

# God's Compassion

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[ 0 : 00 ] Amen. Well, for the last time, would you turn to Jonah, which you'll find on the Pew! Bibles on page 929 as we come to the end of our series. If you haven't been with us, Jonah! is a short book. You've got the whole thing in front of you on that double page spread.

Jonah is a prophet in Israel. He is sent by the Lord to Israel's enemies to preach to them. He refuses to. The Lord finds a way of getting him there, and then he eventually arrives, preaches a message of repentance, and then we'll pick up in verse 10 of chapter 3 as the Lord responds to the repentance of those people. So, Jonah chapter 3 verse 10, and I'll finish the book.

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. But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.

He prayed to the Lord, isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That that is what I was trying 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.

Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live. But the Lord replied, is it right for you to be angry?

[ 1 : 45 ] 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. 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. 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, 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. But God said to Jonah, is it right for you to be angry about the plant? It is, he said, and I'm so angry, I wish I were dead.

But the Lord said, you have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have more 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?

Well, that's how Jonah closes his book. And as we've been going through the short book, I imagine a number of questions have come up for you.

One of the ones for me is, why has Jonah written this? We've asked it so many times. Why has Jonah written this and sent it back to Israel?

[ 3 : 36 ] We've reflected again a number of times that this records Jonah's ministry to Nineveh, but the book itself was Jonah's ministry to Israel.

He sent it back there. And this final chapter really does give us an answer as to why. And to give you a bit of an idea, I want you to imagine something for me.

Imagine you're living in Warsaw, Poland, early September 1939. Nazi forces are coming from the north, west, and south, and are starting to camp out in tanks along the edge of your city.

Soviet forces are gathering along the eastern border. There is absolutely no doubt that you are about to be conquered. Then a man from your community writes a short book detailing his recent trip to Berlin, in which he shows how he brought a message which single-handedly stopped Berlin from being completely destroyed.

That's not great timing, is it? As the Wehrmacht advance on your town, now's not a good time for someone to publicize their hand in saving a key German city from certain destruction.

[ 4 : 57 ] You would be angry to receive that book, to say the very least. Perhaps, surely, the invasion wouldn't have happened if he hadn't delivered that life-saving message to Berlin.

You would be angry. Nineveh is the great city of Assyria. Right now, at the moment of these events, Hosea and Amos are back in Israel saying, Assyria is about to conquer you because of your sin. And Jonah is off preaching to the Assyrians and sends this book home. Surely you would be furious. And so this passage asks the question repeatedly, both to Jonah in his circumstance, but I think he's included it for the people of Israel in their circumstance, and for us in whatever we are facing as well.

Do you do right to be angry? Are you right to be angry with how the Lord has acted? Well, as I say, we've puzzled over and over through this short book as to why Jonah's written it, why he's sent it back.

I mean, he certainly doesn't come off well in it, does he? And why does he leave it so open-ended? Why does he have to leave it so that he has no redemption? I mean, he doesn't respond to the Lord's question at the end, does he?

[ 6 : 24 ] I mean, I take it that Jonah did, in fact, learn the lesson that the Lord taught him in chapter 4. We'll come to what it is. But my understanding is he became an obedient prophet, and the evidence for that is the book, the book which only he could have written.

But why write it, and why include this chapter about him behaving just absolutely appallingly? All the big action points have already happened. The storm, the big fish, the promise of the threat of destruction, then repentance, and then forgiveness.

So why chapter 4? Well, we've seen that the people of Israel were at this point cheating the poor, engaging in violence, a host of other wickednesses, including worshipping golden calves.

So when Jonah subsequently wrote it down and sent this, that punishment was either upon them or jolly nearly upon them. And Jonah obviously thought that this section of the story, the bit that was just about him, which highlights his own sin, would be of tremendous spiritual use to them.

Because no doubt they'd be angry. If not angrier than Jonah was at the sparing of Nineveh, this great Assyrian city, as Assyria mounts forces against them, surely they too would be tempted to be angry with God.

