

Outrageous In Mercy

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if you'll turn with me to Jonah chapter 4. Now, you might be surprised we're in Jonah chapter 4, but that's because we've been going through the book of Jonah in our evening services.

And if you haven't been our evening services, we're now on the final chapter of Jonah. Just to catch you up, just as I guess a recap, to catch you up to where we're at, if you don't know the story of Jonah, Jonah was a prophet.

That means he was meant to speak for God. And God commanded him to go to Nineveh to pronounce God's judgment on Nineveh for all of the things that they had done. But God said, go, and Jonah said, no, he went to the opposite direction.

Jonah traveled towards Tarshish. But the thing we learned in chapter 1 was that since God is the God of all creation, you can't just escape God by going to another country.

And God stopped Jonah right in his tracks with a storm. Jonah was thrown overboard, went into the depths of the sea. But even there, Jonah wasn't beyond God's reach. And God saved him famously through this fish or whale.

[1 : 0 4] And vomited Jonah back up on dry land, set him back on the path to speak to Nineveh. And so two weeks ago in the evening, we saw Jonah's message to Nineveh, which brought about the first revival, you might say, the greatest revival.

As the whole of Nineveh responded to this message of judgment by falling on their knees in repentance and praying that perhaps God would have mercy on them.

And wonderfully, in chapter 3, we read that God does have mercy on them. In verse 10, it says, when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God relented from the disaster that he had said he would do to them.

And he did not do it. Now the book could very easily have ended there. We're going to have this wonderful story of Jonah runs away from God. God brings him back. He preached to the Ninevites.

They all turn, they all become Christians. And there's the end of the story. But it doesn't. There's one more chapter, which is perhaps the strangest chapter, which deals with Jonah's reaction to all of this.

[2 : 0 4] How does Jonah respond to this mass revival? Well, let's read chapter 4 and we'll see. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

And he prayed to the Lord and said, Oh Lord, is this not what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish. For I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding instead fast love and relenting from disaster.

Therefore now, oh Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. And the Lord said, do you do well to be angry?

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade till he should see what would become of the city.

Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah so that it might be a shade over his head to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.

[3 : 09] But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint.

And he asked that he might die and said, it is better for me to die than to live. But God said to Jonah, do you do well to be angry for the plant?

And he said, yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die. And the Lord said, you pity the plant for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night.

And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also much cattle?

How does Jonah respond? Jonah responds with anger. And that brings us to our title this morning, that God is outrageously merciful.

[4 : 12] I don't know if you ever thought about God's mercy that way. That's how Jonah sees it, that God is outrageously merciful. This final chapter confronts us with two challenging questions.

And the first one is, are you angry like Jonah? This is a chapter full of anger. I don't know whether you noticed it. Twice in verses three and verse nine, Jonah says he's angry enough to die.

This is not just a little bit of annoyance. Jonah is absolutely incensed. In verses one to four, give us his first anger episode. We read that it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry.

When Jonah sees that God hasn't destroyed Nineveh, he's seething with rage. I remember teaching Jonah to kids in Sunday school. And often you've got little pictures of the kids to color in. There's a picture of Jonah.

He's hopping mad with his face is red and he's got a smoke coming out of his ears. That's the kind of picture we have. Jonah is absolutely incensed. It's the kind of, he's so angry, he would rather die than live.

[5 : 18] This is the kind of anger that is, this is not just passing in one day. Jonah is absolutely eaten up by the fact that Nineveh has repented.

And up to now we knew that Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. That was much as obvious because he went in the opposite direction. He risked his life to run away from God. But we weren't told why.

But now as Jonah's anger all boils up, everything comes out. We read in verse two and he prayed to the Lord and said, Oh Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?

That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish. For I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding instead of fast love and relenting from disaster.

Jonah didn't flee from Nineveh because he was afraid of the reputation of the Ninevites. Who were, you know, who were acknowledged as violent and brutal.

