

## **"Discovering The Truth About The Compassion of God"**

In J.I. Packer's foundational book, *Knowing God*, he opens his chapter on the love of God with this: "*St. John's twice-repeated statement 'God is love' (1 John 4:8,16,) Is one of the most tremendous utterances in the Bible and also one of the most misunderstood.*"

If that was true when he first wrote the book in 1973, it's certainly true now. There was a time when almost everyone believed in God and in the justice and judgment of God and sometimes, they found it difficult to believe in the love and the compassion of God. Clear biblical teaching about the love of God came to people as wonderfully good news. In today's world, many people, if they believe in God at all, are quick to just assume God loves them and wants them to be happy. They're also likely to think of the love of God as something completely free of anything the culture or the person might find confrontational or uncomfortable. Current cultural views of the love of God have often been sentimentalized. Because of this, if you tell people God loves them, they are often not impressed. They're not surprised. They're not deeply moved. But we should be absolutely stunned by the reality of God's compassion for us and the world in which we live. That's one of the central themes of the book of Jonah. It is the focus of these final verses. In **Jonah 4:11**, God asks: *should not I pity Nineveh*. The book of Jonah begins in **Jonah 1:1** with God's saying that the evil of Nineveh had come up before him. In the end, he asks, *should I not pity Nineveh that great city? God wants us to understand his compassion.*

*One thing He shows us about his compassion is how purposeful it is.*

### **I. THE COMPASSION OF GOD IS PURPOSEFUL.**

It is clear in the story that God has compassion for Jonah, but God is also working purposefully to change his heart.

**Jonah 4** begins with Jonah being angry with God because God has not judged the people of Nineveh. They had repented. God showed them grace. That's what God loves to do. But Jonah was angry. **Jonah 4:5** says: *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.* Jonah storms off to see if God is going to get his act together and destroy Nineveh, like he said. He goes outside of town, builds a little shelter, and waits. But it's hot. The world is hot, and Jonah's heart is hot. He's an angry man in a hot world, so he's miserable physically and emotionally. **Verse 6** says: *Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.* You could read this and think that because God takes the vine away in the next verse, God was just setting Jonah up. But that's not the case. **Verse 6** is very clear. The reason God provided the vine was *to save him from his discomfort*. The word "discomfort" is the Hebrew word *ruah* again. It can mean difficult things on the outside, like exhausting heat. It can also mean difficult things on the inside, like a bitter heart. Here, it suggests both. There is also a play on words in **verse 6**. The key Hebrew words sound similar. In English, it would be something like: *God provided the shade to help him shed his misery.* He's as hot on the inside as the desert is on the outside, so God shows him compassion, and the compassion has a purpose.

### **A. Sometimes God's compassion comforts us for the purpose of helping us by leading us to repentance.**

The end of **verse 6** says: *So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.* But the implication is that - that was it. Jonah was glad because of the plant but it didn't change his heart toward God.

Sometimes, we sin against God outwardly or inwardly, and God goes on blessing us. When that happens, too often, instead of rethinking how we are doing, we go on in pride and even in presumption. Maybe we think God's blessing proves that he doesn't care about that thing

that's questionable, or worse. Maybe we even think blessing means that we're right after all. There's an interesting question in **Romans 2:4**. The Scripture asks, *“Do you presume?” “Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”*

Sometimes, God may be showing you kindness, not to affirm you in your attitude but to soften your heart so you will repent and change. It's possible to be, like Jonah, glad for the comforts God provides you while oblivious to the lesson he wants to teach you or the changes he's working to bring about in you.

What happens if we are glad for the good things God gives us, but we don't soften our hearts and repent of our sins?

### **B. Sometimes, God's compassion for us takes away our comforts for the purpose of changing our hearts.**

Sometimes God wrecks the vine and sends a hot wind. **Jonah 4:7-8** says: *But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup>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.”* You see God's sovereignty, His control over all that happens, throughout this story. The same God that provides the vine provides the worm and the scorching wind.

That does not mean God has lost his compassion! What is God doing? C.S. Lewis said: *“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”*

Jonah wants his own will. When he doesn't run away from God, he drags his feet. When he doesn't understand, he gets an attitude and sulks off in bitterness and anger. Is it possible that some of us, maybe all of us, some of the time, are a lot like him? What does God do?

