



“The Gospel and Compassion” Jonah 4

Idea: The message of the gospel is one of compassion expressed for and toward sinners.

Intro: *For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.* – Isaiah 54:5

These are the words God used to stir the heart of William Carey. History refers to him as the “Father of Modern Missions.” He was the first modern missionary to India who served for forty-one years translating the entire Bible into Bengali. He is also known for being a shoemaker, pastor, founder of the English Baptist Missionary Society, botanist, cultural anthropologist, educator, author, social reformer, and the first to bring the printing press to India.

At the age of seventeen, Carey was introduced to the gospel by a friend and fellow apprentice named John Warr. Carey was an avid reader, so after coming to Christ, he devoted himself to the study of Scripture. He possessed a natural gift for understanding languages, so he taught himself biblical Hebrew and Greek. In fact, before he was thirty-one years old, Carey was able to read the Bible in seven different languages, including Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, and French.

Shortly after his conversion and upon becoming a pastor, Carey read a book called *An Account of the Life of the Late Rev. David Brainerd*, written by Jonathan Edwards. The book detailed David Brainerd’s missionary work among the Native American tribes in the United States. He also read *The Journals of James Cook*, the explorer, which most people in England considered as merely thrilling stories of adventure. For the next five years, William would begin to devote his spare time to making maps of faraway lands and gathering data on their location, size, population, and religions. Both of these written accounts began to spark something in Carey, and he became deeply concerned with sharing the gospel with people who did not have any access to a Bible or a church.

In 1789, Carey became the full-time pastor of Harvey Lane Baptist Church in Leicester, England. Through his preaching and leadership that troubled church was revived as well as many of the churches in the surrounding area. During this time, Isaiah 54:5 continued to beckon Carey’s heart to the nations. It along with the Great Commission of Matthew 28 compelled him of the need to go and make disciples. Just being the pastor of a local church was not enough for him. At a minister’s meeting, Carey stood up and proposed that the local church should partner with other local churches in the region to send missionaries to Africa and India. Another

man by the name of J. C. Ryland exclaimed, “Sit down, young man, sit down and be still. When God wants to convert the heathen, He will do it without consulting either you or me.”

Carey did sit back down, but he could not be still. He used his influence to provoke people to take the gospel to places where it had never been. He was the first Baptist preacher to believe that the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20 was a binding command on every generation of Christians. In 1792, William Carey published his missionary manifesto, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. He dealt with one all-absorbing theme, namely, the responsibility of the body of Christ to launch out upon its long-neglected, world-wide mission. His conviction that the missionary enterprise is the Church’s highest and holiest endeavor continued to increase as he pictured the desperate condition of the world where Christ was not known and enthroned. He led the way in going to the nations. He spent forty-one years in India preaching the gospel, dying on the field in 1834.

William Carey’s heart-cry for the peoples of the world reminds us of our Lord’s heart for people. All throughout the gospels we read of Jesus feeling compassion for people (Matt 9:36; 14:14; Mark 6:34; Luke 7:13; 10:33). He saw their struggles. He knew their infirmities. He felt their pain. He was fully aware of the spiritual condition of each and every person. “*They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*” (Matt 9:36). Jesus lamented the awful spiritual condition of Jerusalem, wanting and wishing the people would allow Him to embrace them (Matt 23:37).

William Carey’s compassion for “the heathen” lays the groundwork for understanding the final chapter of Jonah. We discover God’s heart of compassion for lost, rebellious, and wicked people. The call and command to arise and go to Nineveh begins to make sense. Initially, we may have been tempted to think the Lord’s purpose in sending Jonah was simply as a precursor of judgment, when in fact, it was meant to be a warning that would bring about repentance and faith. God’s purpose in sending the prophet was to preach the gospel, and the message of the gospel is one of compassion expressed for and toward sinners. Let’s take a look at this compassion.

Read Jonah 4.

Inquiry: “Judgment is coming!” This message is what Jonah was sent to deliver to the people in Nineveh (Jonah 1:2), and it would have been a message he would have happily delivered. The prophet possessed a keen understanding of the evil the Ninevites had inflicted upon his people, but he also had an acute perspective of God’s mercy. Therefore, when God called him to go and preach against their sin, he decided to reject the order because they might hear, repent, and be forgiven. Jonah wanted them to experience wrath rather than grace, so he fled.

He went down to Joppa, chartered a ship, and stepped down into it to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. As the ship sails away, God hurls a great storm after it. He is going to get the attention of his wayward prophet. While the storm is raging outside, Jonah is asleep inside the cabin below the deck. The sailors are scared to death as the ship threatens to rip apart, but God’s man is numb to the whole affair. When he is awakened by the captain, the storm is not surprising to him. He knows it was sent by God and the result of his choices. He also knows how to quiet it down. The solution he offered was his own life. If the sailors would throw him over board, the storm would cease. He would rather die than preach to his enemies. After attempting their own action plan, the sailors followed Jonah’s instruction and cast him into the sea. Immediately, the sea ceased its raging.

