

The Gracious and Compassionate God

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- [0 : 00] Let's get the first slide up there. The first thing we see in our verses is that Jonah is sent. I wonder if, as we read through this, you had a sense of déjà vu, perhaps. Hopefully you did. If you've got your Bibles, look at the start of chapter 3. Look at the start of chapter 1. Almost identical, aren't they? Look at Jonah's commission in chapter 1, verse 1. The words 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. Now, chapter 3, verse 1. Then the words of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you. What's going on here? Well, very simply, Jonah is being recommissioned. Last time he was told to go up and east, but instead he went west and down.
- [1 : 07] This time, we're told, he did do as he was asked. Look at verse 3. Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. God was under no obligation, was he? Teased Jonah again. Jonah was given an important task. He chose not to do it. God could just have benched him. But he didn't know, did he? Jonah doesn't refuse this time. He doesn't run. Instead, he accepts God's mercy and he's recommissioned. Striking here at the start, Jonah has sinned. In one level, he's repented. He's restored. And now he's recommissioned. Right from the start, we see here, God is compassionate. God is compassionate with Jonah. Jonah is sent. And what's the result of that? Well, we see that all Nineveh repents. Jonah goes off to Nineveh.
- [2 : 18] Now, let's remember why this is such a big deal for us. Remember how Nineveh was introduced at the start of the book. They are a great city whose wickedness has come up before the Lord. Nineveh was not a nice place to be. It was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The one most savage empires that ever existed. You can think of them, I guess, perhaps like Islamic State, some of the things that they do. Ironically, that picture there is the entrance to Nineveh. Jonah would have walked up through that gateway into Nineveh. But Islamic State blew it up a couple of years ago. It was a wicked place. A horrible place. Jonah going to Nineveh is far more scary than any of us going to Barlini through in Glasgow. Into the worst housing scheme in Scotland. And yet, despite that, Jonah goes. Because God has commissioned him. And three days it takes him to get through the whole place.
- [3 : 23] That doesn't mean that probably took three days to walk from one end to the other. But perhaps instead it took three days for everyone to hear the message. One thing I find striking though is how Nineveh is described. Did you notice that? Nineveh is described as a very large city. It's literally a very great city. See, why does God care so much about Nineveh?

Why does he view it as such a great city? Well, ultimately, Nineveh is important to God. Because it's full of people.

Full of people who are about to face his judgment for their sins. And he cares about them. And he also cares about the evil that they do. Just look at what Jonah says here in verse 4.

These are the first things recorded for us he says after being recommissioned. Verse 4. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city. Proclaiming 40 more days.

[4 : 32] And Nineveh will be overthrown. I work in Charleston, a housing scheme in Dundee. And scheme, we love straight talking. No messing about.

No pleasantries. Just tell me what you're thinking. But this is something else, isn't it? Jonah is some boy. What a bottle this is. Walks into the most wicked city on the planet of time.

And says 40 more days. And Nineveh will be overthrown. But this word from the Lord is not one simply of impending destruction.

But actually when you think about it. Actually this message from Jonah is one laced with mercy. Just think. If God wanted Nineveh to be destroyed.

Well he could have done that, couldn't he? Could have brought in another nation to come in. Wiped them out. He could have gone full on Sodom and Gomorrah. And rained down fire upon it. But he didn't.

[5 : 36] So why this warning from Nineveh? Well because God cares about them. It's a caring message. And actually as shocking as Jonah's message is to these people.

We actually have an even more shocking message. An even more imminent message. We don't say 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. We say perhaps today.

And you'll be overthrown. And that's a loving message. It would be unloving wouldn't it not to warn people.

Of their impending doom. Imagine someone out on the streets. Out there. They've got their headphones in. They're in their own little world.

And then the I don't know what bus comes up here. Number 28 comes up or whatever. And they're about to step out onto the roads. And you're beside them. It'd be unloving wouldn't it. Not to grab a hold of them.

[6 : 38] Pull them back. Warn them of the danger they're in. How much more unloving is it not to warn people. Warn people we love of the impending danger that faces them.

If they don't repent of their sin. If they don't trust in the Lord. To warn people. Not to glean it. Rather warn them of the judgment to come.

It's a loving message. Look at how the Ninevites. Responded this morning.

Verse 5. The Ninevites believed. God. In one sense. The most least likely people in the world at a time.

The Ninevites. The Ninevites. They believed. Yeah. The Ninevites believed. God. A fast was proclaimed.

