

Everybody in the Game Series

## God's Gracious Compassion (Jonah 3:3-4:11)

### Introduction: Jonah's story shows God's amazing compassion

Good morning. Jason, it's so great to see you and to partner as Crossway serves Jesus around the world. As we continue our service sermon series, I want to thank everyone serving here with our Youth Ministry. We so appreciate you investing in the present and in the future of the church as you serve!

And if you're still looking for your place to serve here, we need someone to keep the wording on the church website up to date to invite people into the life of Jesus' church here. Or serve as an English as a Second Language ministry conversation partner, or serve on some Sundays with our Children's Ministry or by running the slides to facilitate our worship.

If you want to explore any of these opportunities, I can point you in the right direction. And for more service ideas and to connect with ministry leaders, check out our website at [www.nwchurch.org/serve](http://www.nwchurch.org/serve).

As we all look to grow as servants this morning, let's ask for God's help now in prayer... (Crossway, pray for CJ's surgery tomorrow)

Last Sunday we started a two-week exploration of the book of Jonah. And you did not disappoint with your Jonah humor, as I was told that it was a "whale" of a sermon and how one of you was a Jonah student because your grades were always below "sea/c level." ☺

This morning I'm eager to talk with you again about the book of Jonah. Not for more jokes, but because Jonah has so much to teach us about serving with God's amazing compassion.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Old Testament book of Jonah, chapter 3, or you can follow along with the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Last Sunday we covered the first half of Jonah. If a narrator recapped last Sunday's verses, they might say something like this:

Previously, in Jonah... over 750 years before Jesus, in the corrupt Northern Kingdom of Israel, Jonah, prophet of God, receives a dangerous call. He is to preach to the brutal Ninevites, Israel's enemy, a shockingly violent people who one day may destroy Israel.

Jonah hates the Ninevites, and doesn't want to be seen as a traitor helping Israel's enemy. So rather than go east to Nineveh, Jonah flees God and His call on a ship sailing west to Tarshish

In response, God sends a storm. The sea, the ship, and the sailors who don't know God respond to His storm, while Jonah, God's prophet, stays asleep below deck. But then Jonah hears a strangely familiar cry, as the unbelieving captain wakes him up by echoing God's words to Jonah, "Arise and call out" to your God.

The sailors cast lots and discover that Jonah bears responsibility for the storm. Ironically, the unbelieving sailors grasp the seriousness of Jonah's disobedience more than he does, greatly fearing, as Jonah confesses and tells the sailors to throw him into the sea.

But these sailors show compassion to underserving Jonah, trying to save him until eventually, with great reluctance, they must throw Jonah overboard.

When they do, the sea immediately calms, and now the sailors' fear is directed in reverent worship to God. So despite Jonah's disobedience, God compassionately works in the sailors' lives and in His rebellious prophet's life.

In disobedience, Jonah has been going down: down to Joppa, down below deck, down into the sea, down into the depths, sinking down, and when Jonah can sink no lower, God brings Jonah upward, delivering Jonah from death by providing a big fish to swallow Jonah. And like the sailors, Jonah now gratefully worships, recognizing from inside the big fish that salvation comes from the Lord.

God stays compassionately committed to reaching the flawed Ninevites through His flawed prophet, and so God delivers Jonah back on dry land... through fish vomit. Then God again calls Jonah to go preach to Nineveh, to a people who, like Jonah, need God's mercy.

But Jonah is disturbed, wondering, "Why is God going to such lengths to reach the wicked, brutal Ninevites, who may one day destroy Israel?"

And we wonder, will Jonah finally fulfill his mission, or keep running from God? And if Jonah makes it to Nineveh and preaches, will he not make it out alive? Or will the Ninevites join the sailors in turning to God?

And we wonder, why has God been going to such great lengths to reach and recall into a service a prophet like Jonah, disobedient and lacking God's compassion for Nineveh? Why doesn't God instead send an ancient version of Jason, who wants to go overseas to share about God and serve people different from him?

### **Teaching: God's amazing compassion**

*The Ninevites repent and God shows compassion* – Let's seek answers to these questions and more, as we continue the story in Jonah chapter three, verse 3. **(3)**

<sup>3</sup> Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.

This time Jonah obeys God and goes to Nineveh. After spending so much time in the story getting Jonah to Nineveh, the summary of Jonah's service there is remarkably short in verse 4... **(4)**

<sup>4</sup> Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

Some think Jonah shares more than this brief verse 4 sermon here, that verse 4 merely summarizes Jonah's longer sermon concisely so as to focus more on the response of the Ninevites and God.