[6 : 14] But that's not why Jonah ran away. Jonah ran away because he was afraid that God might have mercy on them. He knew what God was like. He knew that God had a track record of showing mercy.

And he thought, I would rather die than see these people receive God's mercy. And while Jonah makes a lot of mistakes in his life, you can't actually fault his theology in verse two.

The attributes that he mentions that God is merciful and slow to anger and gracious and abounding instead fast love. Those are all the things that God declares to the people of Israel.

So the first verse that we read to start the service, when God declares his character to Moses, that's exactly what God says. The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious one, slow to anger and abounding instead fast love.

Jonah's got his theology dead right. It's a glimpse of the heart of God that we're given there. But Jonah hates what he sees.

[7 : 14] If you want to know what God is like, it's a wonderful summary. This is God in his own words. He is merciful and gracious. We should see this and we should rejoice.

And it's interesting, the background to this statement, when in Exodus, when God reveals his character to the people, that's when Moses receives the Ten Commandments and he goes up to God and God gives him the Ten Commandments.

And during that time, Israel turns away and they make these golden calves for themselves because they say, we don't know, maybe Moses isn't going to come down. We're going to decide, we're going to worship these golden calves.

And they deserve at that point for God to judge them, for God to destroy them. But Moses intercedes and he says, God have mercy on them and God does.

And then Moses says, God show me your character. And that's what God declares. And he even uses a line in Exodus that is very similar to what we have here.

[8 : 13] God says, he relented from the disaster he'd spoke about bringing on his people. So God's got a track record of showing mercy. Jonah knows his Bible. He knows the story of Exodus.

He knows that when the people of Israel disobeyed, when they turned after idolatry, God had mercy on them. And so he knows that actually, the Ninevites aren't beyond hope.

But let's actually be a bit more clear. Jonah isn't just angry that God is merciful full stop because if you've been following the story of Jonah, you'll know that Jonah actually at times really loves God's mercy.

When Jonah fell into the sea, when he was descending into the depths, he called out to God to save him. And what did God do? God saved him. God had mercy on this disobedient prophet who deserved nothing but death.

And God rescued him. Unusually, yes, with a fish. But God rescued him. God showed mercy. And Jonah was really happy himself to receive mercy. And Jonah was descended from the Israelites.

[9 : 13] He was very happy that the Israelites had received mercy. But what Jonah didn't like, what made Jonah's blood boil, was that God showed Nineveh mercy.

Nineveh of all people. And what I mentioned two weeks ago is that even the people of Nineveh, the people of Nineveh were notoriously violent. You can find that if you look at the British Museum.

The king of Nineveh mentions that, though, even in chapter three, verse nine, he says, or verse eight, he says, let everyone turn away from their violence. Now, there's no kids here, so I can tell you just what you'll find if you go to the British Museum.

There's an exhibition that shows the Assyrian Empire, of which Nineveh was the capital. And that tells you what there's like. There's a big kind of stone carving relief that is essentially like a graphic novel of everything that the Assyrians were proud of.

It shows people being skinned alive, people being impaled. All of these various types of torture, it shows them trampling down their enemies. Nineveh had a fearsome reputation, and they were proud of it.

[10 : 22] They wanted the world to know. They were like the Isis of the day doing these horrific acts of atrocity, and they couldn't film it, so they just scratched it into stone and made pictures of it.

So that's how Jonah thinks. When he thinks about Nineveh, those are the kind of people he thinks of. And those are the last people he thinks deserve God's mercy.

If you were to make a list of the nations that most deserve to hear the Gospel, I suspect Nineveh would have been on the bottom. They would have been like the Isis of Ornatsis of their day.

The last people who you think might deserve God's mercy. From Jonah's perspective, then, God's mercy is outrageous. It's not that Nineveh doesn't deserve God's mercy.

It's that it's the opposite, even more than that. They don't just not deserve God's mercy. They deserve the opposite. Jonah wants to see them destroyed. That's why he's now, even after, that's why he's sitting outside the city, waiting for them to just be destroyed.