[ 7 : 53 ] Not a good time, Jonah. Not a good time to have told us this. The tanks are on the doorstep. And so the question that's posed to Jonah, Jonah poses to Israel, and we pose to ourselves as we reflect today.

Do we have a right to be angry with God in how he doles out judgment and mercy? Jonah had been preaching to the pagans, but his ministry in this book is to Israel as their prophet, and he is every inch a man of Israel.

He represents their behavior in every sense. Israel, we've seen as we've flicked around some of the contemporary prophets of his, were taking God for granted.

They were acting as if they were entitled to God's mercy and their enemies were not. They were disobeying God. This is the story of Jonah, taking God for granted, acting as though he's entitled to his mercy, disobeying God.

He's like Israel in every way, including how kindly the Lord treats him. So I think we should be looking at this short book, this book of Jonah, as a parable for Israel, a true story, certainly, and a parable nonetheless.

[ 9 : 04 ] They're disobeying God, and yet we saw, didn't we, at the beginning of the series, in their disobedience, God is still blessing them.

And yet, despite the blessing, we've also seen that God's patience was coming to an end. The clock was ticking. And the same thing's happening with Jonah's little story of the plant and the worm.

The clock's ticking. There's blessing. But judgment is coming. And so Jonah's writing down this story, I think, to teach two lessons, primarily. And I've written them down here.

The first is this. Sin in the shelter and be scorched in the sun. Sin in the shelter and be scorched in the sun. So Jonah, or little Israel, as we may as well call him, sits under the blessing of God's shade, yet he sins.

So God then blesses a worm with a plant to eat and scorches Jonah with the hot east wind. Jonah enjoys a blessing he doesn't deserve whilst being in open rebellion against God who is blessing him.

[10:15] This is precisely what Israel have been doing and surely what we also have done. Israel were enjoying and the peace of God and the peace of God under a wicked king, enjoying the comfort and security of being a powerful nation, all whilst they worshipped golden calves and neglected the God who had saved them, who had given them this very land.

And yet God is patient with them beyond belief. And God's patient here with Jonah beyond belief, is he not? So Jonah's preparing, as he writes this, he's preparing his people back home to respond well in that time of God's patience and to gently, firmly, proddingly ask them this question, should you be angry right now?

And for us, we ask the question often, I'm sure, what's God doing in the world? No, but seriously, what is God doing? What's he doing in this world?

In the past five years, most of us who lived in countries where we've had the infrastructure to do so were locked down, everyone else kind of offended for themselves, life and liberty was ripped from the whole world, now we're a few years out of it.

It seems every country has posed itself for war, if it's not already in one. And you don't have to think on a global scale for this question to enter your head.

[11:37] What is God doing? What does God think he's doing? Surely we're right to be angry, we think. I doubt for many of us, it's a strange feeling to be tempted to be angry with God, whether it's something terrible happening to us or something wonderful happening to our enemies.

Well, at the time of this book, both are happening to God's people. Both are happening to Israel, and surely they're right to be angry. Well, this leads to the second thing that Jonah wants to teach us in this book, that God's mercy is just, and so is his justice.

God's mercy is just, and so is his justice. Jonah's anger is double-pronged, you see. He's angry, yes, that God is going to forgive the Ninevites, but the context of his anger is that he also knows that God is preparing to punish Israel.

Think one last time with me about Jonah's ministry that we've caught a glimpse of. He's a faithful prophet for years and years. Israel remained disobedient, then he gets tagged out to go abroad, while other prophets bring a message of destruction.

He goes to Nineveh, the Ninevites repent straight away, and so they're going to be saved. Jonah's been preaching in Israel for decades, and they haven't repented. You remember, we saw the cheap returns to the Lord in Hosea, particularly in chapter 6 and 8, and we see a very similar kind of return to the Lord by Jonah in chapter 2.

