

God's Characteristic Compassion

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[0 : 00] When it comes to politics, one tactic that's often used is that of character assassination. So whether it's the Conservative Party leadership contest or whether it is over the US presidential election campaign, character assassination is a common way to get yourself out there and put your opponent down.

The deliberate effort to damage the reputation or the credibility of an opponent is very common. It involves exaggeration or the manipulation of the facts in order to present a negative picture of somebody else.

And it's one thing to try this with another person, but it is an altogether different thing to try this with God. And yet that's what Jonah seems to do here at the beginning of chapter 4.

Jonah is assassinating the character of God. He attacks God's character because he's angry at what God has done. When Jonah announced the coming of God's judgment on Nineveh, the people repented or they turned from their sins and they turned to God.

And God showed them mercy. And it's what we call a revival. A city with 120,000 people were saved from judgment. Amazing. And it would have been a fantastic ending to the book of Jonah just to stop there.

[1 : 22] But that isn't where the story ends. It doesn't end in chapter 3 because we've got chapter 4. It takes a strange and unexpected turn. So instead of chapter 3 ending with words, something like, and Jonah returned home rejoicing, what we get is chapter 4, verse 1.

It's a shocking conclusion. But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong. And he became angry. And then later, chapter 4, verse 3. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it's better for me to die than to live.

So Jonah is not happy with what God has done. And that's when his character assassination of God takes place. He assassinates God, not to anyone else, but to God himself.

He assassinates his character. So this is the angry prophet, Jonah, confronting the compassionate God. God is far too compassionate for Jonah's liking.

And so whether we're here today and we call ourselves a Christian or not, we need to get a better grasp of God's character. To see what God is like and not make the same kind of mistake that Jonah made here.

[2 : 36] Because God's compassion is far wider and it's far deeper than we could possibly imagine. Because compassion is extravagantly wide and it is extraordinarily deep.

Extravagantly wide and extraordinarily deep. And so let's look at these two dimensions, if you like, of God's character. There's an outline on the back of the service sheet. So first of all, God's compassion is extravagantly wide.

Verse 1 and 2. And we see this at the end of Jonah chapter 3. So reading again in chapter 3 verse 10. When God saw that they did what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong and he became angry. So what was Jonah's problem here? Before we think about why Jonah reacted in this way, we need to see the strength of feeling in Jonah. Because the original here expresses this in the strongest possible language.

[3 : 43] So chapter 4 begins more like, it was evil to Jonah and he was incensed. If that's the Hebrew, I guess the Glaswegian would be more like, Jonah was pure rageant.

Jonah was fuming because of what God had done. He even regards God's behaviour as being evil. Because there's a word play here on the word evil.

And it emphasises this. So it comes up twice in chapter 10. Sorry, chapter 3 verse 10, the word evil. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the evil he had threatened.

But again in verse 4 in the original, it comes up that this was evil to Jonah. And so the irony here is, God showed mercy to people who were evil, but Jonah thinks this itself is evil.

It's an evil act of God. And so while God turns away from his anger, Jonah's anger boils within him because of what's happened.

[4 : 51] So there could be a sharper contrast between the compassion of God for these people and the lack of compassion in Jonah. God's compassion is extravagantly wide, and yet Jonah feels no compassion for these lost and helpless Ninevites.

Well, why? Two things. First of all, Jonah had a problem with the people, but Jonah also had a problem with God. So first of all, this problem with the people. Jonah was an Israelite, so he was one of God's chosen people.

The Assyrians, the people of Nineveh, were Assyrians, and they were the enemies of God's people. And so we should dismiss Jonah's response too quickly, because Assyria was basically a terrorist state.

There are some shocking accounts in history of Assyrian brutality. So when they captured their enemies, they would do things like cut their limbs off, they would skin people, they would pull out tongues, they would rape, they would burn people alive, they would even force family members to parade the decapitated heads of those they killed on sticks throughout the time.

And so the Assyrian Empire was known as one of the most cruel, one of the most violent, one of the most brutal in history. And so these evil foreigners were an obvious threat to Jonah and to his own people.

[6 : 18] And there's more to it for Jonah, because Jonah is a really complex character, because there's far more than just fear on the outside, fear of these enemies, there's also a prejudice on the inside.