[7 : 42] And all of them from the greatest to the least. Put on sackcloth. What's happened? Jonah shared God's message. Literally just five words. And what we see here is God's word.

Doing God's work. And over 120,000 people are saved. Man isn't that amazing? This one man.

Coming to the most hostile place. With those who we think are the least likely to repent. They're the ones who are saved. Why? God's word.

Doing God's work. Bringing these people to repentance. And notice as well. It's not just the commoners. The simple folk. It's all the way to the top.

Verse 6 is literally. And when the word reached the king. When the word reached the king. What happens? The king repents. Now how do we do this? Well two ways. First. By what he and the people do in verse 5.

[8 : 38] Have a look at that. They're fasting. That means they're not eating. They put on sackcloth. Which is sort of like a tight sack. Used to wear in school sports day for sack race.

It's a sign of humility. The people do this. The king does this. Secondly. Jesus says they repented. We just read that didn't we? In Matthew chapter 12.

The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment. With this generation and condemn it. For they repented. At the preaching of Jonah. All the people repented.

And look what the king does in response to this. Look at verse 7. Let me read it for us again. 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. 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. Who knows? God may yet relent.

[9 : 37] And with compassion turn from his fierce anger. So that we will not perish. We saw in chapter 1 verse 6.

The captain of the ship saying something similar. Hoping the Lord is compassionate. The pagans throw themselves on God. And he's compassionate.

When they repent. And I think here we see quite a good example again of what repentance is. Just follow the logic of what the king says here. First off we see that. Well the king.

He's heard the word of God. He's heard someone speak to them. He's humbled himself. He realizes he's not in control. He's realized he's not the big boss he thought he was.

Then he calls on God. He calls on God. Urgently. And encourages others to do the same. And he calls on God to have compassion.

[10 : 33] All this from one man. From one of God's prophets. Now here's the kicker in all this.

Let's imagine you were the original readers of the book of Jonah. Perhaps a few decades later and Assyria is coming to take Israel.

What was Israel like? Well Israel was supposed to be the light of the nations. They were blessed like no other nation had ever been blessed before.

They were God's treasured people. They were his son. But Israel shared no family resemblance at this time. There were no light to the nations.

Because they were exactly like the nations. Let me read a passage to us from 2 Kings chapter 17. If you've got your Bible feel free to turn there with me.

[11 : 31] If not I will read it for us. 2 Kings 17 from verse 10 says. They set up. This is talking about Israel. They set up sacred stones and asher poles on every high hill.

And under every spreading tree. At every high place they burned incense. As the nations whom the Lord had driven out before them had done. They did wicked things that aroused the Lord's anger.

They worshiped idols. Though the Lord had said you shall not do this. The Lord warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers. Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees.

In accordance with the entire law that I commanded your ancestors to obey. And that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets. But they would not listen. And were as stiff-necked as their ancestors.

Who did not trust in the Lord their God. They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their ancestors. And the statutes he warned them to keep. They followed worthless idols.

[12 : 31] And themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them. Although the Lord had ordered them. Do not do as they do. They forsook all the commands of the Lord their God.

And made themselves two idols. Cast in the shape of calves. And an asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts. And they worshipped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire.

They practiced divination and saw omens. And sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. Arousing his anger. Israel had many prophets.

Sent to their kings. Many. And not once did they turn from their sin. But wicked pagan Assyria.

One prophet goes to Nineveh. And the king and the people repent. Isn't that a stark warning to the original readers? Not only are they like the nations.

[13 : 41] The nations are better than them. None of Israel's kings obeyed God's warning. They all failed. And so faced God's judgment.

What's that got to do with us though? Well this. We also have a king. A king. A king who has never failed. The one who is the king of kings.

And like the king of Nineveh. He likewise calls people to repent. King Jesus in the start of Mark's gospel says. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.

He also has a message. And because Jesus loves us. He calls us to repent. So if you're here and you're not a Christian.

My question is. Have you repented? Have you turned from your sin? See for all of us. Our greatest problem in life is not our money issues. It's not our addiction.

[14 : 45] Our greatest problem in life is not what other people think of you. It's not our relationship issues. It's not our physical issues. Our mental issues. You and I. Our greatest problem is our sin.

And we don't want people to perish for their sin. And so we call them to repentance. To do a U-turn. To turn from their sin. To trust in God.

