Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

From about 900-700 BC, the super-power in the Ancient Near East was Assyria. And Assyria is particularly infamous for its torture and killing methods. I read an archaeological article about this during the week, and just the first page was enough for me; they were a barbaric people! Well, Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. And Jonah was sent there to warn the people that judgment was coming if they did not repent of their wickedness. And you will remember that the first time he was called to go there, he refused and ran in the opposite direction and was swallowed by a fish. But as we saw in ch. 3, the second time he was called to go there, he did go, and he called on the people of Nineveh to repent and they did.

Well, as we come to ch. 4, it will help us to look again at the repentance of the people and the King in ch. 3. And I want you pay attention to a particular word that is repeatedly used in the last few verses of ch. 3. In Hebrew, the word is ‘*ra-ah*.’ It means evil or anger. So what I am going to do is to read from the second half of 3:8 through 3:10 and use the word *ra-ah* instead of how it is translated in English. So the King said, “*"Let everyone turn from his ra-ah and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from His ra-ah, so that we may not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their Ra-AH, God relented of the RA-AH that He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it*.” OK? So the people stopped being *Ra-ah* and God was no longer Ra-ah. That’s how ch. 3 finishes.

So now listen to how ch. 4 begins: “*But this RA-AH Jonah with a great RA-AH*.” Do you see the contrast being made here? The Ninevites had put away their evil/anger, God was no longer angry, but Jonah was very angry!

And why was he very angry? V1 tells us: “*It displeased Jonah*,” meaning that God had showed compassion to the people of Nineveh was why he was very angry.

Well, what we will see as we consider this chapter together is that ultimately this was a wicked and sinful anger. And we will see that it is a wicked and sinful anger that we can easily fall into as well. But we will also see how patiently God dealt with Jonah to teach him a lesson in Gospel compassion. And all of this will bring us to the reason that the Book of Jonah is in the Bible. And I know this will sound like what is a hot button political issue at present, but the question that the story of Jonah asks is, **Whose Lives Matter**?

And we will get there by looking at **Jonah’s angry Reaction** and then at **God’s patient Response**.