[11 : 27] He's thinking, oh, okay, maybe God showed them mercy. Maybe that will last for about 10 days, 30 days, while they keep their act clean. But I'm going to wait till the fire and sulfur comes down.

Jonah can't wait to see them destroyed. And the thing that makes, that you might say, even pours salt in the wound for Jonah, is the fact that while Nineveh had been spared, and while Nineveh have repented, Israel haven't.

The one other mention we have of Jonah is in two Kings, chapter 16. And we're told there that the people of Israel, while God had blessed them, and while God had helped protect them from their enemies at this time, they continued going after idols.

They continued the same trend that they had begun in Exodus, building, making golden calves, and worshipping them. They didn't turn away from their idolatry. And Jonah is not stupid.

He puts two and two together. He knows that Nineveh deserve judgment for going for their disobedience. And Israel will at some point as well.

[12 : 35] And now he sees Nineveh have repented, and God has spared them, but Israel haven't. And you can see, imagine how Jonah feels. It's like, I mean, for Jonah, it's like, I mean, imagine the person you loathed most in the world, who maybe had caused a lot of harm to your family.

That person suddenly becomes a Christian. And then at the same time, your son or your daughter, or someone you've prayed for all their lives, continues to turn their back on Jesus.

You might cry, it's unfair. That's how Jonah feels. How is God's mercy fair? Well, you might scale it up. Imagine all 1,000 prisoners in Barliny Prison in Glasgow, all come to Jesus.

But all the children in our congregation, all the children in the island, turn away and turn their back on the gospel. That's how Jonah feels.

His whole nation have turned their back on God. While all these people who he thinks they're the last to deserve it, God saves them. How is God's mercy fair, is Jonah's question.

[13 : 49] You can understand then why Jonah feels, and you can understand in some ways, why Jonah feels angry with God. And even if, I mean, maybe I'd ask, wouldn't we feel angry with God? Even if not angry, annoyed, why though?

Where does that anger come from for Jonah? Where does that annoyance come from? You see, I think deep down, for Jonah, maybe for most of us, we think that some people deserve to be saved more than others.

Jonah thought, well, these are the people of Israel. They're God's people. They deserve to be saved more than inovates. And we can't just, that's not just Jonah being racist or anything.

But we feel that as well often. We look around people, and we see you think, well, this person is such a good person. Wouldn't it be great if they became a Christian? And actually think it, and we almost have, you know, preferences, and it would be great if this person became a Christian.

I don't care that much about this person. I don't even like them anyway. Maybe, I don't really mind if they don't even hear the Gospel. We might say that everyone is a sinner, that no one deserves salvation.

[15 : 02] But our thoughts in our hearts will often say otherwise. And Jesus illustrates this brilliantly, and what is known as the parable of the prodigal son that we read earlier. It's that famous parable about the two sons, the first son, the first son, the first son, the first son wants his father's stuff, but he doesn't want the relationship.

And so he says, I want my inheritance now, and he runs away, doesn't he? And he squanders all his father's stuff. But then wonderfully, he turns back. He comes back to his father, his father forgives him, and reinstates him as his son.

And that, the father represents God. And we naturally think about this first son. Because it's a wonderful picture about repentance and forgiveness. About what happens when we as people repent and come back to God, that he forgives us, that he welcomes us into our family and adopts us as his children.

That's the good news of the Gospel. But we often, but actually the second son is also important. You might say that if in chapters one or two, Jonah was a bit like the first son in running away from God.

In chapter four, Jonah is like the second son. The second son who is waiting outside, and when the younger son comes in, and when he sees the younger son reinstated, and there's a party held for the younger son, he's angry.

[16 : 24] He's angry because he says, well, let me just read it. The older brother becomes angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. He said, and he answered his father, look all these years, I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

You never gave me even a young goat that I should celebrate with friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.

The younger son's problem is that he takes his father's stuff and disregards his father. The older son thinks that he deserves his father's stuff.

That's what Jonah's like. And that's sometimes what we're like. We think that somehow we deserve God's mercy. We deserve God's love.

