

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

1 But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee 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. 3 Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

4 But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"

5 Jonah went 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. 6 Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. 8 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."

9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

10 But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

This is the word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Jonah chapter 4, our final installment of the runaway prophet.

Hopefully you've been following along with us over the last few weeks, but if not here's a recap: God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah runs the other way. God uses a big fish to get him pointed in the right direction again. Jonah preaches. Nineveh repents. that's where we pick it up today.

Before we get to our passage, there are a few questions we have to face. This is a serious one. Do you believe in Hell? Do you truly believe in God's judgment upon sin? And do you believe that that judgment is hanging over our world right now. I realize that I'm being politically incorrect, and that I'm treading on ground that many in the mainline American protestant church have long since abandoned as being "too unkind," and "too exclusive," and that I may even risk being labeled a "fundy," or even a "Puritan" for even bringing it up, but we have to face what scripture says.

You see, today we're looking at God's incredible grace; God's infinite love; God's passionate compassion for His lost and wayward children. But none of that really makes any sense if we haven't first reconciled ourselves with the very real tension that stands over this whole story. You see a basic premise of this whole story, from beginning to end, is that judgment is real, that sin is deadly, and that people can really, truly be lost. It is a given that God will judge sin, and that He has every right to. In order for the good news of the gospel to make sense, we have to come to terms with the

bad news. Before we can talk about the cure, we have to come to grips with the fact that there is an actual sickness that needs to be examined and dealt with.

The stakes are high. Sin is real, and the wages of sin are death. God is holy, and holiness and sin just don't mix. That's why you can't have a nice little sin on the side and think it's not going to affect the rest of your life. It's just not possible to keep sin as a pet. It affects you and it hurts others, whether you recognize it or not. Sin is sin is sin. The world has always made a good living off of excusing sin. But it won't be contained and it can't be managed, it has to be dealt with. A society that refuses ends up looking like the Assyrians, with judgment on its way. That's where they were, lost in their sin, spinning out of control and headed for a fall. I think the word is “inevitability.” That was the Assyrians. Smooth sailing to certain doom. Something Jonah, as we heard last week, was finally kind enough to point it out.

Only something changed. Somehow this rotten, depraved nation made a course correction. The meanest, nastiest people in the ancient Middle East had a change of heart, and an epic conversion took place as everyone from the king down to the livestock turned to God in repentance.

You'd think Jonah would be happy, that he would break out the “Mission Accomplished” banner and celebrate.

But this is what scripture tells us: *But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.* Our translation reads “greatly displeased,” but the Hebrew here is a

variation of the verb “to be evil” and it's repeated for emphasis. It says, literally, he was “being bad or evil to a great evil, and it burned him.” I just love Hebrew. They don't sugar coat things. Jonah is furious.

I had a band teacher in junior high, Mr. Nelson. He had fiery red hair, really fair skin and a volatile temper. The students (being junior high schoolers) were not at all compassionate with him. They would dare each other to see if they could get his face to match the color of his hair. If they could get him to throw an eraser, all the better. Once, when they were really on, they got him to throw his trumpet. When I think of Jonah here, I can't help but see Mr. Nelson. His face is beet red. His eyes are popping out. The veins are sticking out of his neck, and you can actually see his temple throbbing. He's eating antacids like popcorn. He looks like Mount Vesuvius about to erupt. He's come all this way, done exactly what God asked him to do and succeeded beyond all expectations, and now we find that he's really, really steamed about it.

*He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee 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, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”* Finally we get to hear Jonah's reasons for why he ran, and why he's so hopping mad right now. It's because he knew, he absolutely KNEW that his mission would be a success. He knew it would be a success because he KNEW the nature of God. He

quotes Exodus chapter 34. The words are God’s own words, in this case spoken to Moses on Mount Sinai as Moses chiseled the tablets of the law. *Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”*

This is God speaking about His own character. This is God saying “This is who I AM. This is what is most important to me. This is what I’m passionate about.” And what makes it all the more poignant is the context in which God speaks these words. God speaks these words while Moses is carving the *second* set of stone tablets. This is after Moses came down from the mountain to find the people cavorting around a golden calf, completely out of control in their sin. They deserved death, or at least to have God move on without them; to have God say, “You know what... maybe you’re not the right people after all. I wonder what’s going on in Assyria?”