1. So first of all, Jonah’s Angry Reaction.
   1. As we have already established, Jonah was exceedingly angry that God showed compassion to the people of Nineveh. And he said so, in his prayer, in vv2-3: “*O 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 are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and relenting from disaster*.” Now, this is the second time we read a prayer of Jonah in this short book. The first one was in chapter 2. And if you were here when we looked at ch. 2, you will recall that we called that prayer **a mixed-bag prayer**. It contained biblical truth about God and salvation, and it expressed thankfulness for deliverance, but there was no confession of sin or recognition that others, like the sailors Jonah had just been with or the people of Nineveh, needed saving too. So it was a very Jonah and Israel-centric prayer. And this second prayer of Jonah is another mixed-bag prayer.
      1. Again, there is biblical truth in Jonah’s prayer. For Jonah is bang on in how he describes **God’s character**. In fact, he basically quoted **Exodus 34:6**, which is where God revealed Himself to Moses as “*a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*.” So Jonah had correct knowledge about God’s character.
      2. And think also about King David. You will remember that he committed adultery and arranged a murder. That’s serious sin! And he repented but there were still consequences – his baby son died and there was turmoil in David’s family thereafter. So in Jonah’s mind, no consequences for Nineveh would be a joke. It would make God out to be a God of cheap grace. How could there be consequences for David but not for Nineveh?
      3. And Jonah also knew that God had sent prophet after prophet to the people of Israel, for over 150 years, calling on them to repent and obey His commandments. And through the prophets, He had warned them, again and again, that if they refused to repent, He would allow them to be invaded and sent into exile. But Israel had *not* repented. Yet here in Nineveh, after one small sermon!, the King and the people of this sadistic super-power had repented, and would therefore not be destroyed by God. So Jonah could see where this was headed; he knew that it would just be a matter of time before Assyria invaded Israel as the instrument of God’s judgment. And he knew what horrors the people of Israel would suffer when that happened. So Jonah’s anger was in part a concern for his own people.
   2. But do you see where Jonah went wrong? **He was** **putting himself in the place of God**. Jonah thought he knew best and that God had lost control; that he understood the circumstances better than God did; that this situation couldn’t possibly be just or advance God’s salvation plans. In short, Jonah was not prepared to let God be God, and to believe that God “*works all things together for the good of those who love Him*,” as it says in Romans 8:28. I said a moment ago that Jonah had correct knowledge about God’s character, as can be seen from his quoting Exodus 34:6. But it is one thing to quote Bible verses, and it is another to *believe* them and *live according to them*. Jonah said, “*I knew that you are …* ***slow to anger***.” And yet, despite ‘knowing’ that God is slow to anger, when He saw God’s slowness to anger in relation to the Ninevites, it made Jonah furious. And this, people of God, was doubly wicked:
      1. It was wicked, first of all, because Jonah’s prayer in ch. 2 basically added up to, God, I know I deserved your anger, but you showed compassion to me and delivered me from death, therefore I am sooo happy! But here, in relation to the Ninevites, Jonah was furious that God is slow to anger. Do you see the inconsistency?
      2. And secondly, God’s great promise to Abraham was that by him all the nations of the world would be blessed. But up until now, God’s saving grace had been focused almost exclusively on the Jews. So this could have been the moment that God began to extend salvation out into the nations. But Jonah didn’t want a bar of it! In his mind, the Jews deserved God’s blessings but the Ninevites did not. But you know your OTs. Were the Jews a wonderful, obedient people, who deserved God’s blessings? No they were not! So Jonah didn’t understand or was forgetting that salvation is by **grace**. And grace is undeserved favour. No one deserves anything from God, because we are all sinners.
   3. Well, Jonah was so angry about this situation, as we see in **verse 3**, that he asked the Lord to take his life! He said, “*It is better for me to die than to live*.” And he said the same in v10. And I hope I *say* this and that you *hear* this as carefully as possible, but suicidal thoughts like these are what can happen when we and our circumstances become big and God becomes small. Brothers and sisters, young people and boys and girls, God never loses control. And you must preach this truth to yourself when you are in desperately difficult circumstances. God never loses control. He always works all things, including *tough* things, for the good of those who love Him. Do not ever despair of God’s sovereign love for you. As the hymn-writer put it, “The clouds you so much dread are big with mercy and shall break with blessings on your head.”
   4. So in v4, the Lord challenged Jonah’s attitude and basically said, “*Is it right for you to be angry about this?*” But Jonah just went outside the city, built a kind of a shelter, and sat there, “*till he should see what would become of the city*.” And congregation, this is the full wickedness of the human heart on display in a prophet of the Lord! His sermon in Nineveh was, “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown*.” So this was Jonah setting himself up in a stadium seat, convinced that his anger had shown God the error of His ways and that God would see sense and rain down fire and brimstone or whatever else to destroy Nineveh, while Jonah was watching. All that is missing from this picture is popcorn and coke!
   5. And so, Jonah revealed himself to be a person who was **full of passion but lacking in compassion**. We read of another example of this in the NT. In **Luke 9**, after the people of a town refused to receive Jesus, James and John said to Jesus, “*Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*” And you can see them, rubbing their hands together, with eager expectation at heavenly fireworks! But Jesus, we read, “*turned and rebuked them*.”
      1. And the fact is, brothers and sisters, that we all fall into this sin at times, to one degree or another. We are all for God being slow to anger toward us and our sin, but there are some people we would like Him to whack when they sin. Can you recall thoughts like that? I am sure you can.
      2. But there are also some people in whom this is a serious and repeated problem. This is like their default mode. Could this be you, perhaps? Are you like Jonah and those disciples? Are you a person, to use a modern idiom, who is ‘full of spit and vinegar’? These are people who are genuinely passionate about theology and holy living, as Jonah surely was. They can quote commandments and proverbs, left, right and centre, but things like love, patience, kindness, and gentleness, fruit of the Spirit, mind you, do not seem to be very important to them at all, and they just crush others with their zeal.
      3. Earlier in the service we read these words from **Ephesians 4:31 - 5:2** say? “*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*.”
      4. So, because of God’s compassion toward you in Jesus, are you full of compassion? Are you slow to anger? Are you gentle? Are you forgiving? I know that you can only forgive a specific sin if someone confesses that sin to you, but do you have a forgiving, gentle, kind, compassionate **attitude** toward the person who gossiped about you, borrowed something and never gave it back, falsely accused you of something, or the teacher who brought your precious child to tears, or the abusive parent who hurt you when you were young? Do you hate bitterness and anger and pursue the same compassion that God has shown you in Christ? Are you quick to flee to God in confession when you sin like Jonah sinned?
2. Well, the root of the word RA-AH is actually ‘**hot**.’ And I am sure you have heard an angry person described as getting hot under the collar. Yes? So what that means is that in v4, God literally said to Jonah, “*Do you do well to be hot*?” And heat will be a big part of what unfolds in the rest of the chapter as we consider God’s **Patient Response**.
   1. And before we begin to look at the details, I want you to imagine yourself as a parent, and you are talking to one of your children who is behaving like Jonah; just throwing a first class, self-absorbed, hypocritical, angry pity party. How might you be inclined to deal with said child? I know what I will be thinking! I will be thinking that it is time for the board of instruction to meet the seat of knowledge, if you know what I mean ☺ Right?! Or, at the very least, I will deliver the line made famous by Greta Thunberg, “How dare you!” and then launch into a long lecture about ungratefulness and hypocrisy, etc. But there is none of that with God here, is there. Instead, we see again that the Lord truly is slow to anger. He would have been perfectly in His rights to smack Jonah around the head for being an uncompassionate, racist, unforgiving, hypocrite. But instead He carefully and patiently teaches Jonah (and us) a powerful lesson in Gospel compassion. So let’s see how He did this.
   2. As I said a moment ago, heat plays a big part in what unfolds here. This was the Ancient Near East and it would have been extremely hot in the Sun. And so, in v5, Jonah built a shelter from the heat of the Sun. And in v6, we read that “*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*.” And this is the second time that we see the Lord **appointing** something in the story of Jonah. The first time was when He appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And in v6 God appointed a worm to attack the plant, and then in v8 He appointed a scorching East wind so that the Sun beat down and fried Jonah’s head. And all of this is **a vivid picture of God’s sovereign control of the universe**. Whether it is a great fish or a plant or a little worm or a wind or the Sun, God controls it all!
      1. In v6, God is referred to as the **LORD God**. And the only place in the Bible, before this one, that God is called the LORD God in this exact form, is creation, when God spoke all things into existence out of nothing. So the author of this Book wants us to know that this God is the God of creation power!
      2. But Jonah was oblivious to this reality. He liked that the plant grew, he disliked that the worm ate the plant, but there was no thanking God or considering God. And congregation, aren’t we, so often, just like Jonah in this? The Sun sets, the sun rises, the leaves blossom and fall, and food appears on the table. Yawn! Whatever.
   3. So once again, in v8, Jonah asked to die. But God said to Jonah, “*Do you do well to be angry for the plant?*” And Jonah, who was still in a state of spiritual depression, said, “*Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die*.” But the Lord said to him, “*You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being at night and perished at night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?*”
      1. Now, some people take the reference to **120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left hand** to mean very young children. But that seems to be a romantic notion that associates infants with innocence, and how could God destroy cute widdle babies. Generally speaking though, those who don’t know their right hand from their left hand is OT terminology for Gentiles who did not know the law of God; who had no access to God’s special revelation. And that reinforces just how important the Bible is for correct knowledge!
      2. But the major point here is that while Jonah was, in a sense, able to be happy with the plant one moment and angry with the plant the next moment, because he did not make the plant, God made the people and the cattle of Nineveh. So God had every right to show compassion to them.
      3. And unsurprisingly, because He is God, we see this **same compassion in the Lord Jesus**. At one time, we read, “*When He saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*.”And even though Jesus knew that the people of Jerusalem would reject Him and cry out for His crucifixion, another time He said, “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!*” So Jesus had compassion for an *unrepentant* people while Jonah had no compassion for a *repentant* people! Again, what a contrast! How wicked of Jonah!