Just remember, back in chapter 1, verse 9, how Jonah identified himself. He defined himself ethnically first, and then religiously.

And then here in chapter 4, verse 2, you notice that he refers to his home. Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? So even mentioning his home, or speaking about his country, means that Jonah's thinking about his people, his tribe, his kin.

So Jonah's certainly a nationalist. He regarded his country as being foremost in his concern. But Jonah could also be described as a racist, because he hated people from other countries, people who he thought were lesser people than people from his country.

And so Jonah is filled with rage, because God showed these people mercy. So there's the people he's got a problem with, but he's also got a problem with God.

[7 : 37] Jonah regards God's actions here as exceedingly evil. So the root of his anger is this characteristic compassion that God shows to people.

So Jonah doesn't want God to be true to himself. And that's why he disobeyed in the first place. And so he tells God this in verse 2. He prayed to the Lord, Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home?

This is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

This is Jonah's attempt at trying to justify himself. And it's a classic, I told you so kind of thing. Isn't this what I said, Lord?

And the expression, what I said, is literally my word. And it's the same word that's used in the phrase in chapter 1, verse 1, the word of the Lord.

[8 : 38] And then again in chapter 3, verse 1, the word of the Lord. So Jonah's saying, God, remember your word? Well, isn't that great now, is it? Now that you have forgiven these people.

Whereas my word, what I thought and said would happen, has happened. So Jonah's saying, God, you haven't kept your part of the deal here.

My word is the word that's been right all along. I didn't just have a sneaking suspicion that you would behave in this way. I just knew you would do this.

It's just like you, God, to act with such compassion towards people who don't deserve it. This time, God, your mercy has just gone too far.

It's like he's accusing God here of having a character deficiency. And so he tries to assassinate God's character by using God's own words against him.

[9 : 40] Jonah says, I knew that you're a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. What Jonah's doing is he's echoing words here from Exodus chapter 34, verse 6 and 7.

They're words that God gave to Moses, words that God spoke about himself to Moses for the people of Israel. And it's a succinct summary of God's character.

And it comes up again and again throughout the Bible. A great description of what God is like. It contains these five wonderful attributes of God. He's gracious.

He's compassionate or he's merciful. He's slow to anger. He's abounding in love. And he relents from sending calamity. Classic summary of God's character.

And yet Jonah portrays these amazing attributes of God as God's fatal weaknesses, like their flaws and the divine makeup.

[10 : 42] Jonah's accusing God of being too soft on sin and evil and wickedness. And yet Jonah's being selective here in what he says to God. Because while he quotes part of God's character, the part he's got a problem with, he fails to quote the part of God's character that he's quite happy with.

Because the latter part in Exodus 34 speaks of God not leaving the guilty and punished. And so Jonah ignores the part about God punishing guilty people.

And so he misquotes the Bible and therefore misunderstands what God is really like. I guess it just goes to show that if you try to use the Bible against God, or if you try to use the Bible to justify your own sinful behavior, then you're really going to fail.

It's an argument that doesn't work. And so Jonah's criticism is that God has been too compassionate by failing to punish the Ninevites. And so we need to see that God's compassion is extravagantly greater here than Jonah can possibly handle.

Jonah can't see past Israel, narrow vision, whereas God is looking out to the world with a salvation plan that is for all humanity.

[12 : 02] And that's what God promised Abraham a way back in Genesis chapter 12, when he said that Abraham's descendants would be a blessing to people from all nations, all over the world.

And so Jonah's only concerned about himself, he's only concerned about Israel, in his narrow mind, and in his small heart. Whereas God has far wider and far greater purposes.

And so as we apply this, well, we've got to be careful not to misunderstand God's character, haven't we? by thinking that we somehow know better about how God should act than God does.

Especially when it comes to who God's extravagant compassion reaches out to. Because it reaches further and it extends wider than we can possibly conceive or imagine.

And so, these days, we know that modern people have got a problem with a God who is angry and who must punish sin and evil.

[13 : 08] People don't like to think that God will judge them and punish them. But what's also just as offensive to modern people these days is the thought that God shows compassion to people who don't deserve it.

That he forgives people who don't deserve it. So, people might say, well, what do you mean?