But God had looked on them with compassion. He punished their sin, certainly; but he also said to them, “I will make a covenant with you. I will be your God and you will be my people.” They deserved nothing; they got everything. They deserved judgment; they got compassion. They deserved to be lumped in with all the other nations of the earth, because they proved they were no different. Instead, God took them

in His hand and claimed them as His own, His covenant people: chosen, Holy, special.

And now Jonah looks around at a nation that is as far from God as it is possible to be, at a city that has been a stink before the face of the LORD, at a people that are despised by the world, and worthy of that despising, and he sees God offering them that same character, that same compassion. And it burns him. He’d rather die than be a part of it any longer.

*But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?”* Well, now. When the Almighty asks you a question it is wise to pick one’s words carefully. I can think of a couple of possible responses Jonah might have said.

He might have kept it personal. “Yes, I’m angry because you made me a false prophet.” After all, God told him to say, “Forty days and Ninevah will be overturned.” There is no “unless” clause here. It’s not “forty days and Ninevah will be destroyed UNLESS you repent, stop doing bad stuff and get to church on Sunday.” It’s a simple message: You... Forty days... toast. Period. Jonah doesn’t preach grace, but they find it anyhow. His reputation as a prophet is at stake, and God makes him a liar. All the other prophets might make fun of him now.

Or he could be mad simply because it’s an eleventh hour confession. Jonah spent his life obeying God, and now he has to spend eternity with those Ninevites because they found God at the last minute? Come on! There’s a difference between bowing your

head in prayer and just plain ducking! That’s a pretty good reason to be angry.

Or Jonah could be angry because he knows what part Ninevah will play in the future. The bible (through the prophets) says that the Assyrians would be used to crush the Northern kingdom of Israel. All those dirty, rotten, nasty things that these guys are infamous for in the ancient world would some day be loosed upon Israel. Interestingly, around the time of Jonah, history shows that there was a “decline” in the Assyrian empire, which means that for a while at least, they stopped gobbling up their neighbors. But a few generations later, they utterly destroyed Samaria, Israel’s Northern capitol, and thousands died at their hands. Jonah would have known it was coming. Can you imagine going down in history as the guy who made it all possible? It’s kind of like being known as the person who introduced Mr. and Mrs. Hitler. That might raise one’s blood pressure a bit.

Or, then again, it could be just plain jealousy. Jonah could watch the same kind of compassion being shown to these worthless, barbaric Ninevites as God had shown Israel, and think “well, what does this make me? I mean if God loves people like that... well he’ll just let anyone in. And here I thought I was special.”

Jonah could have said any number of things to God. But, he simply walks out of the city. All those people pouring out their hearts to God in remorse, and Jonah simply turns his back and walks away. He doesn’t say a thing.

*Jonah went 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.*

God could have let him go. The story could end here. Jonah’s already done his part, and the city is spared. Numerically speaking, God did pretty well. A city of a several hundred thousand is on its knees, and the cost is just one lone prophet sulking in the desert. But God once again shows His character. God is not content to let even this stubborn, headstrong, angry prophet escape His care. God is as passionate for Jonah as He is for that great city. In compassion, He shows Jonah what is in His divine heart. I’m really impressed as I watch God being a parent here. He could just say “Because I’m God!” But He wants Jonah to know why, so He sets up an object lesson to teach him.

*Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine.* Jonah sits outside the city, hot, angry, bitter, and God causes a vine to grow up over his head to give him shade. And for the first time in the story, Jonah is happy. How easy it is to get caught up in our comfort, and think that it is proof of God’s FAVOR on us. I wonder if that’s what Jonah is thinking. “Hmm... God is obviously coming round. The vine is proof that I’m special. Maybe Ninevah will get a divine spanking after all.” God appoints the vine, just as he appointed the storm and the fish back in chapter 1. God uses all of creation to do His will, even for a simple lesson for this

single man. Jonah is happy about the shade, but not for long.

