

The Character of Compassion

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. My name's Steve. I've never met you before. I'm the pastor here at St. Paul's, and it's my privilege to preach my first sermon in Jonah in this series, but to actually wrap up the series for us.

We come to this end of this great story, God's prophet. If you've just joined us, kind of a summary of it, if you like, is that God's prophet Jonah was sent to Nineveh, to the capital city of Assyria, which in Jonah's time were basically the schoolyard bullies.

They picked on everyone, and Assyria was the greatest imperial power in the world at that time. They were known for their brutality, and so God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, preach to them that I'm going to hold them accountable, and that they are to repent of their evil and violence, because I'm going to bring my wrath on them.

And Jonah's message was God was going to send calamity if they didn't turn from their evil. And Nineveh, the city, hears that message from Jonah, responds, they said sorry, they stopped being brutal in the hope that they would be able to appease God, and as a result of that, they are spared.

And so in the meantime, in chapter 4, which we're up to now, Jonah goes to the left of the city, takes up a vantage point to see whether or not the city that he hated so much was actually going to have the wrath of God pour out on him and be destroyed.

[1 : 5 2] So he doesn't just go and preach. He kind of goes to the hill, gets a vantage point, has a look, and to see what's going to happen to Nineveh. And so he's sitting up there outside the east of the city. He's got his popcorn and his chock top, and he's waiting for the curtain to be drawn on the blockbuster, and for the judgment of God to send upon his enemies.

But God withholds his wrath and his justice on Nineveh. And Jonah is furious. He is furious. That's the beginning of chapter 4.

And so what we're going to do today is pull together the threads of this book and try and land on what is the main point of Jonah.

What's the main lesson? Why was Jonah sent to Nineveh if Nineveh was not going to get held accountable for their evil?

It's got three points up there on the screen. It's the Paul's app. You can follow along as we cruise along here as well. First of all, the compassion of God. These verses are telling us three things about God's compassion.

[3 : 0 8] Firstly, it means, God's compassion means that he has voluntarily attached his heart to our heart.

In verse 6, Jonah is sitting, hoping for judgment to come, and we are told that God provides a shady plant to grow for the purpose of easing his discomfort.

God provided the plant to ease his discomfort. In the same way that God provided a great wind in chapter 1, God provided a great fish in chapter 2, and so now he provides a plant.

Verse 6 says, Jonah was very happy about the plant. I'm not that much into gardening to love plants that much, but he was very happy.

In fact, the original wording in the Hebrew language is very strong. He rejoiced with great rejoicing. And it's a statement in the Hebrew, a wordplay in the Hebrew, that is contrasted with Jonah's language in verse 1, where his response to God withholding his judgment upon Nineveh, Jonah in his heart says, So he looks at what God does with Nineveh, and he says, That is not justice.

[4 : 54] That's evil. But give me a plant. Oh, thank you, God. This is the greatest thing that's happened to me in the last three chapters. God's provision of the plant for his comfort brought him so much joy, but God's gracious provision for Nineveh brought him so much anger.

And then the plant died. The next day, verse 10, God said to him, The word that is used for compassion, Jonah uses the word compassion to describe God in verses 1 and 2 at the beginning.

And the word that is used in the second half of chapter 4, the word for compassion is the word concern. In verses 9 and 10, Jonah's delight, his anger, his disappointment, his frustration, and every other emotion that he has here is attached to this plant.

And it's all aspects of concern. The word concern that is used here is a word to grieve.

And it's a word that means to be deeply moved, to mourn, to grieve over the death of something your heart is attached to, something you love deeply.

[6 : 42] The deeper the love, the greater the grief, when it is not there. It's a very strong word. It effectively means that your heart has been broken.

Your heart has been broken. You have lost your great love. All of us need many things, if you like.

We get emotionally attached to things, especially we have an inordinate love for things that we think that we need the most in life.

John talked about this last week. Those things that will give us the deepest sense of worth, security, meaning, joy, love in life, our hearts become deeply attached to those things.

Jonah's joy in the plant is like the joy of a person with all the comforts and the possessions of this world and thinking all of the comforts and the possessions of this world is the thing that makes them who they are.

[7 : 55] Their identity is wrapped up in those things and so they love them so much. Things which, just like this plant, are so fleeting, not secure, and it's never enough.

His heart here was attached to this plant in such a way that what happened to it happened to him. And so when the plant died, the very next thing he says is, kill me.

