

## Compassion that Annoys - Jonah

We're now on sermon 3 in our series on Compassion

and today's title is an interesting one

"Compassion that annoys"

What? I hear you say

Compassion

That beautiful emotion

what on earth is there about it that could annoy anyone?

Well, today we're going to look at a compassion

that doesn't just annoy,

but that provokes real anger.

And the big question is whether or not that anger is justifiable.

But, to answer this question

we really need to draw on the whole of the book of Jonah

And, as well as answering this question,

what we'll also see

is a real contrast between how steadfast is God's compassion

and how fickle is Jonah's

Now we all know the story of Jonah – or do we?

Yes, Jonah and the whale – memories of Sunday School.

That's what the book of Jonah is about isn't it?

Well yes, partly,

But, in fact, very little of the book is taken up with Jonah and the whale

Most of it is about Jonah's personal interaction with God

and in particular his experience of God's compassion.

So please follow along with me as I move quite quickly through these 4 chapters.

Starting on page 753 Chapter 1

Where we learn about

### **God's Compassion for all – even for a disobedient prophet**

So, starting at vs 1.

*"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai:*

*"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it,  
because its wickedness has come up before me."*

Here immediately we see God's compassion at work.

Israel were God's chosen people.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire,

one of Israel's fiercest enemies.

It was also a city renowned for its wickedness, its violence and brutality

Yet still God wanted to send someone there to preach his word.

God wanted to save this city

And so we see

God has compassion not just for his **chosen** people,

but for **all** people.

Now Jonah found this command from God unbearable.

But at this stage we're not sure why

Is he frightened?

Is it because they are his enemy?

We don't know.

But what we do know is that he directly disobeyed God's command

and instead of going to Nineveh

he got on a ship heading in exactly the opposite direction.

Now, as I'm sure many of you remember,

there was a storm and Jonah was thrown overboard

But instead of drowning, he was swallowed by a great fish,

He spent three days in the fish's belly, praying and repenting to God

And, miraculously, the fish then spat Jonah out onto dry land.

Jonah, despite his disobedience,

was saved because of God's compassion and mercy.

So, what should we expect Jonah to do now?

To be grateful for God's mercy on him

To be obedient and faithful to God

To wholeheartedly fulfil the mission God has sent him on

Yes?

No!

Let's now move onto Chapter 3

**a chapter all about repentance and mercy .... But not from Jonah**

Here we see that, finally, Jonah obeys God's command to go to Nineveh

He gets to the city and preaches – an 8 word sermon

*“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown”*

that's his sermon!

Now although we aren't told this directly,

I would guess that this isn't exactly a wholehearted, passionate, Mark Calder sermon

It's more likely a grudging, half-hearted warning,

maybe with a "just you wait" thrown in

But look what happens

*Verse 5 The Ninevites believed God*

This is all God's doing and in it we see his incredible compassion

Not just his compassion to send his prophet to preach to the Ninevites

But his compassion to soften their hearts so that they repent and turn to Him.

And in vs 6 we have a wonderful picture of what true repentance looks like.

*When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh,*

*he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes,*

*covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust*

Here is the King of Nineveh, getting down off his throne and sitting in the dust

such a wonderful example for us.

No, we don't need to cover ourselves in sackcloth and sit in the dust.

But true repentance means getting down off our own throne,

giving up being the ruler of our own lives

and instead humbling ourselves before God,

just as the king of Nineveh did.

But do you know,

in vs 9 we also hear something quite sad from the King

He says in vs 9

*"Who knows, God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish"*

Who knows, God **may** yet relent.....

wow, they've just made a dramatic turn around of their whole city, their whole lives

But still they're not sure that they will be safe from God's wrath?

I wonder how many Christians still think like this – still not sure of God's mercy?

Do any of you here today carry this uncertainty?

Well I can understand this from the Ninevite king.

After all, this is all taking place BC – Before Christ.

But through God's incredible compassion for us,

we need never carry this uncertainty.

If we get down off the throne of self,

And instead make Jesus our Lord and King,

we can be **certain** that we will not perish

God **has**, with wonderful compassion, granted us mercy.

Christ is our saviour, today and every day

and so we can trust in God,

trust in his steadfast compassion

Because of what Jesus has done.

In Romans 10 vs 9 Paul writes

*If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

We should never be in any doubt of this.

But the Ninevites didn't have this same assurance

because they didn't have Christ as their saviour.

Nevertheless our God is a compassionate God,

and so in verse 10 we read

*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.*

Praise God for his great compassion

Isn't that what we should be hearing from Jonah now?

A huge city, one of the most wicked

Has miraculously repented and turned to God.

Jonah must be overwhelmed with joy and thankfulness

Or so you'd think.

But no

Instead what we find next is

**an angry prophet who wants to call the shots**

..... Look with me now at Chapter 4 vs 1

*But to Jonah this seemed very wrong and he became angry*

And in his anger he's even blaming God for his own earlier disobedience

In vs 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.*

What wonderful news this is – our God is gracious and compassionate

Slow to anger and abounding in love

Words that should fill anyone who hears them with joy.

Yet Jonah is angry

Angry because God is showing too much mercy

Angry because God has too much compassion.

**Now** we understand why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh.

It's because he knows God's character and he knows God's heart

And he didn't want the Ninevites to be saved

They were the enemy

As far as Jonah was concerned, they deserved God's wrath

they had it coming to them.