[13:18] Very Christian or very Jewish language, but ultimately summarized as, well, we're God's people, other people aren't, so God will forgive us. There's no actual repentance, no acknowledgement of wrongdoing, just sheer presumption.

Chapter 2 of Jonah, we saw a very earnest expression of who God is, a very earnest expression of who Israel is, and yet no acknowledgement of his iniquity, no acknowledgement that he was in trouble because he was under judgment.

Same for Israel. So Jonah is angry here, both at God's forgiveness and at his judgment that is coming. But we need to just take a beat and hang on a sec, I think.

Because we see as we read that Jonah's angry at this, at God forgiving Nineveh. But how does Jonah know that Nineveh have been forgiven? We see that Nineveh repents and we're told that God relents, but it doesn't seem as though the 40 days are up, does it?

Because that's why Jonah's waiting. He goes and waits to see what becomes of them. Jonah sits down in verse 5 to see what will become of the city. So if the 40 days aren't up, then how does Jonah know that these guys have been forgiven?

[14:42] Well, perhaps it is as simple as God tells him, but the text doesn't say that to us. And there's certainly another reason that's been laid out for us from the start of this book. How does Jonah know that God's forgiven the Ninevites?

Because Jonah knows what God does when people repent. Jonah knows what God's like.

This book shows us what God is like. If you don't trust that that is what God is like, then look at this and see that repentance is the sure way of gaining forgiveness from God.

Jonah just knows it because he sees the repentance in front of him and it displeases him greatly.

But he knew this would happen from way before. He says, this is why I ran away in the first place.

He says, this explains my behavior in chapter 1. It's why I fled to Tarshish because I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

[ 15 : 48 ] This is complaint. Again, remember, he's complaining that's who God is, that he's relenting from disaster. And what Jonah's doing there as he complains is interesting because, as we've seen throughout the service, he's actually quoting the Scriptures.

That's how he knows what God is like. He knows what God's like the same way that we do, by reading God's Word. This phrase, slow to anger, abounding in mercy, comes in Psalm 103, we've seen in Psalm 90, but it first of all comes in Exodus.

In Exodus chapter 34, the Lord reveals himself to Moses, saying this, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.

That is the unrepentant. That's what Jonah is angry about because he knew that the Lord would save Nineveh and he knew that if Israel didn't repent, then they would still have their guilt and God would by no means clear the guilty.

He knows the Scriptures well enough to see that as long as Nineveh repents and Israel doesn't, it is just Nineveh who will get the Lord's blessing, just the people on the outside, just the people who haven't spent their lives going along to church or to synagogue.

[ 17 : 20 ] He knows exactly how much trouble Israel is in, which is why he quotes from this particular passage. This declaration in Exodus 34 that I just read is actually a response to a very specific event.

In Exodus 34, the Lord declares his mercy. You flick back one chapter, you see Moses interceding. You flick back two chapters to chapter 32. What sets it off?

Israel are worshipping a golden calf. Exactly what Jonah's people are doing. Worshipping golden calves while Jonah's enacting his ministry.

And we must be very clear about something to get the right message here. Golden calf worship is not them worshipping some foreign god. That's not a specific foreign god. In fact, in Exodus, they melt all the gold that God's given them from the Egyptians and use it to make a calf in their attempt to represent the one true God.

But he had told them not to worship images. He told them not to represent him like that, not to worship statues as others do. In Jonah's day, the king didn't want Israel traveling down to Judah to worship in the temple at Jerusalem because there was a rival king down there.

[ 18 : 39 ] So he erects these statues of golden calves to help Israel pray to their god, to Yahweh. But God had told them not to worship like that.

The point here is this, to engage in idolatry, you don't have to be worshipping some particular, specific other god. You can be disobeying God by neglecting to worship properly, by just assuming your status before him and thinking, well listen, he's the God I believe in, so whatever I choose to do in worship, he can just accept that.