Or we think that some people, other maybe if we're not talking about ourselves, we think some people deserve it more than others, and some people maybe don't deserve it at all. That's Jonah's attitude.

[17 : 24] That some people deserve God's love more than others. And we see this come out even more in Jonah's second anger episode. Let me just mention this bit briefly. If we look again at verses 2, we look again at verses 5 to 9.

So Jonah goes out of the city. He sits outside the city waiting for a fire and brimstone to come down. He makes a little shack for himself. Clearly it's not a very good shade. So God makes a plant grow up over him to give Jonah some shade.

And we read that Jonah's exceedingly glad because of the plant. I mean, you get this wonderful contrast, don't you? At the beginning, we read that Jonah is exceedingly angry that Nineveh is saved.

Now Jonah's exceedingly glad just because of this plant that gives him shade. Jonah's pretty fickle, isn't he? Jonah's the one who's upset, thinking that God's a bit messed up.

Really, Jonah who's messed up. People being saved from death make some want to die, but a plant giving him shade makes him overjoyed. You know, Jonah's been the one that's accusing God, saying that God is unfair.

[18 : 31] How can God have mercy on some and not on others? But actually what God now exposes is that it's Jonah who's messed up. It's Jonah who's got wrong priorities.

It's Jonah who's completely misunderstood mercy, not God. You know, and God, and we see that even more God causes a worm to come and kill the plant. And Jonah is once again so upset he would rather die.

Jonah cares more about the death of this plant than he does about the potential destruction of this entire city. It's Jonah who really doesn't understand God's mercy.

It's so quick to, isn't it, to say that God is unfair, and who he saves and who he doesn't? Actually, Jonah's the one who's exposed that. Once we put ourselves in the place of God, actually our hearts are exposed just like Jonah in those split priorities.

Jonah cares far more about a plant than he does about whole city. Jonah had his first anger episode because he didn't like God showing mercy on some people. He has his second anger episode because he doesn't like God withholding mercy from him.

[19 : 41] And here we see why Jonah is ultimately angry. In the end, it's not because of, well, it's not because of who God shows mercy on. Jonah doesn't like that God's in charge of showing mercy.

Jonah doesn't like that God is sovereign in salvation, that God is the one who directs his mercy where he will. In some ways you might say Jonah wants to be in charge of that. Jonah wants to say to God, no, these people deserve mercy.

These don't. This is who you should save. This is who you shouldn't. Which is ironic because of the last line of Jonah's prayer in chapter two is that salvation belongs to the Lord.

Does Jonah really believe that? Does Jonah really believe that God is in charge of salvation? Now we're saying salvation belongs to the Lord doesn't mean that we just let go and let God do evangelism.

Rather, it reminds us that when we go out with the message of the gospel, it's God who makes the seed stick. As we scatter the gospel, it's God who has mercy to open hearts to cause the seed to land on good soil for people to receive that gospel.

[20 : 48] It's God who gives the harvest. And that leads to our second point. You might say, well, if God is the God of salvation, if salvation belongs to the Lord, if his mercy, if God has mercy in the right way, then can we trust him with it?

If God, can we trust God with his mercy? That brings us to our second point. Not just are you angry like Jonah, but are you compassionate like Jonah? But are you compassionate like God?

Wonderfully, God is nothing like Jonah. God truly cares for the Ninevites, not because they have done something or they deserve his compassion. And we're now looking at verses 10 and 11, because we see the reason for God's compassion here.

And we read it again. And the Lord said, you pity the plant for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also much cattle?

Now we read that. We think, what's going on? It sounds like the start of a bad joke, a plant, some Ninevites and some cattle walk into a bar. But the answer, what connects all three of those is actually very simple.

[22 : 06] They're all created by God. They're all God's creatures. God has compassion on Nineveh because he made them. It's the lesson that we were talking about with the kids just beforehand and the children's talk.

Jonah cared about the plant because it gave him shade. It did something for him. You could say it was almost a selfish compassion. God cares about the Ninevites and the cattle and everything else because he made them.

