

(Jonah) a Wideness in God's Mercy

by John Vissers

God's compassion is revealed in the book of Jonah, and we must learn to see the world from God's perspective and extend His grace and mercy to others.

Duration: 33:10

Scripture: Jonah 4:1

Topics: "Jonah", "God's Compassion", "Mercy and Grace"

Description

John Vissers concludes the series on Jonah by exploring the profound compassion of God as illustrated in Jonah chapter 4. He highlights Jonah's anger at God's mercy towards Nineveh, contrasting it with God's sovereign grace and concern for the lost. Vissers emphasizes that God's compassion is limitless and challenges believers to expand their hearts to reflect God's love for all people. The sermon culminates in the reminder that the ultimate expression of God's mercy is found in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, inviting the congregation to approach the Lord's Supper with faith and repentance.

Transcript

Tonight we come to the final message in our series on the book of Jonah, and I'd like you to turn in your Bibles to Jonah chapter 4, and I'd like to read this evening from the first through to the end of the eleventh verse of the fourth chapter of the book of Jonah, Jonah chapter 4 at verse 1. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 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. But the Lord replied, Have you any right to be angry? 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.

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. 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. 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. 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.

But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city? Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from his word this evening. Let's pray together, shall we? God our Father, we bow before you this evening and thank you for your inspired and infallible word, which is our rule.

We pray this evening that you would speak to us through your word. Indeed, we come with the prayer of a young Samuel upon our lips. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. The fourth and the final chapter of the book of Jonah presents us with really two remarkably different portraits. On the one side, we see a disgruntled and we see a disappointed Jonah quarreling with God, arguing with God, taking on God in debate.

Jonah's angry. He's angry that God has had compassion on the people of Nineveh. He's angry that God has saved the city and that God did not bring upon the city the destruction that had been threatened.

And we see a man in Jonah chapter 4 so deep in self-pity that he wants to die. His world is closing in on him. His world is crashing down around him and he wants simply to be left alone and to die.

And then on the other side, we see another portrait. We see a portrait of the Lord. We see a portrait of the sovereign God.

And we see a God whose compassion saved the city of Nineveh when the people repented. We see a God who engages Jonah and refuses to let him off the hook for the way that he's feeling about things. And we see a God whose mercy is so wide and whose concern runs so deep that we cannot help but marvel at the mysteries of his grace, at the mysteries of his providence, at the ways in which he works in the world.

Now last week, last Sunday evening, we focused on Jonah's response in chapter 4. We focused on Jonah's bitterness, on his response, on his withdrawal from the city. And we tried to learn some lessons for the Christian life, for us as disciples of Jesus, from Jonah's experience about how not to respond to a work of God's grace. And this evening, I want us to look then as a kind of concluding postscript to this series.

And in preparation for the Lord's Supper, I want us to look at this other portrait, the portrait of the compassionate God, the portrait of the merciful God, the portrait of the gracious God, which is revealed to us, which is unveiled for us, which is uncovered for us in this marvelous concluding chapter of the Book of Jonah. And so let's look briefly at this chapter together this evening with that portrait in mind, with the vision of God before us, and let's see what we can learn about God and what we might indeed learn about our response to God as a result of what's here. Now the first thing I want us to notice is that God's compassion is set forth very clearly in this fourth and final chapter of the Book of Jonah.

Now the word compassion actually first appears at the end of chapter 3 in v. 10. It reads as follows, When God saw what they did, that is the people of Nineveh, and how they turned from their evil ways, the text says that He had compassion on them and did not bring on them the destruction that He had threatened. And then in chapter 4, in the opening paragraph in v. 1-3, again we see the word compassion used to describe God.

Again we see this portrait of compassion, the compassionate God unveiled for us. Because what we see there is that Jonah's displeasure and Jonah's anger with God are in response to the compassion of God. In justifying his earlier flight from God, Jonah says, I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

And as we saw last week, this is a text really from another passage in the Old Testament from another book out of the Old Testament, and Jonah is really quoting God's Word back against God. But the message is clear. The picture is of a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love.

The people of Nineveh were saved because of the compassion of God. And Jonah is angry because the people of Nineveh had been saved, which means at bottom line that Jonah is really angry because of the compassion of God. He's angry because God is compassionate.