He didn't want their repentance; he wanted their doom.

Oh what irony

This same compassion and mercy that saved Jonah from drowning

is now the cause of his anger and resentment towards God.

How fickle is Jonah?

But what else is going on here.

Well, Jonah wants to play God.

The king of Nineveh got off his throne and repented

Jonah did the opposite,

He tried to get on the throne alongside God

To be the one who called the shots about what should happen to the Ninevites

What a contrast.

A contrast between a wicked king who repented and humbled himself before God

And an arrogant prophet who thought he knew better than God

Which one of these do you think you most resemble?

I'm afraid that for me it's a mix of both

Often repentant and humble before God

But equally as often,

And possibly within hours, if not minutes of my humble repentance

There I am, climbing back up on my own throne

Being ruler of my life

Side-lining God and doing things my way

In fact I'm afraid that I can very much relate to Jonah here

I know there have been times when I've had similar very strong views

Views about who should be punished and who should be saved

For instance back during the Iraq war

I remember hoping that Saddam Hussein would be killed

So that no one else need be hurt.

Please God, when it comes to this situation, could you hand the reins over to me

Could you just do what I want

It's for all the right reasons, honestly

So please, on this occasion, my will be done, not yours.

Just like Jonah who wanted his will to prevail, not God's

And because Jonah doesn't get his way

He becomes so angry that he just wants to die.

And right then God asks him this most fundamental question

Vs 4 ... *Is it right for you to be angry?*

Well Jonah doesn't answer,

but instead continues his tantrum and goes off to sit by himself.

Next, starting in vs 6, we have what is almost like a parable

Where God causes a series of events that show that Jonah still doesn't get it

God sends a plant to provide shade for Jonah

Then God sends a worm to kill the plant

Then, when the sun is at its hottest

he sends a scorching wind.

Is God being purposefully cruel?

No, he's just trying to make a point to Jonah

And Jonah rises beautifully to the bait.

He's angry, again.

Angry that his nice shady plant has been killed.

So God repeats his earlier question

except that this time he says "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

**Yes** says Jonah and again he's so angry, he wishes he were dead.

Jonah has missed the point completely.

His compassion is for a plant

A plant that he had nothing to do with.

He didn't plant it

He didn't tend it

He only feels compassion for the plant because it provided him with comfort.

Then God asks him a very searching question. Look at the very last vs, vs 11

*And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"*

Nineveh was part of God's creation; he cared for it

So of course he had compassion for the city

And when they turned back to him

Of course he showed them mercy.

Jonah is such a contrast

He received incredible compassion from God

when God sent a fish to save him from a death he deserved.

Yet, when given the opportunity to show compassion to others,

He has none.

He has compassion for a plant – because it was good – it suited his purposes.

He has no compassion for a worm or a wind that cause him harm

And even worse, he abhors God's compassion on Nineveh because he hates them.

Jonah's compassion is completely fickle.

What about you?

Do you have a Nineveh in your life?

Of course we pray for God's loving mercy and compassion

on those we know and love

But what about that old schoolyard bully back in grade 6?

Or the burglar that broke into your home and ransacked your belongings?

Or the paedophile arrested a few weeks back?

Or the terrorists who bombed the London underground?

Or the members of ISIL?

Do they all deserve God's compassion and mercy?

Which of these is your Nineveh?

And how would you feel if your Nineveh turned up in church next week

and sat along side you

Would your hearts be full of joy and thankfulness?

Or would you struggle with the breadth of God's compassion.

We hear of people who have been able to forgive unspeakable crimes

To forgive criminals who have brutally harmed them or their family

I'm thankful that I've never had to face such a situation

because I don't know

honestly, I don't know if I have that sort of forgiveness in me

But ..... I'm forgiven by God for all my sins

So, if I can't forgive someone else,

then.... well..... I'm just as fickle as Jonah

I am so thankful that our God is a compassionate, merciful God

Because otherwise I'd worry about where the line might be drawn

You know, the line which says "this sin is OK but that one isn't"

God can forgive this, but he can't forgive that.

Because then I'd be right back where the Ninevites were

Who knows, God may relent and show me mercy

Imagine living life like that

Never sure of God's mercy

Never being able to rely wholeheartedly on God's saving compassion

Back in those dark days of "have I done enough, am I good enough"

The fish that saved Jonah was a result of God's compassion and mercy –

completely undeserved by Jonah

God's mercy to Nineveh was a gift – they did nothing to earn it

God's mercy to us in the sacrifice of his only Son

is a gift to us – we certainly have done nothing to deserve it

Who are we then to judge who might deserve mercy and who might not.

Twice God asked Jonah "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Is there ever a time when we should be angry or even annoyed at God's compassion?

The answer is of course no

God is not fickle; He is steadfast.

His compassion is there for every one of us

Whatever we've done

However undeserving we may be

All we need to do is to open ourselves up

to receive his saving compassion and mercy

From Romans 10:13 "All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved"

And for those of us who already know and have received God's gracious mercy

How do we respond?

Does this mercy move us to compassion?

Compassion for all?

Regardless of who they are and what they may have done?

Is our compassion fickle?

Or is it steadfast?

Let me pray.

Father, expand our vision to see the world as you see it. Please make us less like Jonah and more like Jesus. Grant us a fresh concern for those we meet. Renew in us a compassion for those who by nature would be repulsive to us. Give us your heart for the Ninevehs all around us, and give us the strength to go gladly with your Good News. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.