*But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine 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."* The very next day God does some more appointing; this time a worm, and a cutting East wind. I scanned through the Hebrew text, and though I can't seem to find the word “yoink” I'm certain it must be there somewhere. As quickly as God gives the vine, he “yoinks” it away. He's not being cruel or toying with Jonah, but he is trying to teach him something. God provides the vine so that Jonah can finally attach some value to something. Then God provides the worm to kill the vine, and a cutting East wind, and the sun to beat on Jonah's head, all so that Jonah is once again in the midst of his misery, so that God might show what HE attaches value to. And when Jonah is good and hot under the collar, God asks him the same question he had evaded earlier.

*But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"*

*"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."*

Literally, God's question is “Is it good for you to be angry about the vine?” or, in other words, “Is this working for you, son? Are you enjoying your ulcer, Jonah, or would you like to talk?” You know, the really annoying thing about God is that when you're having a disagreement with Him, he just insists on reminding you

that He IS, in fact, GOD. Jonah and God are at odds, they have different desires, and God has the nerve to remind Jonah that he knows better.

Jonah says “Yes, I'm angry,” (at least he's honest) *But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight."*

The Hebrew here says Jonah had compassion for the vine. He was moved with pity because in that short day he had become attached to it. It's not that he spent any effort in giving it life or helping it grow, or had a particular interest in seeing it reach its potential. He didn't really have any reason for caring about it at all, save that it brought a temporary convenience. Still, although Jonah didn't love the vine for what it was, he at least loved it for what it could give him, and that's a start.

And then God gets to the point that has been hanging over this book since the very beginning. It's the point of my earlier questions: “Do you believe in Hell? Do you truly believe in God's judgment upon sin? Because God does. God is Holy, and righteous, and pure, and good. But Nineveh is not. Nineveh has been living evil, and judgment must fall upon evil. Judgment must fall upon sin. Judgment must fall because it is in God's very nature, in God's very character, that He is holy and cannot abide the same sin we embrace. But it is also in God's very nature to be passionate about His people, to be passionate about showing them compassion.

*But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”*

God is remarkably vulnerable here. I think God truly unfolds His heart to Jonah. “You, Jonah, are passionate about this temporary thing that was a blessing to you for a day. Let me tell you about my passion. My passion is for those people. There are thousands of them who don’t know left from right, or right from wrong. Don’t you see how much I love them? Don’t you see that same love extended to you? I formed them. I gave them life. I know each and every one of them by name. I know the hairs on their head. I know their faults and their fears and their hopes and their dreams. I see them face down in the mud, at their very worst, and my judgment must fall on their sin because I cannot be untrue to my character. But I also see the good in them! I see them stumble and I see them reflect my very image, placed in each and every one of them by me. Should I not love them? Should I not have compassion on them?”

And that’s Jonah. That’s the end of it. We are left with an unanswered question. No tidy wrap up. No happily ever after. It ends with God’s unanswered question. It is a question that hangs suspended through the ages. For seven hundred years the question hung there, until, one day, God’s own Son came to give the definitive answer. And as he hung upon a cross and looked down at the totally undeserving people who put him there and as he looked across time and space to this

very day, he said, “Yes, Father. Have compassion... forgive them for they do not know what they do.”

And now it is the crucified one who looks out at the world and asks the question of us. Should I not love them? Should I not have compassion on them?

I have to confess that I often feel like Jonah. There are times I’d just as soon sit comfortably in my shaded sanctuary on my padded chair and pray for God’s judgment on this broken, sinful, disgusting world.

But God’s call to His people... Christ’s commission to his followers... was not to sit and wait until He should come again. Our commission is to go out there where there are thousands, millions, suffering in Hellish places or in Hells of their own making, or simply perishing, with Hell to pay. They are image bearers of God, loved passionately by Him. Will we reach out with the good news that God is passionately for them? Our commission is to love our enemy, to love the Ninevites of our day, and to embrace them with the grace of Jesus Christ. Our commission is to shower this world with compassion so that all might know that God’s judgment does not need to fall upon them, because Jesus has already taken it.

Our commission is life and death. God’s judgment is real, but so is God’s grace! Should I not have compassion on them? God answered that question in the ultimate way through Jesus on a cross. He asks us to make that answer real even now.