Because our king himself took the punishment that we deserve. Jonah is sent. Or Nineveh repents. And what's next? Well the Lord relents.

Have a look at verse 10. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways. He relented. And did not bring in them their destruction.

He had threatened. This wicked nation. Repents. And amazingly.

[15 : 45] God relents. See God. He will never turn away anyone who comes to him. No matter what sick things they have done.

What I have done. What you have done. And these Ninevites did some awful things. If you turn to the Lord in repentance. He will turn to you. What compassion he has towards them.

I think it's worth pointing out here. That Ninevites. They haven't changed God's mind and everything. We can still trust him. God would still do. What he said he'd do. He will do what he said he's done.

Ninevites haven't shown him. Persuaded God. That they aren't too bad. But said because they repented of their sin. Because they've turned to him. They're in a new relationship with him. One where God treats them as such.

See remember that word from Jonah. It's a warning to give them the opportunity to repent. And that's what they've done. Just think how generous our God is.

[16 : 48] How loving he is. How kind he is. How merciful he is to these people. Sure their repentance may not be perfect. But it was genuine enough for God.

The Ninevites repent. God relents. And finally. Jonah resents. Notice here.

It's still the same scene. Still the same thing going on. Jonah's still in the city. It's the same conversation. It's very much part of chapter three. And look at his response. I mean you'd think.

I'd be buzzing. Would you not be? You go out into Aberdeen. You share five words with people. And 120,000 people believe. Praise the Lord. Look at verse four.

Sorry verse one of chapter four. Jonah is raging. He's raging at this. Look down at verse three of chapter four.

[17 : 47] He would rather die than see Nineveh saved. What is reason? Well let's look at verse two from the middle.

Jonah 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. See Jonah's repentance chapter two. Doesn't last that long does it?

He says see. I knew this would happen. I told you so. I knew that this is exactly what you would do. Jonah knows what God's like.

He actually quotes back to God. What God first said to his people in Nexus 34. And what he says about his character. Is just what we've seen in chapter three. That he is slow to anger.

[18 : 43] Gracious and abounding in steadfast love. See Jonah. He is spot on in his definition of God. He knows God. He knows what he's like. But he hates it.

He hates God's compassion. Because he thinks people need to deserve it. Just compare this attitude to the people we have seen be saved.

Look at chapter one verse 14. The sailors hope that God is compassionate. And they are saved and they worship God. The king of Nineveh we just saw in verse nine. He hopes that God is compassionate and is saved.

Jonah knows that God is compassionate. And he hates it. Striking isn't it? There are these ignorant pagans who don't know God.

Don't know what he's like. They hope he's gracious. Then there's this orthodox prophet who knows what God's like. And he hates it. See Jonah's problem is that he doesn't like what he knows about God.

[19 : 57] Look at God's response to all this in verse four. Is it right for you to be angry? It's a great question, isn't it? Is it?

Is it right for Jonah to be angry at what's happened? See, here's the heart of the question. Is it right to be angry at God's sovereign grace to save who he wills?

Is it right to get angry at God's sovereign grace to save who he wills? It's possible to understand the doctrine of God's sovereign grace. It's possible to understand it and not love it.

But in fact, like Jonah, resent it. See, this whole book is dripping in irony. See, Jonah gave a description of what God's like from Exodus 34.

But he seems to have forgotten why God himself first said it. Let it remind us of what was going on then. God, he'd just saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. They'd become his people.

[21 : 10] He was their God. They were his people. They'd covenanted together into relationship. And God gave them the law to teach them how to live as his people, as people who are saved.

And all of it completely undeserved. And what did the people do? They worshipped the golden calf. It was like adultery on a honeymoon.

And it was into that context that God spoke these words about him being a God who is compassionate, who is gracious, a God who relents from sending calamity.

The Israelites in Exodus, they deserve to be smashed. But instead, they got compassion. It's up to God who he chooses to have compassion on.

And that's really hard sometimes. That is really hard for us sometimes. How do we feel when God chooses to extend his grace and blessing to someone over there, but not over here?

[22 : 16] To that church over there that perhaps isn't as orthodox as us. To that family over there who's not quite as godly as ours. People being saved over there, but not here.

And Lord, I'm on my knees every night. How do we feel then? How do we feel when God chooses to save people we don't like, when there are those that we love who we long to be saved?

That's what grace is. It's God's sheer undeserved kindness and favor to people. So the question here is, have we grasped the grace?

