

Jonah: The Missionary God, Ch.4 "When God is Compassionate" 2/23/25

We are learning about the Missionary God from our study through the book of Jonah this missions month. Of course the part of the story everybody knows is Jonah being swallowed by a whale. Which coincidentally, did you all see the viral video going around from two weeks ago of an ocean kayaker in Chili who was **swallowed by a humpback whale**? My phone was blowing up with you all sending this to me. We are going to study the ending of the story that most people overlook, even though the entire point of the book comes home for us in chapter 4.

Recap- Jonah was a prophet in the Kingdom of Israel. One day he receives an unexpected call from God to preach to the Assyrian city of Nineveh, a corrupt, wicked, violent enemy city. But Jonah goes in the opposite direction, running from God and God's mission. But God halts Jonah in his attempt to flee by sending a storm and a fish to swallow Jonah, it's a massive wake-up call for Jonah, who humbles himself, turns to God in repentance and renewed obedience. He goes for a 3-day journey through the city proclaiming the name of God and warning them of God's pending justice against their wickedness.

As we learned last week from Rodney, the response of the city to the preaching of the Word of God is nothing short of astonishing. People from the king to the beggar and everyone in between humbles themselves and turns from injustice and violence. They cast themselves at the mercy of Jehovah, God of Israel, and God shows mercy and forgives them. And so here, this reluctant preacher, Jonah, ironically becomes the Billy Graham of Nineveh. Just when we think this is a happy ending, comes chapter 4. **But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.**

2 He prayed to the LORD, "Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home?"

That 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. 3 Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." Jonah isn't just angry, he's so beside himself, so undone that death seems like a better option. And it's here we come to find out what has been at the heart of Jonah's resistance the whole time. **Jonah is offended by God's indiscriminate compassion.** He's saying, "God you went too far this time! These people? How could you forgive them? They are horrible monsters!" He's saying, "God your compassion is reckless, wasteful...it's even unjust." **4 But the LORD replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"**

Notice God does not give Jonah what he asked for- death, although that might be justifiable. He doesn't scream at him and call him an idiot. We might say, God's response is exactly what Jonah just accused God of- indiscriminate compassion. God asks Jonah the kind of question a wise, patient counselor would ask, someone who genuinely cares and is trying to get at the deeper

heart issue that's manifesting as anger. Have you experienced God in this way, as a wonderful counselor? You can go to him with your raw emotions. But for now, Jonah doesn't even respond to God, he's too angry to think straight, his heart is hard and he doesn't want to listen. But God, in his infinite wisdom and slow-to-anger compassion uses another strategy to get to Jonah's heart, an object lesson using a plant, a worm, and a heat wave. **5** *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. Jonah is sitting arms crossed, holding out some hope that God would change his mind and torch this city.

6 *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.

7 *But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant 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." Once again Jonah is undone by his anger, and once again God takes him back to the counseling chair. **9** *"Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"* This time Jonah answers him. *"It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."* Now if I were God I would say, "Request granted." But not God, because there is a much more important lesson to teach Jonah and each of us. **10** *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.

11 *And should I not have 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?" God is saying, "Jonah do you see the deeper heart issue here? You are so concerned about your own people, own sense of justice, your own comfort. Jonah you are concerned about this plant, but Jonah, don't you see? I'm concerned about lost people." People who don't know the right hand from the left, a figure of speech that means they are spiritually blind, and ignorant about God, about the source of their problems or what to do about them.

The word "concern" God uses is a heart word, a word of emotional attachment, could translate it as pity, or even grief. This is what God felt, even toward the wicked people of Nineveh. **God's heart is bound up in people.** This is so radical, so unique to the God of the Bible, that God

emotionally attaches himself in the same way that a father or mother's heart is bound to a wayward child. In a way that makes himself vulnerable to grief and pain and hurt when we walk in sin, rebellion, and lostness...and yet that is what He says.