Well, that brings us to the end of the Book of Jonah. And you will notice that we read nothing about Jonah’s response to God’s question. And that is because the Book of Jonah was included in the Bible to test the response of other OT Jews who read this story, to see if they were angry like Jonah or compassionate like God. And it was included to test your response and my response to the story of Jonah. So here is the big question that the Book of Jonah asks of us: **Whose Lives Matter**?

* I don’t know if you have a garden at home, but if you do, how would you feel if someone trampled on a flower in your garden? That will make some people furious!
* Or perhaps you really like your car. How would you feel if someone parked next to your car in the car-park and opened their door and whacked it into the side of your car? That would make some people, myself included, furious!
* Or what about cruelty or neglect of animals; how does that make you feel? What lengths would you go to if you walked past a house and saw an animal in pain?
* So now this question: **How do those feelings compare with your compassion for the lost**? Does it really upset you that many of the human beings in your neighbourhood or on the train with you or at work or at a school, will spend eternity in hell if they do not repent?
* Could it be that you are more like Jonah than you care to admit?
* You see, if you have benefited from God’s compassion, and you don’t tell others about this God of compassion, then you are just like Jonah. As a mixed-bag, sinful human being, whose sins have been forgiven in Christ, the spiritual destiny of every other mixed-bag, sinful human being should concern you. Local evangelism and overseas missions should be important to you.

And that’s where we must finish: The Lord has had compassion on you. Do you show compassion to others? Amen.