But others think the brevity of Jonah's message points to Jonah's continuing lack of compassion for the Ninevites, only sharing with them the bare minimum, purposefully not letting them know that Nineveh will be saved if they turn to God. It also appears that Jonah may have only preached to the Ninevites on this first day instead of spending the whole forty days sharing about God.

But despite Jonah's lack of compassion, God still compassionately works through Jonah. Rather than Nineveh being overturned in judgment, Nineveh experiences a turnaround, starting in verse 5. Verse 5 says: **(5-6)**

<sup>5</sup> The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. <sup>6</sup> 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.

Fasting and wearing sackcloth here expresses the Ninevites remorse for their sin, all repenting from the greatest to the least.

We talked last Sunday about how some have a hard time believing that Jonah miraculously lived in a big fish for three days. Similarly, some have a hard time believing that all the Ninevites would repent of their sins. But if you believe that God is real and all powerful, then it's not hard to see God's ability to bring revival among the Ninevites.

Some also think that God, in His compassion, has been preparing the Ninevites ahead of time to respond to Jonah's message. Through things like a total solar eclipse in 763BC, which ancient people often viewed as a sign of divine anger.

And through the Ninevites being especially receptive to someone coming from a big fish since one of their gods is Dagan, which some ancient sources describe as a half man, half fish god. Further, some scholars think the name of their city *Nineveh* came from the earlier *Nina*, a Sumarian name of the goddess Ishtar commonly written with a sign depicting a fish. So the Ninevites may be more ready to accept a divine message from someone who encountered a big fish like Jonah had.

But whatever you think of the repentance of all the Ninevites, let's not focus there. Let's focus on God's amazing compassion in going to such amazing lengths to show mercy to such a brutal people. Even the Ninevite king responds to God in verse 7. **(7-9)**

<sup>7</sup> This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. <sup>8</sup> But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

These verses show that the Ninevites are not just making an outward show through their sackcloth and ashes, they're serious, as they also fast, pray, and repent of their evil.

Jonah's verse 4 sermon may have been incomplete, but ironically, in these verses the pagan king does Jonah's job, calling Nineveh to repentance and to hope in God's compassion.

In these verses the king calls everyone to turn away from their evil, hoping that God might turn away from His righteous anger. As the Ninevites do turn away from their evil, God compassionately responds in verse 10. **(10)**

<sup>10</sup> 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.

As the Ninevites turn from their evil ways, all seems right, as God has worked powerfully through His prophet's one sentence sermon.

Jonah is angry and despairs over God's compassion – But all is not right in the world, because to Jonah's way of seeing things, God has done wrong. We see this in verse 1 of chapter 4: **(1)**

4 But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.

With the Ninevites' repentance, God has turned away from His righteous anger. But now Jonah is the one who is angry.

As we talked about last Sunday, in the generation before Jonah, the Ninevites had violently attacked Israel and forced Israel to pay tribute to them for years. And because of Israel's rebellion against God for generations by the time of Jonah, prophets like Hosea and Amos are warning in Jonah's time that if Israel continues in evil, God will eventually give Israel over to their Ninevite enemies (*Hosea 11:5*).

So Jonah here is not just musing, you know, philosophically speaking, the problem with God is that He's just too compassionate. No Jonah is deeply disturbed by God showing compassion to a people who've tormented his people in the past and who may be a terrorist threat in the future, which did end up happening in the generation after Jonah.

After Jonah's lifetime, Israel continued in sin and the Ninevites did come and take over the Northern Kingdom of Israel and force the Israelites into exile. So think of the later Israelite people who lived after Jonah, hearing this book of Jonah calling them to share God's concern for the people who forced them into exile. So God is really challenging His

people back then, as well as us today, to really open our hearts wide in compassion to everyone.

But Jonah does not. Jonah is angry about God forgiving and about God working through Jonah to bring God's compassion to the Ninevites. Starting in verse 2, Jonah lets God hear about it. **(2-3)**

<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

The last time Jonah prayed, back in the fish in chapter 2, Jonah was rejoicing, praising God for His compassion and deliverance. But now, Jonah angrily criticizes God for extending that same grace, compassion, and deliverance to the Ninevites.

In just verses two and three, Jonah uses, "I", "me", or "my" six times here in the NIV. As Jonah makes other people's deliverance about himself and wants to control who God extends compassion to, Jonah gets so angry and despairing that he even commands God to take his life.

God's compassionate response to Jonah's anger - Rather than run out of compassion for His hypocritical, belligerent prophet, God instead invites a conversation in verse 4. **(4)**

<sup>4</sup> But the LORD replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Jonah has condemned God for not being angry. And now God invites Jonah to consider if his anger is valid. "Is it right for you to be angry?"

