

## #35 “A Lesson in Compassion”

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Most of us know the story of Jonah. We know that he ran from God, we know that he was in the belly of a fish for three days and three nights, and we know that he preached to Nineveh, at which point the entire city repented. God had told Jonah to proclaim to this wicked city that destruction and judgment was imminent if they would not repent. Upon hearing Jonah’s message of judgment, Nineveh repented. This greatly angered and upset Jonah. Why was this? Jonah 4:2 says, “[Jonah] prayed to the LORD and said, ‘Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.’” Jonah ran from God not only because he was disobedient but because he believed that, if he preached of God’s judgment to Nineveh, Nineveh would repent, and God, in turn, would relent of the calamity which He was planning to bring upon them. Jonah wanted to see Nineveh wiped off the face of the earth. He disliked, even hated, these pagan people. They were not his countrymen, but some foreign strangers. What were they to him? Clearly, in his mind, it didn’t matter that they were people who would spend eternity in hell if God destroyed them. He wanted to see them get their just due now. He had absolutely no compassion for these wicked people. His refusal to obey God was not about not wanting to preach, being afraid of going to this foreign nation because of what they might do to him, or just that he would rather do something else, being simply selfish. These things were not Jonah’s primary issues. He believed, knowing that God is a God of mercy and compassion, that if by chance Nineveh did repent, then he wouldn’t get the pleasure of seeing them get wiped out. Jonah had confidence in the power of the Word of God being preached. He dreaded that it might accomplish what God set it forth to do and actually cause this evil nation to repent. He wanted to see these people annihilated, and it was for this reason that he fled.

Once God made it clear to Jonah that He had relented, Jonah was extremely angry and upset to the extent that he asked God to take his life (Jonah 4:3). Still defiantly hoping judgment might come, he went out to some place east of the city where he could wait to see what would happen (Jonah 4:5). This was one angry, bitter, and depressed person all because God had shown mercy to people he didn’t particularly like or care for. He wanted to see them destroyed, and the “show” was cancelled.

Jonah, though a prophet of God, needed some instruction and correction from God. The irony is that God had been extremely merciful to Jonah, but Jonah would show no mercy to others. Even as he rebelliously fled to Tarshish, God caused some of the pagan sailors to call upon the name of the Lord and fear Him (Jonah 1:16), working good out of a bad situation. God’s mercy to him continued as He appointed a fish to swallow him, lest he drown in the storm. When Jonah repented in the stomach of the fish, God had mercy and

ordered the fish to vomit him up on dry land. And despite Jonah's questionable motives, God still used him to bring about a revival of an incredible magnitude. Given that there were 120,000 in Nineveh who didn't know the difference between their right and left hand (likely referring to young, innocent children), we could infer that there were at least several hundred thousand or more people in the entire city. Scripture says that the people of Nineveh, from the greatest to the least, believed in God (Jonah 3:5). But rather than praise God for changing these hearts and sparing their souls and even having the chance to be involved in such a work, Jonah grew angry unto death. God had been so compassionate to him over and over again, but he missed it or refused to acknowledge it. He had no problem with God showing him compassion, but he simply wouldn't be merciful to others.

In the end of the book, God drilled the message home to Jonah. He appointed a plant to miraculously grow up around Jonah to provide shade for him from the scorching sun. This made Jonah happy (Jonah 4:6). God then appointed a worm to eat the plant, causing it to wither, followed by a scorching east wind which made the heat unbearable. Jonah again said to God that he wanted to die, for he missed his plant on which he had had compassion. God's question for Jonah was this:

“You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?” (Jonah 4:10-11).

God was constantly compassionate to Jonah, wanting him to repent and hoping to teach him to have compassion on others. He was so self-centered that he missed his plant, mourning over its death, when he wanted to gloat in the death of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives. As the book closes, it does not tell us whether Jonah repented or not. The message, however, is clear. God is a God of compassion, and He continually pursues us, trying to teach us to be conformed to His ways. Yet we must choose to repent and have compassion on others.

Are we like Jonah? Are there people we so despise that we would love to see them die in their sins? Do we care about their souls and the fact that they, if they do not repent, will spend an eternity in hell? What about the innocent children who suffer because of the sins of others? Do we care? Christianity, at its core, must be compassionate because Christ is compassionate. If we all got what we deserved, including Jonah, we all would be judged and wiped off the face of the earth. But God has been compassionate to us, even giving up His own Son for us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). God loves the unlovely, the unlovable, and those who hate Him. Thus, He gives us Christ. Yet we must repent of our sins, receive His gift, and choose to show compassion on others as He has had compassion on us.

May God compassionately pursue us and teach us to be merciful as He did Jonah.