Christian psychologist David Powlison wrote a book titled *God's Love, Better Than Unconditional*. What he points out is that while God's love is certainly not conditional in the sense that we have to earn or deserve it, it is actually something much better than unconditional.

Unconditional love, as a lot of people think of it, begins and ends with sympathy, empathy, and unquestioning affirmation.

He writes:

Imagine yourself as a parent, watching your child playing in a group with other children. Perhaps you are observing your child in a nursery or a classroom, or on the playground, or in a soccer game. You might accurately say that you have unconditional love for all the children in the group. That is to say, you have no ill will towards any of them; you generally wish them well.

But when it comes to your own child, something more goes on. You take much more notice of your own child. Injury, danger, bullying, or injustice arouses strong feelings of protection—because you love your child. If your child throws a tantrum or mistreats another child, you are again aroused to intervene—because you love. 1

When the Bible speaks about the love of God in passages like **Psalm 121** or **Isaiah 49**, it speaks of the Lord *watching over* us and *caring for us*. How we are doing and what we are doing matters to God.

Would you stop and consider and even give thanks that God is actually watching and caring for and committed to developing and deepening your life with him. That is a good thing both for this life and the life to come. But that means that some of the difficulties and discomforts you face are part of his purposeful compassion. They are sent by a God who cares too much to leave you alone. That changes how you think about your life and how you handle what you go through. If you've given your life to God in Christ, if you're his child through faith in Jesus, then God isn't going to leave you or give up on you, but he isn't going

to just let you go your own way without his intervention, his correction, his purposeful compassion.

*You can find strength and have faith because the...*

## **II. THE COMPASSION OF GOD IS WONDERFUL.**

The word *wonderful* is sometimes overused, but it fits perfectly when we're speaking of God's compassion. The compassion of God is big enough to melt our hearts and warrant our trust. Look at **verses 9-11**: *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. <sup>11</sup> And should not I 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?"*

*Notice two things. First,*

### **A. There is a wonderful breadth to God's compassion.**

**Verse 11** again: *And should not I 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?"* These people, the sinful people of Nineveh, I have compassion on all of them; I even have compassion on the animals.

**God has compassion on the spiritually clueless.** When **verse 11** talks about people who *don't know their right hand from the left*, it's using a figure of speech that Jonah would have understood. Multiple times in the earliest books of the Bible, this idea of the right and the left is used to describe knowing right from wrong, knowing the wisdom and the word and the commands of God. In **Deuteronomy 28**, God promises to bless the people, and he says, in **verse 14**, I will bless you, *if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.* **Joshua 1:7** *Only be strong and very courageous, being*

*careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go.* There's a principle of divine judgment that says God's judgment takes into account the light or the revelation of God that you've received. Period now, this doesn't get anyone completely off the hook. Romans One says that we are all without excuse. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (**Romans 3:23**). But it does mean that it matters. God says as he looks at these Ninevites, who had not received the level of revelation that Jonah did, and he pitied them in their lostness.

One thing this means is that we who call ourselves Christians - who believe we are enlightened by the Spirit of God and given the word of God to guide us - should look at the world around us in its lostness and not just be angry, but we should have compassion. We see in the culture around us a profound lostness. Without the recognition of the God who made us for himself and his revelation in his word and in Jesus, we were groping in the dark. Our culture has lost its foundations for human flourishing, virtue and morals, and even relationships. As God's children, we should discern things correctly and speak the truth clearly, and yet we need to do all of that with compassion. Just reflect on how much of the ministry of Jesus and how much his most convicting words were aimed at religious people who were self-righteously condemning the sinners in their culture while being blind at the same time to their own deep selfishness and self-righteousness. God says he sees these people trapped in their own sinful ignorance, and he has compassion on them. Jonah was lacking in compassion.

***God has compassion not because sin is insignificant but because his heart is gracious.*** The background for Jonah was that if the people of Nineveh had not turned from their sins, God would have judged them. There came a time later in history, in another generation, when God did judge them. The central theme of the book of Jonah is the steadfast love of God, but we are only stunned by the reality of the steadfast love of God when we see what a wonder it is that he offers it

to us. Because we're all like the Ninevites whose evil deserved God's judgment. That's what God was teaching Jonah, and that's what he is teaching us through the story of Jonah and the Ninevites.