Jonah can only tread water for so long. Eventually, he begins to sink into the deep. His desire for death rather than obedience to the call is quickly replaced with despair. In his affliction he calls out to God in repentance and faith, so God appoints a fish to swallow him. We have seen in Jonah’s repentance how the Lord specializes in the impossible and improbable. His mercy can and will reach down to the very depths of despair to raise up those who will repent of sin. It may feel like you are a million miles away from the Lord and dead to the things

of God, but you are only one prayer away. The Lord desires to step in, rescue, and raise you to life again. Jonah was raised up and put back in service.

The word that reached the Ninevites was the warning of judgment. They were in spiritual danger, and Jonah was fully aware of what it was like to experience the judgment of God. Jonah obeyed the second call to go to Nineveh (3:1) because he had learned that obedience is always the best option. At the same time, I believe Jonah's heart, at least for the moment, had softened toward the Ninevites. The preaching of judgment came from a place of love rather than hate.

The king and the people of Nineveh heard and heeded the warning. They turned from their evil and cried out to God. They covered themselves with sackcloth, fasted, turned from their evil, and cried out to God for mercy. They by faith believed on God and turned from their sin. Then we read in 3:10 the beauty of the gospel. The Lord relented of His judgment and forgave their sin.

At this point, we would think Jonah would be rejoicing over the repentance and faith that was sweeping through city. Unfortunately, Jonah is angry over it. It is the worst thing he could have ever imagined. This closing chapter is enigmatic. The way it finishes is puzzling. We do not expect to see the prophet who has repented of his rebellion and shown signs of a heart change to once again express hatred and disgust toward the Ninevites. We are also puzzled because the prophet who experienced God's compassion refuses to show compassion to others. What are we to learn from this enigmatic final section of the story? Today, we see in God's interaction with Jonah His compassion for people, and we learn how uncompassionate we can be toward others.

1. A Compassionless Servant

Read Jonah 4:1-4.

Jonah had tasted of the goodness of God. He had experienced His grace and mercy. He had felt His compassion. Why then does the prophet react in anger at the Ninevites repentance and faith? Why does he again prefer death over living in a world where his enemies have become his spiritual brothers and sisters? His response is troubling.

Thankfully, we see evidence of spiritual activity. Jonah is praying. Earlier, when called to go and preach to Nineveh, he arose and fled. Jonah never prayed in chapter one; he did not want to hear from God. Now, after experiencing the judgment waters of the Mediterranean and the great fish, we find him praying. He has been forgiven and restored to ministry. God has done a great work in him, yet there is still much to be done. There are areas in need of sanctification.

Jonah has not yet lost his prejudices. The prophet who has known the compassion of the Lord wants nothing to do with extending compassion toward his enemies. He is "*exceedingly*" angry because they have experienced God's grace and mercy. His reaction is unexpected. What preacher does not rejoice and get excited when people respond in faith and repentance? What preacher does not love to see the altar filled with broken people pouring out their hearts to the Lord? This reaction is what we long to see in our preaching, but it is not the case with Jonah. He abandons the assignment. He is stomping around, yelling, and beating his fist on the ground. "*Is not this what I said when yet in my country?*" "If you had just left me alone, I would not have to witness these reprobates coming to faith and getting right with you! I would rather die than watch that happen!"

Wow! Where is the love of Christ in Jonah? Where is His grace and mercy? Jonah has no love for these people. He has no compassion for them. In his opinion, the world would be better off without their existence. Thankfully, we never react toward people in the same manner as Jonah, or do we?

Illust: My first international mission trip was to Haiti. I had just graduated from college and taken my first student pastor position. I was bright-eyed and ready to tackle ministry. I loved preaching and sharing the gospel, so I was ready to take my loves and skills to the Haitian people. My zeal and readiness, however, hit a bump in the road the moment the door opened on the plane. As we exited out on the tarmac in Port-au-Prince, a hot, humid, and putrid air hit me in the face. It was one of the worst things I had ever smelled. Then, as we walked into the airport, everything was in chaos. Outside the entrance was no better. Men kept reaching for our bags as we quickly walked to the bus. The place was a mess. The city was filthy and seemed to resemble more of a landfill than a national capital. It was hot as Hades, and there was no air conditioning. I was in shock. "How in the world could people live like this? How could these people not make their world better than this?" In many ways, I resented the people of Haiti. I looked down on them because they did not live like me. This feeling of resentment went on for the first three days of our nine-day trip. God finally got hold of my heart and broke me. The final six days, there was a tenderness and love for the people I had not known earlier.

This lack of love can be prevalent on the mission field, but it is not isolated there. It is all-to-often true in our everyday life. How many times do we resent and look down on people who are not like us rather than feel compassion for them? If we are honest, we too are often compassionless like Jonah instead of compassionate like Jesus.

2. A Compassionate Savior

Read Jonah 4:4.

Jonah is disappointed with God's character, but it is exactly that character which responds compassionately toward the wayward servant. When the prophet abandoned his post and went outside the city, God pursued him. As Jonah sat in the makeshift booth he made to shelter himself from the scorching sun, God knew he was very uncomfortable. Therefore, He appointed a plant to grow and provide shade (vs. 5-6). It grew up in a single day, but during the night God appointed a worm to eat the plant. When Jonah woke up the next morning, the plant was dead and lying on the ground. The sun and the scorching wind that God appointed beat down on Jonah all day long. He became faint and longed to die. God again asked the prophet if he was doing well to be angry (4:9).