There's no other ulterior motives. God has compassion because they're his creatures. And there's even a hierarchy in God's creation. Do you notice God says to Jonah, you pity the plant.

How much more should I pity this city of 120,000 people? It's not just about numbers. It's about the fact of their people. The Bible says that people aren't just any old creature that God has created.

God has made humanity in his image. He's made us to have relationship with God. He's made us with a family likeness to God. We're created to be with him, to be like him.

[23 : 15] And the fact that God has compassion on us because he has made us means that you and I have immense worth. And that's something that we need to hear. That's something, that's a message that is, we really need to hear, especially in this society, in this climate that we're in.

Because we live in a society that looks for value and worth in so many other places. That looks for value in what, what can I do in my health? Our value is in what, what we're able to do.

And our society often will look down on the aged, on the disabled. People will feel pretty rubbish about themselves when they feel they can't do what they used to be able to do.

Value is placed in lifestyle. Are you a good person? Are you a good person? It's, some people are lauded over others based on, on what they have done in their life maybe.

Or in work, are you successful? Value comes from someone's work. Why do people find it so hard? In certain jobs, when they don't get the respect they deserve or they lose their job, it's partly because value comes from what we do.

[24 : 23] Or maybe what we look like. Society places value or no value on you. Based on what you look like, whether that's in beauty or in race. And we can go on.

There's so many ways in which society gives us standards about our value. The Bible is wonderfully refreshing. It tells us that we have value because we are created by God.

He has compassion on us. He cares about us because we are created by Him. You know, that kind of value system of society drives people into anxiety. Because you're, you're trying to, well, you're, because we're consumed by worrying about what we're like, what we can do, what we look like.

The kind of value system where our value is based on our health. That's what trends towards euthanasia, which the Scottish government is trying to pass right now.

If life is all about what we can do, then what value does a person have if they're immobile? If our value is on, is based on the fact that God has made us, then that changes everything.

[25 : 33] That gives us immense comfort. That gives us immense worth. Our value is in the fact that God has made us. God has compassion on an individual, not because of anything they've done, but because He has made them.

We don't need to worry that God is in charge of salvation because He is a compassionate God who cares for His creation. He's not like waiting around the corner to, to smash us in judgment.

Rather, He's waiting with His arms outstretched like the Father in the parable of the prodigal Son, waiting to welcome us home, holding out His hands to that second Son saying, come in.

Stop being angry and come in. He's waiting to forgive and He's done everything that's necessary so that we can be forgiven in sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, taking our sins so that we can once more go back to God, so that once more we can be friends with God, we can be family with God.

If you aren't trusting Jesus this morning, do you realize that how much God cares for you? Do you realize that you are valuable even if, even if you're rejecting God this morning, you are still valuable and He cares for you because He made you?

[26 : 59] Can I encourage you not to hold Him at arm's length, but to come to Him? He holds out His arms like that Father in the prodigal Son.

Don't just stay at arm's length, the Father who values you as His creature, but come into His arms as His child, as His Son, as His daughter.

Now talking about how God sees the world leads us to the challenge about how we see the world. That's the big question we're left with, is that do we share God's compassion? Those of you who are Christians this morning, do we share God's compassion as we look out at the world?

How do we view the people around us? Do we view them the same way that God does, or the way that Jonah did? I hope we see people. I hope we see them as having immense value.

Here's the uncomfortable test though. Do we care about them more than a pot plant, if I can put it that way? Jonah cared about the plant because it gave him shade.

[28 : 03] He cared about the plant more than the thousands of people around him. What are the pot plants in our life, if I can put it that way? What are the things in our life that actually we care more about those things than the thousands of people who are going to a lost eternity every day?

I think if I look at myself, I think how much more I'm upset maybe about a phone breaking, a car breaking down, than about hearing someone has died.

Especially if it's someone I don't know. We need to ask God, we need to repent and ask God for forgiveness, for the ways in which we don't see the world like God does.

