city to see what would become, or what would happen to Nineveh. He makes a booth. And why does he do this? Why does he go to observe this, and to stand at the edge of Nineveh and watch?

And maybe he hoped actually that disaster would strike Nineveh. Perhaps Nineveh wouldn't really turn away from their evil, and toward the Lord.

Maybe Jonah slipped into a kind of a bit of denial here, in his anger, and his sadness, and his displeasure. Well, at any rate, Jonah wasn't prepared for the weather conditions, on the edge of the city.

And the good and kind Lord looked after him yet again. The Lord appointed a plant, a worm, and wind to destroy then the plant. The whale provided one prophetic image, and then here came another.

And don't you find it just a little bit interesting, that we tend to be more interested in the whale, than we do the plant and the worm? Hmm? Well, Jonah's initial response was exceeding pleasure, that matched his exceeding displeasure earlier.

[9 : 00] Jonah didn't lack emotion, and probably he had a little bit too much of it. But we get the feeling that he lives by his emotions, and his exceeding pleasure lasted as long, as the protective plant did.

And the destruction of the plant meant, then the destruction of his happiness. And so the Lord and Jonah had an exchange, that followed just like the one that was a little bit earlier.

Again, Jonah wanted to die. Again, the Lord asked Jonah, do you do well to be angry? And the Lord is showing Jonah a parallel here. The Lord is as good to Jonah, as he was to Nineveh.

The Lord is as fair to one, as he is to the other. Or better yet, he's as kind to Nineveh, as he is to Jonah. And so the point.

The point. Unlike the Lord, Jonah pities a plant, but he can't pity a nation. He's more concerned about the good of a plant, than he is people.

[10 : 08] He seems to think a plant deserves more pity, than Nineveh does. In actuality, neither deserves the pity, and the kindness, and the grace, and the mercy, and the patience, and the long suffering of the Lord.

And that's the point. And spiritual economy of God's redemption in the world. The pity, concern, kindness, and goodness of the Lord isn't merited.

It isn't deserved. In Jonah's case, he'd rather his own destruction, and he, if he can't have, the destruction of Nineveh, he doesn't actually even want his own life.

Two of Jesus' disciples, didn't go quite as far as Jonah did, but, but, but almost. I don't know if you remember in Luke chapter 9, beginning at the 52nd verse, where Jesus passes through, the village of Samaria, and when they wouldn't actually receive him, James and John wanted to call down fire, on that city, on those people, right?

Now, the Israelites didn't see Samaria, the same way as Jonah saw Nineveh. Samaritans weren't kind of oppressors. It was the Roman Empire that were. But, but they both, in this case, that is, James and John, wanted the same thing that Jonah did of Nineveh, which was their death, their destruction.

[11 : 33] So the reason, though, was the same in this case. The Samaritans, and the Ninevites, didn't deserve the love of God, for some reason. That's what these people thought.

Well, Jonah acknowledges, three things. And in this, I'm just kind of ending, I wonder if we can kind of think about this. I wonder if you think that we're all, at all like Jonah, at all like James and John.

Here's something about Jonah. Jonah acknowledges, the Lord's character. He believes, in the Lord's sovereign work. And he concedes, the Lord's divine will.

I, believe in the Lord's character, and work. But sometimes, I'm not convinced of his will. Even, even if I am convinced, of those other things.

I, in much of the church, isn't like, isn't like Jonah, angry. But I think we're apathetic sometimes. We're not convinced the Lord's will, will really turn the hearts, of the enemies of the church.

[12 : 45] Do we really think that? We believe he's loving. We believe he's gracious. We believe that he can turn. But will he do it? And what do I, and what do we do in that case?

Do we do will, not to be angry, but do we do well, to be apathetic? My apathy doesn't stand to reason. My apathy doesn't produce anything.

My apathy does no good. So how do I move, from apathy, to action? How do I move, from apathy, to the acceptance, of what God is doing?

And I figure, the only way, that we can do that, is look to the cross. To look to Jesus, and what God did, through Jesus, on the cross, for the world.

And that's where, our understanding, acceptance of God's will, the belief in God's work, and yes, wholehearted commitment, to the Lord's will, in this world, for it, through his word.

[13 : 55] And I figure also, the words of Peter, someone who, certainly wasn't apathetic, but sometimes lived by his feelings too, said, in the second letter, that we have in the book, in the Bible.

Peter said, the Lord is not slow, to fulfill his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing, that any should perish, but that all, should reach repentance.

Peter was someone, who also acted, out of his feelings. He wasn't angry, like Jonah, but passionate. It was the death, of his Lord on the cross, that turned his heart, to hope.

A hope, grounded in the exceeding, kindness of Christ, for the world. Jesus wants to do the same, by his work, with his word, for his world, and through his people.

Who like, I think, Saint Augustine once said, is a prophethood, of all believers. So do we have something, in common, with Jonah? I think we do. We have much, in common with him.

[15 : 01] And I think, as God can actually, move us, from our apathy, to acceptance, to wholehearted commitment, to what the Lord, is doing in this world. And speak to you, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.