The Hebrew word used in verse 6 to describe the plant God appointed is believed to be the castor oil plant. This is a fitting plant for the situation. It is a healing agent and was often used to cure digestive issues. Jonah's inward man was not right, and the compassionate Savior graciously worked to bring about the needed change, which brings us to a third point.

3. A Compassionate Scolding

Read Jonah 4:10-11.

The prophet had learned much from the Lord since that first call to go to Nineveh. As Warren Wiersbe shares:

"In chapter one he learned the lesson of God's providence and patience, that you cannot run away from God. In chapter two, he learned the lesson of God's pardon, that God forgives those who call upon Him. In chapter three, he learned the lesson of God's power as he saw a whole city humble itself before the Lord. Now, he had to learn the lesson of God's pity, that God has compassion for lost sinners like the Ninevites; and his servants must also have compassion."

Jonah had been used of God to bring thousands of people to saving faith, but he did not love the people to which he was preaching.

He needed to learn compassion. The object used in this lesson was the castor oil plant. Jonah felt compassion for the plant that had died even though he had nothing to do with it. He did not plant or tend to it. It came and went in the span of twenty-four hours. It was like a vapor, here and gone in a moment. It was just a plant...an insignificant plant, yet Jonah despaired over its demise. God brought the lesson full-circle by comparing Jonah's compassion for the plant to God's compassion for the 120,000 Ninevites who did not "*know their right hand from their left.*"

God graciously takes Jonah on a journey to teach him compassion and love for his enemies. This is the gospel at work in believers. Like Jonah, we need to learn that it is possible to experience and accomplish much for the Lord, while still keeping areas of our lives walled off to the Lord. It is amazing and frightening to think we can effectively share the gospel with people, leading them to faith in Christ, while not possessing a genuine love for the very ones we serve.

We need this "missionary experience" as Sinclair Ferguson describes it. We need to and must take the gospel to our neighbors and nations because God has commanded us to do so. However, we also need to take the gospel because in doing so God uses it to make us more like Christ. Many times, the worst within us is brought out when we are taken out of our normal home context, work under pressures never before encountered, and experience the frustrations that come from a new culture and language. Sensitivities are revealed that would normally have been hidden by our Christian fellowship at home. As Ferguson says:

"The bold knight errant who rides into foreign parts with high aspirations and expectations of fervent evangelism, of a ministry teaching the indigenous church, may soon find out that God has removed him across the face of the earth more for the sake of his own sanctification than that of others! There he may find what a narrow-minded, prejudiced, conceited, prayerless, fruitless, and uncooperative believer he really is in his heart of hearts."

Jonah had to learn that he expressed greater compassion for a soulless plant than he did for human souls. How often do we express more passion for temporary things than we do for eternal things? We get caught up in the political argument of the moment and neglect the weightier spiritual proclamation of the age.

Conclusion: As William Carey began to respond to burning passion for lost souls among the nations, J. C. Ryland said, "Sit down, young man, sit down and be still. When God wants to convert the heathen, He will do it without consulting either you or me." Ryland needed a Jonah 4 lesson in his own life. He needed to learn the lesson of compassion for himself because he had none. He was a compassionless servant, which is an oxymoron statement. The two terms are in opposition to one another. How can you be the servant of the compassionate Savior and not have compassion? Unfortunately, we discover in Jonah that this is all-too-often true of God's people. Thankfully, we have a compassionate Savior who compassionately scolds us.

The book ends without revealing Jonah's response. Perhaps, it ends this way to draw the reader into the story to bring the reader face-to-face with the same dilemma. How do you know if you have compassion for lost people? I think the answer is found in how quick you are to share the gospel with them and integrate them into your church circles. God sends His children on mission with His message of salvation. As a Christian, are you sharing this message with others? How often do you preach it to family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and classmates? Are you committed to taking this message to the nations? Will we like Jonah go to people who are far from God and tell them the Good News?

The gospel is an incredible message! It is a message that says no matter who you are or what you have done, you can be forgiven and transformed. God is in the business of raising broken people out of the despair of sin. He does that in salvation. Today, if you have never surrendered your life to Jesus and trusted Him as your Lord and Savior, what is keeping you from doing that? Like the Ninevites, turn from your sin and place your faith in Jesus. He will change your life.

Perhaps, you are a Christian who is walking at a guilty distance. In a lot of ways, your life resembles Jonah's life when he was on the run. That is a dangerous and miserable way to live, and you know it very well. What is keeping you from coming home? What is keeping you from turning from whatever sin you are holding onto and receiving Christ's forgiveness and restoration?

What is the Lord calling you to do today?

Good news: God loves you. He created you and desires to know you.

Bad news: You are a sinner in rebellion against your Creator.

Best news: God has done everything necessary to justly deal with your sin and bring forgiveness and restoration to your life. Today, He calls you to turn from your sin and self and turn to Him as Savior and Lord. Have you received forgiveness in Christ?