Can you, like me, see some of yourself in Jonah? It is so like us to be exceedingly glad over our comforts and really angry about our discomforts, and in the midst of being wrapped up in our comforts and discomforts, we can be embarrassingly indifferent to all the lostness around us. What do you think about the thousands of people in our community who, spiritually speaking, don't know right from left? People all around us are living under the threat of God's ultimate and final judgment while we're excited about Costco coming to town or a new restaurant opening up - like a vine to save us from discomfort. Meanwhile, we get angry because someone hurts our feelings.

Yes, God wants us to see the breadth of his compassion, but he wants it to see us from the perspective of people who know; as **Romans 5:8** says, *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* That doesn't mean that sin is no big thing. It means it was such a big thing the only way God could save our souls and be just and righteous was to come into our world and go to the cross and lay down his life for us. He did it because of the breadth of his compassion. *God so loved the world*, as big as it is, as bad as it is, with you in it and me in it, that he sent his Son to be the savior of the world.

God hates our sin. He hates the sin in us, and he hates the us that's in our sins, but he loves us in spite of all that. He loves us as those whom he has made in his own image. He loves us because of who he is not because of who or what we do or are. Don't deny the reality and seriousness of God's judgment, but right next to it, place this reality: the reality of God's compassion.

In fact, in verse eleven, God tells Jonah that he even cares for the cattle. God is saying, *“Jonah, you were grieving over the loss of a plant. Animals are more precious than plants, and people are more*

*precious than animals. I even care for the animals. How much more do you think I care for the people created in my image?"*

*There is wonderful breadth to the compassion of God. And...*

### **B. There is wonderful depth to God's compassion.**

You see that in God's question to Jonah. *Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city?"* The word translated *pity* is a Hebrew word that can mean: "to shed tears." One commentator writes, *"In these final words of the text, we are left with the image of the Lord being moved to tears of compassion as he looks on the ignorance of Nineveh."* 2

This image of God with tears of compassion is an image we find again on the pages of the New Testament Scriptures. When Jesus came to the city of Jerusalem for the last time. **Luke 19:41-42** says: *"As He approached Jerusalem, he saw the city and wept over it and said: If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace -- but now it is hidden from your eyes."* He looked at that city and wept with compassion.

Of course, in the end, Christ not only shed tears for us, He shed his blood for us and gave himself in our place to pay for our sins. He died for people like Jonah, angry, hard-hearted, and self-righteous, and he died for people like the Ninevites, who were sinfully and spiritually ignorant. He rose again because this tearful compassion of Almighty God is a triumphant compassion that will ultimately triumph over all sin and wipe away every tear. He offers his forgiveness, redemption, His presence now, and eternal life forever to everyone who is willing to trust in him.

## **CONCLUSION**

Throughout the book of Jonah, we have seen two main things: on the one hand, God is showing compassion to Jonah, and at the same time, God is working purposefully to teach compassion to Jonah. That's what God does in our lives, also. He shows us compassion, and He teaches



us compassion. Trust in the compassion he is showing you. Learn the compassion he is teaching you. Build your life on trust in the compassion of God. Live your life for the purpose of sharing his compassion with others.

**Amen**

## **A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ,**

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. You are the risen Savior who has conquered sin and death. Save me and change me by your grace and compassion. I can be as wicked as Nineveh and as blindly bitter as Jonah. So I thank you that you have not only shed tears of compassion but, in compassion, your precious blood to redeem me and renew someone like me in grace and mercy. I confess my sins and turn from them to trust in you alone as my Lord and Savior. Amen

## **A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal**

O God, our Heavenly Father, help us to see your care at work in the comforts and discomforts of life. Demonstrate your persistent patience with us as you work to transform us into the image of your Son, our Savior. Forgive us when self-centeredness absorbs us, blinds us, and hardens us so that we neither see our own resistance to your Holy Spirit's teaching nor share your compassion for those around us who, just like us, struggle in this broken world. Help us to be thankful instruments of your peace and your compassion. Amen

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1 Powlison, God's Love, Better than Unconditional, Pages 3-5

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2 Rosemary Nixon, *The Message Of Jonah*, p 200.