God raises the question because there is hypocrisy in Jonah celebrating his salvation from the storm of God's anger, yet wanting God to bring a storm of judgment on the Ninevites. And it's sadly ironic that Jonah, who was once full of life, celebrating God's compassion, now prefers death because of God's compassion for others.

But Jonah does not see God's perspective as he walks away from God's question and heads outside the city in verse 5. Verse 5 says: **(5)**

<sup>5</sup> 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 now waits to see what God will do at the end of the 40 days, perhaps hoping God will now see things Jonah's way and bring judgment to the Ninevites. Though Jonah has walked away from conversation with God, God does not walk away from Jonah. God keeps graciously trying to reach him through another object lesson starting in verse 6. **(6-8)**

<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. <sup>8</sup> 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."

God compassionately works to try to draw Jonah back into their conversation. Ancient Nineveh is in modern day Iraq, so it's hot, and Jonah is very happy about God providing the shade plant. But then the next morning, God sends a worm to attack the plant, and then the hot wind and sun attack Jonah, and Jonah angrily despairs once more. But God keeps engaging His prophet, asking him a familiar question in verse 9. **(9)**

<sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

Heavy stuff; in verse 4, when God asks, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah does not answer. Here, as God asks, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" Jonah retorts that he is justified in his anger and is so angry that he wishes he were dead.

Before, Jonah was angry about God's compassion in delivering the Ninevites. Now Jonah is angry that God has not delivered the plant. Jonah does not like God's ways, and no longer wants to live. Yet God keeps engaging Jonah in verse 10. **(10-11)**

<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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?"

God keeps compassionately engaging, trying to help Jonah to see that he is the one seeing things wrongly here.

If Jonah has concern for a mere plant, that he invested nothing into to make grow and that only lasted a day, then shouldn't God, and God's prophets, have compassionate concern for Nineveh? A city and surrounding area filled with 120,000 people made in God's image, who are living in a place of such immorality and lack of knowledge of God that it's like they cannot tell their right hand from their left.

These verses show us that God still loves the people He's created even when they've become desperately wicked. And if Jonah still can't have compassion on the people, God brings up the animals at the end of verse 11. Jonah had compassion on the one plant, can't he at least have compassion on the animals in Nineveh?

God has the last word in the story, as it ends here in verse 11, asking, "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?"

### **Next Step**

We're left to conclude, with God's concluding question, that Jonah is the one being absurd here, not God. So Jonah is a tragic, negative example for us. A disobedient prophet who tries to stand in the way of God's compassionate work and who can't get past his prejudice to share God's compassion for the Ninevites.

As God asked Jonah, so God asks us today, "Should I not have concern for the great city of San Antonio?" God's question to Jonah, and to us, is not the end of the story, as the question calls us to share God's great concern for everyone in our great city, and our world.

Concern for everyone... people of every race and nationality and socioeconomic background and sexuality and immigration status and faith and political affiliation and so on. Compassion even for those who celebrate what is wrong, and those who harshly criticize, and those who have harmed.

Or instead, you and I could live like Jonah: avoiding those who are different, desiring nothing but bad for those who have harmed, disobeying God's call to share about Him and serve, wanting to control

who God shows compassion to, erupting with anger when we don't get our way with God.

Wouldn't it be better to fully let God's compassion into our lives? To not make excuses about why we can't serve, and instead let God, in His great compassion, work through flawed people like us as we serve, showing His compassion to others.

After all, if God will work through Jonah with all his flaws, then surely God wants to work through our service to bless people. As God is working through the so many of you who are serving in our church, community, and world.

And unlike Jonah, wouldn't it be better to share God's compassion as we serve? Rather than respond with anger when God blesses someone we don't like, let's instead celebrate that another flawed human being is a fellow recipient, with flawed us, of God's amazing compassion.

God has shown us amazing compassion. As we talked about last Sunday, Jonah's story points to Jesus, as Jesus talked about Jonah being a sign. And so, isn't it amazing that Jesus, filled with compassion for us, faced the ultimate storm of God's judgment for us?

And isn't it amazing that Jesus spent 3 days, not in a fish, like Jonah, but in the grave, only to arise to save not just one city, like Nineveh, but people from all around the world?

If you don't yet identify as a Christian, don't leave here without Him. Place your trust in Jesus and receive God's compassion.

As recipients of God's amazing compassion, may we share God's concern for the great city of San Antonio, all its people, and our world. Amen? Let's pray...

**Dismissal** – You're dismissed, go in peace to serve others with God's compassion.