However I choose to live, he can take that as my sacrifice of life. No, the Lord has taught the right way to worship and we don't make images. We worship the Lord like this, by gathering together, by singing his praises, joining in fellowship, doing things like taking the Lord's supper together.

The lesson Jonah learned and the lesson Israel was taught time and time again is that you can't just say, hey, I fear the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

That's what he does in chapter one. You can't just say, well, I just worship God and then just coast along hoping that saying that is enough. That's what Jonah says in chapter one. And while under the wrath of God, while in the storm, he says, this is the God I worship.

[ 20 : 02 ] Well, no, he's not. He's the God you're an open rebellion against. We've had to learn this in our own lives, I'm sure, many times. When the pandemic hit and we're all confined to our homes, life was hard, wasn't it?

Life was scary for a lot of people. But when we weren't allowed to meet in churches, on a simply practical level, church became a bit easier, didn't it?

For me, it was certainly easier. My sermon was written and delivered by the Thursday so the tech guys could have it all ready and I'd just sit on the sofa with my slippers with my wife and my newborn son watching church.

We didn't need to pile kids into the car, didn't need to check if we were on a rotor that week, boil the kettle, press pause if you need the loo, etc. Practically, church was easier.

They were miserable years but church was easier for many, which is why so many didn't return after the pandemic because it was real life, real worship, real church.

[ 21 : 06 ] Real worship is hard, isn't it? For Israel, their obedience would have looked like traveling all the way down to Jerusalem regularly to sacrifice at the temple. And, don't get me wrong, sometimes obedience is impossible in that sense.

When Daniel was in exile, he couldn't go to temple so he sat in his room, faced the temple and prayed. He did right. But worshiping God doesn't always feel easy.

It doesn't feel easy when you're angry, does it? It also doesn't feel easy when you have to walk through the rain or when your body's tired or when the church that you worship in feels much emptier than it used to feel.

And yet, what a privilege to honor this one true God who is kind in the face of every weakness that Jonah and Israel throw up before him. Even in Jonah's anger, the Lord just responds in kindness. And so, when life is hard, when living out the gospel feels hard, we must continue to love one another and to worship God. It's about responding rightly to him as he's revealed himself to us.

[ 22 : 24 ] Israel were coasting, relying on just being believers. That's who we are. Much easier to worship the calf down the street than trek all the way to Jerusalem.

They were coasting and then suddenly they just saw their blessing being ripped from them and taken elsewhere to their enemies in Nineveh. Jonah. Jesus takes this very warning to the Pharisees when he warns about the sign of Jonah, that those who relied on their religious status would face judgment and that those who repented simply and followed the Lord would be saved.

Listen to what happens. This is in Matthew's gospel. Jesus explicitly tells his followers in Matthew chapter 10 to only preach to the Jews for now. Then in chapter 11, Jesus starts proclaiming judgment on the Jewish towns that they've just been preaching in.

Does this sound familiar to the Jonah story? Sound familiar to what's going on with Hosea, Jonah, and Amos? So in chapter 11, Jesus starts proclaiming judgment on the Jewish towns they've been preaching in.

Then in chapter 12, the Pharisees start squaring up to Jesus on their extra rules, their extreme interpretations of the Sabbath. Basically, their proud rules that help them say this is who we are.

[ 23 : 42 ] We are other than those Gentiles. And then immediately after Jesus performs a miraculous sign, the Pharisees approach him. This is what it says. Some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.

And he answered, a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign. None will be given it, given to it, except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. So that three days, that's what indicates the sign.

That's what shows that Jonah and Jesus are doing the same thing in that instance. And here's the sign. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now someone greater than Jonah is here.

The queen of the south will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom and now someone greater than Solomon is here.

[ 24 : 53 ] And so just getting back into the meat of what's going on in Jonah chapter 4, that can be deeply, deeply offensive to those of us who are religious.

religious. The idea that our enemies could be forgiven is offensive, I suppose, to anyone who has enemies. I was in a prayer meeting a while ago with a small group of people who'd been hurt in various ways, sometimes very seriously by people, by leaders in their church.