And the picture which runs straight through this book from beginning to end is the picture of a sovereign God who is compassionate. And the problem that Jonah has is that he cannot reconcile these two pictures of God or these two ideas of God. We saw how God chose.

How God called. How God commissioned Jonah. We saw how Jonah ran from that call of God.

We saw how God sovereignly intervened, ordaining Jonah's life in such a way that Jonah could not run, but that Jonah was stopped dead in his tracks. We saw how God graciously intervenes and saves him from the sea and puts him back on the road to Nineveh to preach the message that God has given him. And through it all, Jonah experiences both the sovereign will of God at work in his life, but also the compassion of God.

But although he's experienced this, nevertheless, in chapter 4, he still cannot bring himself to see how these two things fit together in his own life, in his experience, and in the life of the city of Nineveh. God exercises His sovereign will with compassion. He had compassion on Jonah.

He had compassion on the heathen sailors. He had compassion on the people of Nineveh. And in the midst of it all, God's sovereign will is being worked out.

And you see, the book of Jonah, I want to suggest to you this evening, keeps together what we often tear apart. It keeps together what Jonah had difficulty in reconciling. That is, the sovereign exercise of God's will in our lives, and at the same time, the compassion of God.

In His wrath, at the end of chapter 3, God remembers mercy. And we tend to tear these things apart. We think of God as the sovereign judge of all the earth whose will is supreme, whose judgment is harsh, whose anger and wrath strikes fear into our hearts.

And then on the other hand, we think of God as loving and compassionate and gracious and merciful. One whose arms are outstretched to us. One who cares for us.

And some people, of course, like to think of the former picture as the picture of God which emerges in the Old Testament. A kind of sovereign God who makes His will come to pass in a way that He runs people over. And the picture of a loving, gracious, merciful, caring, compassionate God revealed in the New Testament.

But of course, it's a false dichotomy. It's tearing apart what the Bible never tears apart. And here in the very heart of the Old Testament, what we find is a portrait of a sovereign, compassionate God.

A God whose will comes to pass. A God who exercises His will in the life of Jonah. A God who exercises His will in the lives of the heathen sailors.

A God who exercises His will to see that it comes to pass in the city of Nineveh. And a God who in the midst of it all exercises mercy and grace and compassion. And we need to understand in our own lives that God's sovereign will is exercised in the midst of God's grace and God's compassion.

Now what is compassion? It's a word we use a lot. But what does it really mean? It means to have sympathy for another. It means to be able to identify with the situation of another person.

It's a feeling of deep empathy. It is motivated by mercy and love and grace and people who are compassionate are caused to think and act in ways that they might not otherwise think and act. To be compassionate is to feel deeply about a situation.

About the situation of another person. It means literally to suffer with someone else. To suffer with another.

To come alongside and to feel the pain. To feel the suffering that that person is going through. And in the Bible, the compassion of God is God's coming alongside of us and feeling the pain that we feel and standing in our midst and coming alongside of us.

Do you remember that wonderful text in Matthew 9, v. 36? Where Jesus looks out on the crowds. And He looks out on the crowds and the text says that He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. As you look at the life and the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, you see one who looked at others with compassion.

Who identified with them. Who stood alongside of them. Who felt the pain and the suffering that they felt.

They were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. One who stands with them in the midst of their suffering. And I want to suggest to you tonight as we come to the Lord's table, that we need to be reminded that the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is the supreme manifestation of the compassion of God.

Because in His love and grace and mercy, the Sovereign God sent His only begotten Son, the suffering Savior, the suffering Servant, the suffering Messiah to come alongside of us, to stand in our midst, to take upon Himself our suffering, our pain, our sin. The One who knew no sin became sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. And so we see that God accomplishes His purpose of redemption, His plan of salvation, His sovereign will is exercised in the cross of Jesus.

The supreme manifestation of the compassion of God, which is revealed here in Jonah 4. In Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, God relents from sending calamity upon us, and He instead visits it upon His own Son. And so as we come to the table tonight, this picture of God as the compassionate God whose will is exercised, whose will is accomplished, is one that we need to hold very much before us, centered in the cross of Jesus. But secondly, notice then also that God corrects Jonah in this passage.

In verse 4, it says, the Lord questions Jonah, have you any right to be angry? It's a wonderful question, and what you see really unfolding here in this 4th chapter is this conversation between God and between

Jonah. And it's almost as if God says to Jonah, you know, Jonah, you really don't have any reason to be angry. You don't really have any reason to be angry with Me.