I am dead too. Jonah is furious at God for sending a worm to take away what his heart was attached to.

Ancient philosophers used to say that there were kind of two kinds of loves. There was the, you could do good things and helpful things for people, but you didn't actually have to like them or love them in any way.

It was, it's the love which is an act of the will. It's a determination. It's similar to the statement that I've heard so many times, ironically from Christian people, I might have to love that person, but I don't have to like them.

[9 : 14] That's Greek stoicism. It's not in the Bible anywhere. The ancients used to distinguish that kind of love as an act of the will with what they called the love of attachment.

This is where your heart is bound to another's. And the ancients actually thought that it was impossible for a divine being to have a heart attachment to anything that they had created, including mere mortal human beings.

How is it possible? They think it's illogical for the great divines in any kind of way to have a sense that they needed to have their heart attached to something which is fundamentally less than them.

And so that makes the language of God at the end of Jonah absolutely shocking. The whole book ends with a question that is yet another assault on Jonah and his self-righteousness.

Verse 11, this is the end. Should I not have concern? There's that word again. 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 animals.

[10 : 53] The God who has made everything, who has everything, who needs nothing, whose joy is complete and dependent upon no one or anything has chosen voluntarily to attach his heart to humanity.

Including Nineveh. He has voluntarily attached his heart to humanity. He is concerned compassion for Nineveh.

Yes, he is angry at Nineveh and has compassion for Nineveh. What happens to Nineveh impacts him. It moves him.

What happens to Jonah impacts him and moves him. What happens to you impacts him and moves him. God's compassion is that he voluntarily attaches his heart to house.

He doesn't need to do it. He's not dependent upon it. He chooses to do it. I think Hosea 11 verses 7 and 8 is a great couple of verses.

[12 : 09] It records there God looking at his own people Israel sinking into sin and evil and he speaks of his heart being turned within him.

My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God most high I will by no means exalt them. How can I give you up Ephraim?

Another word for Israel. How can I hand you over Israel? My heart is changed within me. All of my compassion is aroused.

I am concerned for you. The second thing to know about God's compassion here is that his heart is particularly moved because of our condition.

In verse 11 it isn't just the Ninevites in some general senses people that bring out God's compassion but a city of people who cannot tell their right hand from their left.

[13 : 20] Here is a city full of people who have entirely lost their way. They are spiritually blind. They don't know what they're doing, how they have gone wrong, how to live well, how to fix it, and God has compassion on them.

He is moved and grieved by their condition. Jonah looks at them and sees a bunch of evil people deserving of judgment and God's words here to them is how much grace does he show them?

Of all the things he could have said, they can't tell their left hand from their right hand. Their way would have lost. They're blind. They're spiritually blind. The third characteristic of God's compassion is he forgives readily.

This is what has got Jonah all completely bent out of shape. Jonah goes to Nineveh, the great enemy of the nation of Israel. They are brutal. They're an evil city. He has a message of judgment.

Frankly, as much as he resisted getting there, this would have been a message knowing Jonah's heart would have been one that he would have been happy to say. He is hoping for their judgment.

[14 : 40] He wants God to bring justice. He wants God to obliterate them. And what does he get? He gets Nineveh, the city, saying sorry and promising to be good.

Now, the response of Nineveh here is quite different than the response of the pagan sailors at the end of chapter one, where they pray to God using the covenant name for God.

They pray and ask to God for forgiveness for what they're about to do with Jonah. They feared the Lord, they offered sacrifices and they vowed to follow him.

It's like these pagan sailors became Israelites in that moment, became part of the covenant people of God. Nineveh doesn't do that.

Nineveh doesn't enter into a covenant relationship with God. There's no circumcision, there's no sacrifices, there's no vows, they don't even use the covenant name of God.

[15 : 47] They don't come under the law of God, they don't convert and become Israelites in any way. And throughout the history books, there is no evidence of Nineveh changing in any way whatsoever. What we have here with Nineveh is the response of someone, a calamity comes into their life, they get a cancer diagnosis and they go, better get off to church and get God on my side.

And hopefully the cancer will be solved. And yet despite that, and despite God knowing their hearts and knowing what their history will be, he relents from bringing calamity on them.

And Jonah sees this and goes, that is an evil above all evils. God, can't you see what they're doing here? Can't you see their pretense? Can't you see the falseness of what is going on here?