What is more astounding is that God binds his heart to people voluntarily. God is perfectly happy and self-sufficient within the eternal Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He doesn't need us so how could he possibly get attached to us? And the only answer is that an infinite omnipotent divine being chooses to love us in this whole-hearted way.

There is no more vivid place we see this than in the heart of Jesus, God in flesh. The great 19th century Princeton Theologian, B.B. Warfield wrote a powerful article that I'd recommend everyone read available on the internet, called *The Emotional Life of Our Lord*, where he considered every recorded instance in the gospels that described the emotions of Jesus. He concluded that by far the most typical statement of Jesus' emotional life was the phrase, "He was moved with compassion." The Bible records Jesus, weeping 25x for every one time that he laughs.

When Jesus was riding into Jerusalem in the last week of his life, He knew he would suffer at the hands of the leaders and the mob of the city, but instead of being absorbed with anger and self-pity like Jonah, when Jesus saw the city, he wept over it. One author puts it like this "We can only look in wonder on such a heart. He is the weeping God of Jonah 4 in human form."¹

And here's what's more, Jesus did not merely weep for us. His heart was so bound up in our pitiful, lost state that He gave his life so that we could be found, forgiven and set free eternally. This is why he's the anti-Jonah, the far greater Jonah. Jonah went outside the city, hoping to witness its destruction, but Jesus Christ went outside the city to die on our cross to accomplish our salvation.

And that includes you, his heart is bound up in you and he died for you, because whether you are a Christian or a heathen, whether you are nice or mean, or in between, the Bible says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and we are lost without him. And so God reveals to Jonah his heart of compassion and says, "This is who I am, does that move you, Jonah?"

This is where the book ends. We feel like we might be missing a page. We don't get a response from Jonah. One author says, "It remains unfinished in order that we may provide our own conclusion. It's as if God shoots an arrow of a question at Jonah, but Jonah disappears, and we realize that the arrow is aimed at us. How will we answer?"²

Growing up we had a tree stump that was right in the middle of the field we played football and all kinds of games in, always try to avoid it. So one day, my brothers and I decided we were

¹ Ibid, quoting theologian Jacques Ellul, p.123

² Tim Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah*, p.134

going to remove it, knowing nothing about how to do this. We got our shovels, started digging...after a while that didn't seem like it was working, we got our neighbor kid who had a four-wheeler, tie a rope around one of the roots, got some axes...at this point you should be asking, where were your parents? We grew up in the sticks in the 80s and 90s...like wild animals. Axes didn't work well. Well my oldest brother Ryan had a friend who would get him explosives. One time we set one off behind the church next door to us...during choir practice... and it blew a hole about the size of the drum kick...that one we did get in trouble for... We thought, surely, this will do the trick. So we made sure it wasn't during choir practice and lit several of these around this tree stump. Boom, the ground shook, grass and dirt went flying...I think I still have ringing in my ear from that...and when the smoke cleared we ran to the stump. And while the hole was bigger, but the stump remained unmoved. We gave up...and that stump is probably still there to this day 30 years later.

Jonah's heart was just like that stump. When confronted with the compassion of God remained unmoved, stuck in his own anger, self-justification and pride. And so the same question is aimed at us. **When we are confronted with the compassion of God does it change us? Or do we remain unmoved?**

We cannot say we are truly a Christian and be unmoved, unchanged by God's compassion. We love him because he first loved us. It's his compassion on us that brings us to salvation, but it doesn't keep us there, it moves us to compassion for people. Let me give you just two of many ways that it must change us. **God's compassion must change how we respond to "others" and even "enemies"** By others, I mean those not like us, who believe different, act different, have different politics, moral sensibilities, whose differences frustrate us to no end. And even those who are our enemies. Those who have hurt us, walked out on us, been nasty to us, or even threatened us.