You don't really have any reason to be angry with the people of Nineveh. Your anger is not going to do you any good. It's not going to change My mind.

And in fact, it's only going to make you more miserable. You see, Jonah has no right to be angry. And this is why God confronts him.

This is why God questions him. This is why God calls him to account for the way that he feels. If people have sinned, if people have departed from the way of God, if people have been disobedient to the will of God, if they've not heeded the Word of God, if they've followed their own evil devices, if they've done all kinds of things which bring disrepute to the name of God, if they've hurt others, if the violence and crime which was manifested in the city of Nineveh is manifested in this way, but if people repent, and if people believe God, and if people return, and if people truly repent and come in godly sorrow, what God is saying to Jonah, Jonah, what right do you have to object to that? Who are you, Jonah, that you should quarrel with Me? Who are you to call into question My compassion, My saving grace, My mercy, My redemptive purposes? Who is Jonah that he should begrudge the crumbs of divine mercy to the Gentile world? And as Jonah withdraws from the city of Nineveh, God confronts him, and God shows just how far Jonah has traveled from the will of God and traveled from the compassion of God.

And so what happens? Out there outside the city, Jonah learns that his times are really in God's hands. God first provides a vine to ease Jonah's discomfort. And then God provides a worm to chew the vine so it's withered.

And then God provides a scorching east wind, the text says, and a hot sun so that Jonah grows faint. And then the Lord questions Jonah's anger again. And God points out to Jonah his own pettiness, his small-mindedness, his narrowness.

And so God confronts Jonah. God corrects Jonah. But Jonah does not respond in faith.

Jonah does not respond in repentance. Jonah does not respond in obedience to the correction of God. And I want to suggest to you this evening that we all need to be reminded that God corrects the critics of His compassion.

That when we question the dealings of God, when we question the ways of God in the world, when we question the exercise of God's compassion, the exercise of God's sovereign will, that God corrects the critics of His compassion. You see, we seem to work somehow with the idea that Jonah had that somehow if God shows mercy, if God shows grace, if God saves people, particularly in terms of people that we think perhaps ought not to be saved, if God shows mercy to people that we think do not deserve that mercy, that somehow God's mercy is going to be exhausted and nothing will be left over for us. You see, Jonah, as I suggested to you last week, has this idea that somehow there's a limit to God's mercy.

There's a limit to God's grace. There's a limit to what the Lord can do. And like Jonah, we too seem to think that there is a limit to the love of God.

We have this idea that God's mercy is measured and limited. And the lesson for all of us from the book of Jonah is simply this. That our smallness must be absorbed into God's largeness.

Our lives must be transformed by the grace and the mercy and the forgiveness of God which Jonah experienced, but then which Jonah was not willing to extend to others. And so our lives as we are transformed by the grace and the mercy and the forgiveness of God, that grace, mercy, and forgiveness is to be extended to others. God wants Christians to have big hearts.

To have compassionate hearts. To be big-hearted about what God is doing in the world. To be open to what God is doing in the world.

And the Lord, I suggest to you, will keep working on our lives until we learn this lesson. And the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is one of the means of growth.

It is one of the means of grace. It is one of the ways in which the Lord confronts us. It is one of the ways in which the Lord corrects us.

It is one of the ways in which the Lord keeps us on the pathway of discipleship in terms of His grace and mercy at work in our lives. Here, at the Lord's table, our smallness, our smallness may be absorbed by the largeness of God's grace. And then thirdly, and finally, notice that this passage concludes by underlining God's concern.

Last week I suggested to you that the book of Jonah ends on a rather sour note. And it only ends on a rather sour note if you end with your perspective or if you end with your focus on Jonah. It ends with Jonah outside the city in despair much like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son.

But it only ends that way if you focus on Jonah. Because the book of Jonah literally ends with a question posed by God at the very end of verse 11. Should I not be concerned about that great city? Should I not be concerned about that great city? You see, the marvelous thing about this book is that Jonah doesn't get the last word.

God gets the last word. And God asks this rhetorical question which of course means there is only one answer. Of course God should be concerned.

Of course God should exercise compassion and concern for that great city. And so should you, Jonah. And so should you, the people of God.