There's not true repentance here. Can't you see the hypocrisy in their heart? Can't you see, God, that this city is still a threat to your people Israel?

God, make them grovel, put some conditions around them, take their military away from them.

[17 : 17] He could not accept that God's compassion and grace should work in favour of his enemies, but neither could he accept life without it himself.

God's compassion for Nineveh was unacceptable, but so was the redrawing of his compassion to Jonah in the plan, unacceptable.

Jonah longed for a God who was just like him, who met his needs, supported his plans, the sort of God that I mentioned before previously, the God who is the great divine vending machine.

If I put stuff in in a particular kind of way, he'll spit out what I want at the bottom. Jonah did not want the God who had made the heavens and the earth, the sea and the land.

The God that he confessed that the God that he believed in. It was up here, but operationally not in his life and in his heart. A God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

[18 : 29] A God who relents from sending calamity. God's gentle and persistent questioning here in chapter 4 was in fact an expression of God's concern and compassion on Jonah.

The saving of the pagan sailors, the response of the city of Nineveh to the word of God are all of God laboring and laboring and laboring in this book for one purpose to bring Jonah to repentance and faith in the God that he said that he believed in.

That's what it's all about. As he sat over the city condemning the city of Nineveh God was showing him Jonah are you not exactly like them?

Are you not exactly like them? So Jonah four ends with the big question which is a question that is on the mind of Jonah and in his heart and it leaves us with this big tension.

Well, what about the justice of Nineveh? What about Jonah's own self righteousness and the justice that he deserved? why didn't God punish such an evil nation as Nineveh in that moment?

[20 : 19] And you end the book with this tension and we don't ever find the answer until we look centuries later to the compassion of God in Jesus Christ.

You see, Jonah four points us forward to a much greater one sent by God to a city with another message. Not to a pagan city but this time to God's own people in Jerusalem to his own people.

In the last week of his life Jesus came to Jerusalem and as he came to Jerusalem he is hailed by those who recognise him as being God the rescuer come to his people the great divine now dwelling with his people and Luke 19 puts it like this as Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city he wept he wept over it and he said if you even you had only known on this day what would bring you peace but now it is hidden from your eyes Jesus the king from heaven is coming to a city full of people who are blind they're blind to the spiritual reality of who

Jesus is they don't know their left hand from their right but unlike Jonah he knew that he would suffer and die at the hands of the Jonahs of Jerusalem the religious elite the corrupt politicians the mob rule but instead of anger and instead of being absorbed with self pity he weeps Jesus weeps and on the cross he cries out father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing they are brutally torturing and killing and denying and betraying him but none of them not even the teachers of the law really understood what they were doing in that moment now he doesn't say that they're innocent any more than

God says that Nineveh is innocent they are completely guilty which is why they need forgiveness so how can God be merciful patient gracious to evil Nineveh and Jesus to his murderers and his betrayers how do you get both of those things colliding together and the clue I wasn't here and I'm assuming this has already been preached on so let me just revise it the clue is in Jonah 2 verses 2 to 4 where Jonah says from inside the fish from deep in the realm of the dead I called for help and you listened to my cry you hurled me into the depths all of your waves and breakers swept over me I said I have been banished from your sight yet

[23 : 58] I will look again toward your holy temple the words the statement there the realm of the dead is a reference to the world of divine punishment and death in here it's the word sheol such was Jonah's anguish and despair inside the fish and in Matthew 12 Jesus calls himself one greater than Jonah is now here and it's a reference to Jonah's three days inside the fish three days and nights in the fish and when Jesus went to the cross he repeats the suffering of Jonah but to an infinitely greater degree and he cries out from the cross my God my God why have you forsaken me why have you forsaken me

Jonah went into the depths of the sea to save the sailors Jesus went into the depths of death and separation from God into sheol itself into hell into the depths of divine judgment which washed over him like wave after wave to save self righteous Jonah evil Nineveh and you and me Jesus willingly came under the judgment of God for all of our sin for all of our rebellion from running from God for refusal to obey refusal to allow him to be God and for all of our self righteous religious morality that looks down at the rebellion of others and failing to see our own ourselves he died for both the bad and those who think they're good as 2

Corinthians 21 puts it God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God salvation completely belongs to Jesus where both justice and mercy meet such is the wonder of the heart of Christ theologian B.B.