Jonah hasn't. Is there an attitude of Jonah perhaps lurking within us? Just think for a moment.

Just be really honest in your thoughts. Can you think of someone who doesn't deserve to be saved? Someone who doesn't deserve God's compassion?

[23 : 21] Perhaps you think of yourself and do you think, I am so deeply ashamed of the things that I have done. I struggle even today to come to God with empty, dirty hands.

See, if that's us, we think we need to come to God with clean hands. And so if we do think that, if we struggle to come with God with our dirty hands, we haven't really got grace.

Because it's not about us. Perhaps you might think of people who've really hurt us. People who've opposed us in the workplace of being Christians.

I wonder how we feel at the end of their life if they turned to Jesus. They made our life miserable. And then they turned to him. Perhaps we need to think of a really extreme example.

Someone like Jimmy Savile. A pedophile. Someone who's a domestic abuser. Those who societies say are monsters and undeserving.

[24 : 25] Do those people deserve salvation? No. They don't. But neither do I.

And neither do any of us. But that's what grace is. Grace by definition is unfair. It's people not getting what they deserve.

Instead getting better than what they deserve. Grace can be really hard to stomach sometimes, can't it? But praise the Lord for his grace.

He's showing us in Jesus Christ. Now imagine again that you're an Israelite. You are a few decades on. The Assyrians are coming for you. And you're raging probably at Nineveh's short-lived repentance.

And you say, see? See? They didn't deserve that. Well, Nineveh's short-lived repentance was better than anything Israel was doing. And did you pick up on what they were doing at the time when I read this?

[25 : 30] Read 2 Kings 17. Worshipping golden calves. They hadn't changed.

Israel had experienced God's compassion, salvation, but they looked just like the world. And yet God still wanted them to turn back in repentance. Israel presumed upon their salvation.

And so looked just like the world. See, Jonah, it's a nice kid's story, isn't it? You see it in kids' Bibles all the time.

But it's hard-hitting, isn't it, once you get under the flesh of it. Do I presume upon my salvation? Do I look just like the world as this was challenging the original readers in doing?

Sure, I may not be worshipping golden calves or sacrificing my children like the world. I really hope you're not. If you are, we'll read the conversation afterwards.

[26 : 35] But am I presuming upon my salvation, I'm yet looking just like the world. Self-absorbed. Living totally independent. Just trying to be comfortable.

What do we do when we find ourselves like this? Being challenged in the same way the original readers were being challenged. Well, we repent, don't we?

That's what God called the Ninevites to do. That's what he wanted the Israelites to do. That's what he wants us to do. And that God revealed in this chapter, throughout this book, he is so compassionate.

So kind, so generous. He loves to have mercy on people who repent. And he has placed his people in the world to show them what he's like.

And just think, what is the mark of a Christian? How do people in your workplace know that you are a Christian? Is it because of growth and fruits of the Spirit?

[27 : 45] Well, yes, it is those things. But what's the primary way? It's repentance. That's the way people know. Repentance is the true mark of a Christian.

So come to him. Come to his compassionate God. And repent. As for all of us, not just non-Christians, if you've been listening tonight, and you're a Christian or not like Jonah, we know in part what the Lord is like.

May we be won over by his gracious, compassionate mercy. And so, turn from our sin. Repent.

Because he loves to save people, as he did Nineveh here. Let me pray. Amen. Our great God and Father, we thank you.

If we are here this evening, we are believers. We thank you for all those people who brought the message of the gospel to us. Time and time and time again. And thank you for opening our eyes.

[29 : 03] Seeing our need for it. And calling us to repent. And enabling us to do so. Father, we acknowledge that even today, there are still sins repent of, as we've prayed about already.

Maybe people who are quick to repent because we know grace. We are free to hold our hands up and say, yeah, I'm sorry. Please forgive me. And Father, no doubt that our friends, loved ones we know who haven't repented from their sin.

May they know the danger that they are in. May we be willing with tears in our eyes to warn them of what is to come.

But to point them to the God who is gracious, slow to anger, merciful and kind. The God who does not treat us as our sins deserve. The God who is gracious.

What does that look like? Well, thank you that we can look to the cross. For there we see your grace in Lord Jesus Christ magnified.

[30 : 18] And forgive us, we ask for times when we are presumptuous. For times when we live just like the world. Times when we struggle with your grace. May instead we be won over by it. Lord Jesus, we thank you for the cross.

We pray all these things for your glory. Amen. We're going to close.