You're telling me that somebody can have lived a really wicked and evil life their whole life then on their deathbed they can say a simple prayer saying sorry to God and because of Jesus they can be forgiven and they get a place in heaven.

Really? God is that compassionate and loving and yet isn't that the scandalous grace that is at the heart of the Christian faith? where God's anger at sin and God's mercy towards sinners come together because these two truths are held in tension here in Jonah and throughout the rest of the Bible.

And religious people just don't like it because God forgives people who don't deserve it. And irreligious people just don't like it because God judges people who do deserve it.

So nobody's off the hook when it comes to God and his dealings with humanity. Nobody is so good that they don't need God's grace and nobody is so bad that they can't receive God's grace.

[14 : 40] And so thankfully God is never ever limited to doing what we think he should be doing.

And so if we find it hard to imagine that God might show mercy to that kind of person who I don't think deserves it then we haven't really grasped how extravagantly wide God's compassion really is.

And if we find it hard to embrace the kind of people who are just so unlike us maybe morally or ethnically or culturally they just haven't grasped God's compassion and his love for people.

So it's clear from Jonah that God wants to welcome the very people that we are possibly prone to exclude and keep out. And so the implication is that God will welcome the very people who feel they should be excluded who don't feel worthy enough God will take them in.

And so let's never have such a narrow and such a small view of God that we limit his extravagantly wide compassion to the people that he can reach.

That's the first thing. God's compassion is extravagantly wide but the second point is that God's compassion is extraordinarily deep. Verse 3 and 4. So God's characteristic compassion made Jonah so angry that he didn't want to live in a world with a God like this.

[16:10] With a God who had this character. And so he prayed verse 3 Now Lord take away my life for it is better for me to die than to live. He's grumbling to God because things hadn't turned out the way that he wanted and so in his self-pity he now wants divine assisted suicide.

Jonah can't bear to live and let God be God. And so seeing God display his extravagantly wide compassion was worse than death for Jonah.

Can you imagine that? He would prefer to die than to live in a world with a God who treats people in the way that we treated the Ninevites. What a sad and sorry state.

And yet Jonah's so serious that he even repeats his death wish later on there in verse 8 and then again in verse 9. So Jonah's criticizing God for failing to punish the Ninevites.

But God now challenges Jonah on his anger with a question. Verse 4. But the Lord replied is it right for you to be angry?

[17:23] So let's get this. God's compassion isn't just extravagantly wide. It goes extraordinarily deep. God's great salvation reaches out to the world.

So the book of Jonah's about it reaches out to people like the Ninevites and yet it also reaches in to individual hearts. So Jonah's been disobedient, Jonah's been difficult and yet God has shown him mercy.

And he'd experienced God's grace already, hadn't he? And yet here he is fuming with anger. Now God, he wants to die and be rid of God and yet God doesn't want to be rid of him.

Just see how patient God is with Jonah, how concerned God is for Jonah. God just ignores his pathetic request to die and he says, Jonah, let's talk.

Let's talk together. God wants to bring Jonah to his senses. He wasn't just going to leave Jonah in this dark place that he was in. And that's when God puts Jonah on the spot.

[18:31] Because after everything, God's saying, Jonah, do you really have any right to be angry? Like, seriously? After all I've done for you, it's a rebuke from God for sure.

And yet God is remarkably gentle. He's forcing Jonah to reflect on the state of his own mind and his own heart. And so yes, God's purpose was to show mercy to the people of Nineveh.

And it was mission accomplished. 120,000 people were saved. Brilliant. But God doesn't just leave it there and, as it were, ride off into the sunset.

Because what we see here is that God cares about his servant. Not just about his service. God loves Jonah for who he is. Not just for what Jonah can do for him.

God is concerned for the man. Not just the mission. compassion. And isn't that so beautiful in how God deals with people like Jonah, like you, like me.

[19:38] His compassion doesn't just go wide for the whole world. We can get that. But it goes deep. It goes deep for people like us. Because while Jonah was the instrument of God's grace to others, God's grace hadn't really sunk into Jonah's heart deep enough.

God's grace to God's grace to God's grace to God's grace to God. When we don't fully know him or appreciate his nature, as it's outlined here, then we might be able to say what God is like with our lips, without really believing it deep in our hearts.