And the hardest thing to lead through in that was to lead people in prayer for the desire to see people actually repent, to lead people in prayers not just for vindication, not for humiliation, but for repentance and restoration.

It's true that if sinners do not repent, then their victims will be vindicated and sinners will be humiliated in judgment. But we all deserve that. And we who've been given a chance to repent must pray earnestly!

for our enemies, pray earnestly for those who've hurt us that they might repent. This is not a prayer against justice, it's a prayer for mercy. Now it's based on these two sub-points, very brief, two things

about which God and Jonah actually agree.

[ 26 : 12 ] And that's firstly that Nineveh are evil and deserve judgment. There's no doubt here. In chapter 1 verse 2, God says they're evil. Chapter 3 verse 8, the Ninevite king says that they're evil.

And in chapter 4, Jonah's angry enough to die at the prospect of such evil people being forgiven. brothers and sisters, when it comes to our salvation, the only thing we bring to the equation is our evil, is our sin.

We don't contribute religious status, diligent church attendance. We can coast by coming along to church as well as by not coming. We bring our sin to the equation and the Lord Jesus takes it upon himself.

He suffered and died for us because here's the second thing that Jonah and God agree on.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. That's what Jonah says at the end of chapter 2, but he's saying it about himself, not about the Ninevites.

Not until chapter 4 that the Lord teaches Jonah, should I not pity the city I've made? Do you do well to be angry, Jonah? This is my salvation.

[ 27 : 24 ] This is my salvation, Jonah. I'll give it to whomever I want. And it is this moment, I take it, which led Jonah to becoming properly penitent, to be truly sorry and end up telling this story.

But why then did he leave it open-ended? I believe for us, for Israel originally, for us now. At some point, I'd like to look through some of the parables of Jesus in Luke with you.

There's a parable of the lost sons or the prodigal son. It does a very similar thing. It shows an openly wayward son sins in very obvious ways, as well as an elder son who feels entitled to everything because of his status.

Reminds us of this a lot. And at the end of that story, similarly, the father invites the elder son into a party and then the story just checks out.

It's a full stop. We don't know what happened because, I take it, the idea is that those who read it have to decide, well, do I accept or not? And I think the same thing is happening here.

[ 28 : 34 ] Jesus wanted to let the Pharisees finish the story of the lost sons and Jonah invites Israel to give their own answer to this question. Should I not pity these people?

Should I not offer salvation to all? And we ask, should God not forgive those who've harmed you? Should God not forgive those who've done much wickedness?

When God does forgive these people, when these people do repent and come to our churches, do we do well to be angry? This is a hard teaching. We've gone all over the Bible in this study of Jonah and I think that's right.

Jonah clearly represents God's people past, present and indeed now which is why Jesus constantly compares his ministry to Jonah's. But as we close, let's reflect briefly on what God sends Jonah in chapter 4.

I was talking through this passage with a friend. We were talking about how kind God is to Jonah throughout this whole chapter even in Jonah's real sin and rebellion. How patient and gentle God is.

[ 29 : 45 ] And she pointed this out that for the great city of Nineveh to hear the gospel, God sent a great storm and a great fish to bring them the messenger.

But for little old Jonah in his disobedience, God still powerfully instructs both flora and fauna, sentient and non-sentient, to teach him the plant and the worm.

God shows once again that he is God over all, over everything. He is desperately kind. And he has not sent a storm to us.

He has not sent a fish or a plant or a worm for us. He has sent his son. He has sent his one and only son Jesus to die in our place and has left us with his words to know him better, to know how to worship him faithfully and with which to introduce others to him.

this book shows us that salvation belongs to the Lord and that is a wonderful thing because as we hold out this book we have the ability to confront other people not just with their sin, not just with a mighty and powerful God but with the salvation that he offers.

[ 31 : 01 ] Salvation belongs to the Lord. Let's pray before we respond in song. Let's pray