Warfield wrote an article it's actually probably more of a book really called The Emotional Life of Our Lord he wrote it well over 100 years ago and he made the point that by far the most typical statement in the New Testament to describe the emotional life of Jesus is the phrase he was moved with compassion he was moved with compassion a phrase that means that he was moved from the very center of his being from the driving center of his heart his life in fact Warfield that the New Testament records Jesus weeping 20 times for every time he laughs he was a man of sorrows not because he was depressive but because his compassion connects his heart with ours and he sees our sadness and it makes him sad he sees our pain and it brings him pain he sees our sin and the destruction that we are bringing on our life and it breaks his heart

Jonah went outside of Nineveh climbed a hill to wait and hope for the destruction of the city Jesus up the hill outside the city of Jerusalem and died to bring it and us salvation nothing is more important for anyone than to know the heart of Jesus for them a heart of compassion just very briefly out there on the stand just over there there is a book called the heart of Jesus how he really feels about you if anything has touched you at all grab a copy of this and read it take it it's yours read it that brings you to the final point in terms of the compassion of God Jonah and us Jonah has got many great things running through it but the whole point of

[28 : 55] Jonah comes to its focus in the final chapter Jonah reveals that anyone from pagan nations like Nineveh through to one of God's successful prophets and preachers can miss the grace and the compassionate heart of God can say a lot of true things about God can believe a lot of true things about God but actually be disconnected from the actual heart of God all of Jonah's fears all of his disobedience all of his prejudices all of his inordinate loves all of his tantrums!

all stand from his blindness to the compassionate heart of the true God all of it and the main purpose of this book is to get Jonah to not just know great things about God but to actually walk with God to know God stand God and his compassion and one of the great things about this book is that God is so compassionate that he doesn't allow his servant Jonah to remain undisturbed in his complete blindness and foolishness God keeps coming after him again and again and again with a storm a fish a plant and all of it all of it is God's compassion revealing to him again and again and again who he is and calling

Jonah to come to him God is too compassionate just to leave him alone and just to give him what he wants the whole book is about bringing Jonah to a point of repentance and faith and communion with the God who is and because this book ends with an unanswered question for its readers like us the main purpose of this book is to get us to understand God and his compassionate heart and to go to him to be embraced by him so there's three things I want to say firstly how much of Jonah's self right and I say this to the religious amongst us those who gather in church how much of Jonah's self righteous heart lingers in ours

Jonah's self righteous condemnation of Nineveh is just like this great story that Jesus told in Luke 18 of the Pharisee and a tax collector where the Pharisee prays so confidently God I thank you you know it's because of you that I am not like other people and especially this tax collector God I thank you that I am so much superior to others that I am so much more moral than others I thank you God so as Jonah looks over Nineveh he could have prayed exactly the same prayer and as we finish up this book and all of Jonah's dirty laundry is out there if you get to the end of this book and say

God I thank you that I'm not like Jonah what an idiot how foolish then Jonah's for you read it again with the end in mind self righteousness will never ever lead to compassion it will never lead to grace or forgiveness or mercy it is inconsistent to have contempt for others a refusal to forgive others while claiming God's grace on your own life Matthew 18 we read another great parable of Jesus where he told of an unmerciful servant a servant who had been forgiven a debt that they had no chance of ever paying back it was incalculable and this servant says thank you so much for that and immediately goes out and treats with contempt someone who owed them a comparatively small debt such is self-righteousness the gospel of

[33 : 50] Jesus Christ should drive the Christian to deeper and deeper and deeper levels of humility grace compassion and forgiveness towards others even those and especially those who have wronged us the thing that should consistently be on the mind of any Christian the clearest wrong is their own sin they should feel their own sin more than anyone else's secondly Jonah confronted never without any compassion without any weeping he preached to his city without loving his city he had a true message but not true heart he had orthodoxy but not an orthocardia when he when we are captivated by the compassionate heart of

God in Jesus Christ we abandon a comfortable world of self protection as we seek as a church for others to know the compassion of God the truth must be communicated from hearts of compassion and lives of service God compassion didn't result him you know like staying up in the up in the heavens looking down at us feeling so sorry for us throwing some money towards us to make life better telling us to take a holiday he came down he took the initiative he took on our nature he stepped into our shoes and into our condition and into our problems and he walked with us he dwelt with us!