This is what marked the 1st century church. Historian Will Durant in his book *Caesar and Christ*, **"There is no greater drama in human record than the sight of a few Christians, scorned or oppressed by a succession of emperors,**

bearing all trials with a fierce tenacity, multiplying quietly, building order while their enemies generated chaos,

fighting the sword with the word of God, fighting brutality with hope, and at last defeating the strongest state that history has known.

Caesar and Christ had met in the arena, and Christ had won."

Even when Roman Christians were persecuted they did not retaliate with violence, or threats, not by clapping back, or with insults or even self-pity. They forgave, they showed mercy and restraint, they built a multi-ethnic community that removed "the other" and everyone because

a “brother and a sister.” Over time, their way of life, the way of Christ, defeated a culture built on rule of brute force, classism, and decadence.

In Tim Keller’s book *Rediscovering Jonah* he tells a powerful story I want to read to you. In 2004 the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was killed by a Muslim radical. In the aftermath of his death, both churches and mosques in the Netherlands experienced retaliatory attacks, including the bombing of Islamic schools. The outpouring of violent rage shook a Dutch nation that had prided itself on being a peaceful and open society. At this incendiary moment, a Dutch Protestant minister, Reverend Kees Sybrandi, did something radical. That week he walked to his neighborhood mosque. He knocked firmly on the door into the shock of the Muslims huddled inside, he announced that he would stand guard outside the mosque every night until the attacks ceased. In the days and weeks that followed, the minister called on other churches in the area and they joined him, circling and guarding the mass throughout the region for more than three months. Why would he have done such a thing? He simply replied, “Jesus. Jesus commanded me to love my neighbor, and even my enemies too.”

How are you responding to others and even enemies? You may never be called on to stand guard at a mosque. But maybe you need to forgive someone who hurt you. Mom or dad, ex, a bully, someone here at church or the church you came from to get away from that person. There are a couple of people in my life that have wounded me that every few months I have to surrender my intrusive thoughts and the feelings that start to well up in me to the Lord, and fight it in the Spirit and the compassion of the Lord is the antidote. Maybe you need to pray and ask the Lord to soften your heart toward someone in your office or school that you feel morally superior to, or who just bugs you. Maybe you need to reconsider your tone and approach to those on the other side of the political fence. Maybe you sit down for coffee with someone who sees the world differently than you. The compassion of God, if we are truly Christians and have the Spirit in us, must change us, it does not, it cannot leave us unmoved.

Second- **God’s Compassion must fuel and accompany our gospel witness.** Do you know there are over 3000 people groups in the world that have not yet been told about salvation through Jesus? Individuals just like you, made in the image of God like you. Who experience pain and sadness and fear and lostness just like you. Does that move you? And it’s not just over there. Only 6% of our neighbors go to a gospel-preaching church. Does God’s heart for lost people fuel your heart to reach your coworkers, to invite your neighbor to church, to tell your friends about why you follow Jesus?

And the compassion of God must not only fuel our gospel witness but accompany it. That means we don’t bomb people with tracts or yell at them to turn or burn. We must never detach our hearts from people. Compassionate acts accompany our gospel witness. We demonstrate and declare the gospel. We serve people, we seek the best interest of our city, we help meet the needs of others, not expecting anything in return. In fact, compassionate acts can become, just as it did in the 1st century Roman world, a powerful apologetic, that is, that which gives our message credibility. Because before people care how much you know, they need to know how

much you care. This is the purpose for **Go Week- April 27-March 4**. Our goal is 100% involvement in compassionately serving our neighbors around us in a way that reflects the very heart of God revealed in the book of Jonah and Jesus himself.

In closing, have you ever wondered, who wrote this story down that we read in Jonah? We aren't told, but I think we can make a reasonable guess that the only way we know about his prayer inside the fish and the only way we know these things is if Jonah told everyone. What kind of man would let the world see his rebellion and flaws, and ethnocentrism and hardness of heart? Only someone who was finally and profoundly moved by the compassion of God. Who found in the gospel of grace, the very power of God. If it can change Jonah, it can change anyone. And that means it can change you and me.

Time of prayer and reflection.