We don't have compassion like he does. We need to ask him to give us his eyes so that we'll see people with that immense value. He'll give us his heart so that we see people as having far more value than anything else.

And that will cause us to want to throw our lives into the effort, into the mission of making the Gospel known.

[29 : 16] We need to ask him to strengthen us, to share with other people the compassion of God.

I was going to share with you the story of William Booth who founded the Salvation Army. It's a bit late though. I'm not going to, I'm not going, but I can, I'll share you a little bit of it.

William Booth was the founder of the Salvation Army and in one of his sermons he illustrates really powerfully just how we should see the world. Let me read a little bit of it to you.

I saw a dark and stormy ocean. Over it black clouds hung heavily through them every now and then a vivid lightning flash and thunder rolled while the winds moaned and the waves rose and foamed, towered and broke only to rise and foam, tower and break again.

And in the ocean I saw myriads of poor human beings plunging and floating, shouting and shrieking, cursing and struggling and drowning as they cursed and screamed and rose and shrieked again and then some sank to rise no more.

[30 : 21] I saw after this dark, angry ocean a mighty rock that rose up with its summit towering high above the black clouds that overhung the stormy sea. And all around the base of this rock I saw a vast platform. On to this platform I saw with delight a number of poor struggling, drowning wretches continually climbing out of the angry ocean.

And I saw that a few of those who were already safe on the platform were helping the poor creatures still on the angry waters to reach a place of safety. And looking more closely I found a number of those who had been rescued, industrially working and scheming by ladders, ropes, boats and other means to be more effective to deliver the poor strugglers out of the sea.

Here and there were some who actually jumped into the water regardless of the consequences in their passion to rescue the perishing. And hardly know which gladdened me most, the sight of the poor drowning people climbing onto the rocks reaching a place of safety or the devotion and self-sacrifice of those whose whole being was wrapped up in the effort of their deliverance.

As I looked on I saw the occupants of the platform were quite a mixed company. They occupied themselves with different pleasures and employments. But only a few of them seemed to make it their business to get people out of the sea. But what puzzled me most was the fact that through all of them, though all of them had been rescued at one time or another from the ocean, nearly everyone seemed to have forgotten all about it.

In any way it seemed the memory of its darkness and danger no longer troubled them at all. And what seemed equally strange and perplexing to me was that these people did not even seem to have any care. That is an agonizing care about the poor perishing ones who were struggling and drowning right before their eyes.

[32 : 01] Many of whom were their own husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, and even their own children. Now this astonishing unconcern could not have been a result of ignorance or lack of knowledge because they lived right there in full sight of all and even talked about it sometimes.

Many even went regularly to hear lectures and sermons in which the awful state of these poor drowning creatures was described. I've always said the occupants of the platform were sometimes engaged in different pursuits and pastimes. Some of them were absorbed day and night in trading and business in order to make gain, storing it up in boxes, safes and the like.

Many spent their time amusing themselves with growing flowers on the side of the rock, others in painting pieces of cloth or in playing music or in dressing themselves up in different styles and walking about to be admired.

Some occupied themselves chiefly in eating and drinking, others were taken up with arguing about the poor creatures who had been already rescued. And then he says a bit later on, my friends in Christ, you are rescued from the waters, you are on the rock, he is in the dark sea calling to you.

To come and help him, will you go? Look for yourself, the sea is surging, the surging sea of life crowded with perishing multitudes, crowded with perishing multitudes rolling up to the very spot where you stand.

[33 : 25] Look, don't be deceived by appearances, men and things are not what they seem, all who are not on the rock are in the sea. Look at them from the standpoint of the great white throne and what a sight you have.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through his spirit is in the midst of this dying multitude, striving to save them. And he is calling on you to jump into the sea, to go right now to his side and help him in the holy strife. Will you jump?

That is, will you go to his feet and place yourself absolutely at his disposal?

Brothers and sisters, our God is gracious and compassionate. Do we share his compassionate heart? Let's pray.