And so friends if you have a friend brother or sister in Christ going through a hard time don't be so busy that you can't sit with them that you can't walk with them that you can't weep with them through the suffering compassion hurts but that is what God has done for us in Jesus he walked in our shoes and he wept with us thirdly God did not try to expose the self righteousness and lack of compassion in Jonah's heart just by talking to him didn't just talk to him in his grace and his compassion from his compassion his heart is attached to

Jonah God sent Jonah difficulties disappointments and troubles God keeps coming after Jonah with a storm with a fish a plant even a scorching east wind from the east to beat down on his head and to bring him to a point of beyond himself he keeps coming after him God is too holy he is too compassionate just to leave Jonah alone in his foolishness and just to give him what he wants as if the plant in itself is going to satisfy all of his needs God is mercifully doing spiritual surgery on the idols of Jonah heart

God is trying to liberate Jonah from the things that enslave him that drive him that control him he's trying to show Jonah again and again and again these good things are not ultimate things I am the ultimate thing you need to see the plant your self righteousness they are fragile they will never meet you only I am compassionate and good he's trying to show Jonah that to dwell in his presence in the midst of the storm of life is better than the absence of the storm of life and he will do the same for us it is a painful process to find our all in Jesus if you ever pray the prayer God make me like

[38 : 57] Jesus find all of my hope and my joy and my meaning in you he will answer that prayer but not in the way that you expect it it is a painful process to find our all in Jesus but it's the only path to real and enduring joy and contentment and stability in life as Hebrew 12 tells us Jesus walked an infinitely more painful path for the joy that was set before him out of compassion for us because his heart is bound to us God will graciously provide some storms in our lives to drive us away from fleeting comforts and hopes to something that is much more secure and that's him dwelling in him walking with him he will not leave us in the foolishness of our shallow loves in his mercy he will drive us to more solid and enduring joy and that is his presence

I've said it really briefly and I hope at some point in the near future sometime in the next five years I will unpack this idea in a much more extensive way God the idea of suffering and evil and the good that God brings out of it one great example is Charles Spurgeon the great English preacher he was someone who suffered repeatedly in his life but he had an unwavering trust in the compassion of God in every moment of his afflictions every time he was afflicted it just drove him closer and closer to God he saw it all every bit of his affliction every trouble in his life every storm he saw it all coming from God for his good and for his joy he wrote it would be a very sharp and trying experience to me to think that

I have an affliction which God never sent me that the bitter cup was never filled by his hand that my trials were never measured out by him nor sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity!

God that there was greater joy in God and it was only through the afflictions and the troubles of life that drove him to that greater joy he wasn't joking at all when he quipped I dare say that the greatest earthly blessing that God can give to any of us is health with the exception of sickness affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house it is the best book in my library he said to learn and grow and flourish in those seasons we must walk with him every day in other words if you are not walking with him now you won't walk with him in affliction and suffering you we must walk with him now and so I commend to you our vision series and the seven rhythms of grace seven rhythms of life that keep driving us again and again to the cross to his gospel to his mercy his compassion joy awaits those who do joy awaits those who do how do we know that joy awaits those who do

Jonah finishes with this cliff hanger unanswered question and so you sit there the last picture of Jonah is him going I want to die God you've not met any of my needs you've not done what I thought you I just want to die so what happens to Jonah in the end we know in history that didn't change they went on brutally and they ended up destroying the northern tribes of Israel eventually but what about Jonah did he stain his foolishness did he and his condemning self righteousness of all others or did he see God and himself differently from what God had brought in his life we can only speculate but I'm going to anyway how do we know that

[44 : 05] Jonah was so self righteous how do we know that he was entirely clueless how do we know that he was so angry how do we even know that he he he did the I hate God's grace speech how do we know about his prayer inside the fish only if he told others only if he recorded it only if he went back to Israel and said let me just tell you something let me tell you who I am let me tell you what I've done and the and so the question is what kind of self righteous angry judgmental prophet foolish foolish man the main prophet in Israel what kind of person would go back and have it recorded in

Israel's history and for every person since them around the face of the earth how much of a self righteous angry fool he had been how sinful he actually was only someone who had become joyfully secure in the compassion of God only someone who didn't care what others thought about him anymore only someone who knew he was as sinful as Nineveh but entirely accepted by the compassionate heart of God only someone who was found in God's forgiveness his grace his mercy his abounding love and who delighted in the compassionate heart of God himself and he only got to that point through the affliction

God if God's compassion can change Jonah it can change anyone who Thank you.