And like Jonah, it can be that the deeper impact of God's grace and compassion, the deeper impact happens in stages. So for Jonah, this traumatic experience of being caught in a storm, swallowed by a fish, and spat out alive, that wasn't enough for Jonah to grasp the grace of God.

Because here he is, angry. He wants to die. And it's because the grace has not gone deep enough to make him want the Ninevites to experience that same grace that he's experienced himself.

So how could Jonah find sinners being saved so distasteful when God finds it so delightful? He's in a bad place, isn't he?

[21:11] The pulse beat of God's heart for the lost wasn't really Jonah's heartbeat, was it? Jonah had forgotten that he'd be dead at the bottom of the sea if it weren't for the same compassion of

God that's now shown to the Ninevites.

And so while Jonah was happy to receive it, he still felt the Ninevites didn't deserve it. And it's that self-righteous attitude that thinks that Jonah, he deserves God's mercy for other people who don't deserve it.

God's mercy for the And it's a typical response that religious self-righteous people make when God welcomes people in who don't meet their standards.

Just think of the Pharisees in Jesus' own day. They were horrified when they saw Jesus hanging out with sinful people. They criticized him, calling him a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

And he grumbled, saying, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. In fact, Jonah's just like the elder brother in Jesus' parable of the lost son, isn't he?

[22 : 22] Which was directed towards the self-righteous religious leaders. Remember how the elder brother in Jesus' parable, he ended up outside, away from his loving father when his loving father threw a party for the lost son.

He couldn't cope. He didn't think it was right. This boy doesn't deserve what I do. And he's self-pity. He couldn't stand the extravagantly great compassion of his father towards his wayward son. And Jonah's just like that here. And it's what we'll be like unless the extravagantly deep compassion of God sinks into our own hearts.

We'll look down on other people, thinking that we deserve God's welcome whereas they don't. It's interesting, today our culture struggles with identity and acceptance, where the message is that you're only worth something if you're successful or if you're beautiful, meaning that your value comes from how well you perform or how well you look.

and so if you perform well and if you look good on the inside, then you'll feel right. Life will be great. And you'll get angry when others get the recognition that you don't think that they deserve because they haven't worked as hard as you.

[23 : 45] And if you look good, then you'll feel affirmed on the outside by other people. But then you'll get angry when others are affirmed and you don't think that they deserve it as much as you. And so when you fail or you're no longer noticed, you feel crushed and excluded because your identity or your worth has been built on the wrong things.

But God doesn't see people the way the world sees people or even the way that we see ourselves. God knows exactly what we're like. He knows our fears. He knows our failures.

And he receives us not because of anything that we do, but because of himself because of his character. And so his acceptance of us and his approval of us doesn't come from the inside or the outside.

It comes from above. That's why there's nothing left to prove with God. Our lives are like an open book before him.

Earlier, Jonah had said salvation comes from the Lord, meaning nobody can save themselves. Nobody can help themselves. Nobody can do anything to warrant or deserve God's compassion and love and mercy.

[25 : 00] Had Jonah forgotten that? I wonder, have we forgotten that? Because God's compassion is far wider than we expect. And it has a depth to it that is deeper than we can even imagine.

And it extends to people like the Ninevites, people like Jonah, people like you, people like me. That's why the story of Jonah shows us what God is really like.

Because when we see him for himself and how he deals with us, we can't possibly walk away and be narrow-minded or mean-spirited or small-hearted.

Because if we call ourselves a Christian, we must never forget that we are nothing more than a sinner saved by grace. grace. We are no better than anyone else and no more deserving of God's grace, his compassion and love than anyone else.

We all deserve God's wrath for failing to worship, love and obey him. We've insulted his character by living in his world as if he didn't matter.

[26 : 09] And yet God sent his son, Jesus Christ, the one who said he was greater than Jonah in order to save us. So God's wrath was poured out on Jesus Christ so that God's mercy could reach us.

And that's why turning from our sin and trusting in Christ's death and resurrection is the only way that any one of us can be saved. And so the story of Jonah reminds us of this God who is so

compassionate, the God whose compassion is extravagantly wide and extraordinarily deep. And this is the God we need to know. Thank you. Thank you.