Because that's the message, that's the note on which this book ends. That's the message to the people of Israel in the Old Testament. And that's the message to God's people throughout the ages.

Should I not be concerned about that great city? Yes. Yes. You see, God deprived Jonah of the shade of the vine in order to expose Jonah's petty concerns.

In verse 4, Jonah was angry because God had compassion on the people of Nineveh and saved them. But by the time we get to verse 9, Jonah is angry again. But what's he angry about this time? He's not angry because God saved the people of Nineveh.

He's now angry because this vine which God gave to him has now withered and been taken away. And the Lord turns this experience around and he tries to show Jonah just how small-minded he has become. Because Jonah has more concern for this vine that he neither tended nor made grow than he did for a large, large city in deep, deep trouble.

And what God says to Jonah is this, if you can get all worked up over a little plant, can't you see the legitimacy of my concern, of my compassion, of my love for the city of Nineveh? You see, Jonah's concern for the plant is motivated by self-interest, while God's concern for the people of Nineveh is motivated by genuine love and mercy and compassion. The reality is, and I think this is one of the clear messages that comes to us from the entire book of Jonah, the clear reality is that many of us live in very small worlds. Our hearts are small, not compassionate.

Our worldview is small. We live with limited concerns from the perspective of our own self-interest, out of our own personal needs, a world shaped by our immediate concerns, the tyranny of the urgent. And the book of Jonah, from the opening in chapter 1 through to its conclusion in chapter 4, invites us to see the world, to see the world from God's perspective, to see the world through the eyes of the Lord.

To see our city through the eyes of the Lord. To look at our world through the eyes of compassion which our Lord Jesus has. To look at our relationships.

To look at our families. To look at our concerns. To look at our daily lives.

To look at what's happening around us in our church. To look at what's happening in our city, in our world. To look at the world through the lenses of Scripture.

What does Jesus see when He looks at our world? Is that what you see? What does Jesus see when He looks at your life? Is that what you see? What does Jesus see when He looks at your family? Is that what you see? What does Jesus see when He walks the streets of this city? Is that what you see? What does Jesus see as He looks around our globe this evening? Is that what you see? You see, one of the reasons we need as God's people to be firmly rooted in Scripture, to be immersing ourselves in the Word of God, is so that we will know the mind of God. As Paul says, we can have the mind of Christ and then we can look at our world, at our lives through the eyes of our Lord Jesus Christ. To see what He sees.

To love what He loves. To be concerned about what He is concerned about. And to do, then, what He would have us do.

And so the book of Jonah concludes with a powerful portrait of the sovereign and compassionate God. There's a wonderful hymn which we're going to sing in a minute by F.W. Faber which says, there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea. And it's a wonderful picture really because it speaks about God's mercy being as wide as the ocean, as wide as the sea.

But I want to suggest to you this evening, particularly as we approach the Lord's table, that even this picture is inadequate. That the wideness of the sea does not even capture the wideness of God's mercy. The real measure of the wideness of the mercy of God is that of the outstretched arms of our Lord Jesus Christ as He hung on the cross of Calvary and as His body was broken and as His blood was shed for sinners, for all of us who need salvation.

You see, that's the wideness of God's mercy. That's the measure of God's mercy. That's the measure of the length to which the love of God will go.

And that is the mercy and the grace which is poured out on this table this evening without measure. Neither height nor depth can separate us from this love if we come to this table as did the people of Nineveh to respond to the preaching of the message. They believed God with faith and they repented of their sins with godly sorrow.

And if you come with faith and if you come with repentance, even this evening, those outstretched arms on the cross which are the measure of God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ will welcome you, will embrace you, will take you to the breast of Jesus. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

That's the message of Jonah. That's the message of the New Testament. That's the message of this table.

May that message be deeply rooted in our hearts tonight. Let us pray. Gracious God, our Father, we thank You tonight that there is a wideness to Your mercy.

Help us, we pray, as we come in faith and repentance to experience that grace, that mercy in our lives. We thank You for Jonah, for the book of Jonah, for the lessons that we've learned together over these past weeks of study. We pray that we will not soon forget what You've been teaching us and that we might be strengthened in our pathway of discipleship as a result.

For the sake of Jesus, we pray.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/30/SID30658.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-vissers/jonah-a-wideness-in-gods-mercy/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net