

# Now That's Compassion

By Don Green

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**Truth Community Church**  
4183 Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road  
Cincinnati, OH 45255

**Website:** [truthcommunitychurch.org](http://truthcommunitychurch.org)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm](http://www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm)

Well, if you were with us last week, you know that we have started an exposition in the book of Jonah, the Old Testament so-called minor prophet, one of the 12 minor prophets as they are known, perhaps better known as the book of the 12 would be a better designation for them, the 12 prophets that form together a very significant portion of God's word. I invite you to turn to Jonah with us here this morning.

We introduced the book last time and we are going to continue with another word of introduction today before we get into the exposition of the text more fully in the weeks to come. There is just so much of the groundwork that I want to lay for us here as we contemplate what God's word would have for us here today, and let's look at the first three verses once more just with that in mind. Jonah 1, beginning in verse 1,

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." 3 But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Now, as I was contemplating the preaching of this book, I was very mindful of a necessary reality in that whenever probably any of us think about the book of Jonah, we immediately associate that book with the swallowing of Jonah by the great fish that is described in Jonah 1:17, and that's understandable. That is a great magnificent event in the history of Scripture, so significant that even Jesus used that to point to his own death and resurrection and so that is no small matter and certainly it's understandable that we would gravitate toward a story like that because it is so outside of our experience to think that a man was swallowed by a fish and lived within the belly of that fish for three days and three nights. So I get that. I get the fact that for some of us that were involved in children's ministry very early in life, the story of Jonah was one of the prominent things that was taught to us and that story of the great fish was repeated and so it's inevitable that we would have a perspective like that on this book but, beloved, what I want you to see today, today we pivot away from that. Today as a church, today together, we pivot away from that characterization of the story to see, to appropriate, to embrace the greater purpose, the great message of the book of Jonah and what it is ultimately, truly and

finally all about. The fish was a means to another end. Jonah's ministry was a means to another end. The book of Jonah tells us something great and significant and strategic about the nature of God and that is what we need to set our focus on. We will come back to this theme again and again as we go through the book of Jonah but today I want to devote a particular message upfront to the start of it so that we would in the weeks to come hear and process everything from the perspective that the book of Jonah intends us to learn.

And what is that perspective? That perspective is the nature of the compassion of God. The nature of the compassion of God and to set the full context for this, we need to again deal with a little bit of introduction. We saw the first three verses and we saw in verse 2, we saw the Lord telling Jonah, his prophet, "Go to Nineveh, the great city." Well, that raises a question right from the start: who were the people of Nineveh? Why would Jonah resist going to them? Why would God send his prophet outside the bounds of the physical geographic kingdom of his people to a foreign land? Why would he send him to a foreign city? Why would he send him to these people in particular? That's what I want to address here today and what you're going to find as we deal with this great magnificent theme of the compassion of God, is that you're going to see that you see a foretaste of the ministry of Christ, you see a foretaste of what motivated Christ to come to the earth for sinners, you're going to see a foretaste, you're going to see the veil pulled back and get a clear pristine view of what the true character of God is toward lost and sinful people.

So to do that, we're going to set some historical context today. I'm going to give you some history information here today that is vital to understanding this. It all sets the stage for everything that is to come, but we need this historical context to understand why Nineveh was significant, why Jonah didn't want to go there, and what it tells us about the transcendent nature of the God of the Bible. That's what we want to do here today. We'll break it into two parts here this morning. First of all, I want to show you God's compassion on a divided people. God's compassion on a divided people and here we need to start at the center point, we need to start with where Jonah was when God came and spoke to him and sent him to Nineveh, and to do that we need to spend just a little bit of time to refresh your memory about some basic aspects of biblical history.

The nation of Israel, as you know, was united and flourished under the reigns of King David and King Solomon and those were the glory days of Israel, but when David died and Solomon became king, Solomon built the temple, Solomon was known for his great wisdom but a really bad thing happened, Solomon you read in 1 Kings 11, turned to foreign women, turned to idols, and turned his back on all of the blessing that God had given to the nation and led them astray, and as God had warned him, his love for foreign women led him astray spiritually, and as you continue to read in 1 Kings 11 and 1 Kings 12, you realize that there were consequences for that of great lasting significance. God punished Solomon's disobedience by bringing about a division of the kingdom when his son Rehoboam took the throne after Solomon died, and we're not going to go into all of that, I'm just presuming a basic familiarity of those facts in your mind and just want to refresh you as we prepare for our exposition of Jonah.

There was a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. The northern kingdom had 10 tribes of the 12 sons of Jacob. The northern kingdom had 10 tribes and it was called Israel. The southern kingdom consisted of two tribes, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and that southern kingdom was called Judah. So you had Israel to the north, Judah to the south.

Now, as you read about the different cities, you read about the different kings and you go through reading through 1 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles, 2 Kings, all of that, you read through the prophets, I sympathize if you find it very difficult to keep all the different factions and tribes and geography straight, to keep all of that straight in your mind. It's enough for our purposes today to remember a really simple and basic fact, that from the time of the division of the kingdom till the time that the people were carried off into exile in 722 BC, it's enough to know that the Bible declares that all of the kings without exception of the northern kingdom of Israel were evil wicked men who continued in the ways and the sins of their forefathers. These were an unworthy people. These were a disobedient people and throughout the course of their rebellion, God sent his servants, the prophets, to call them to repentance, to expose their wickedness, to call them back and yet they refused and they persisted and even as their kingdom gradually declined over time, they did not repent, they did not turn back to God in the northern kingdom but they continued in their rebellion all the more. They were a picture of the deep-rooted nature of sin. They were a picture of the deep-rooted nature of sin even in some of you here this morning who can somehow, it can only be explained in the darkest of spiritual terms, somehow can continue in sin and rebellion and rejection of Christ even when mercy is all about you in the proclamation of the Gospel, in the word of God that you hold in your hands, in those who lovingly call you to repentance, for some of you young people who have the blessing of having been placed in a Christian home with parents who love you and bring to your mind the things of God. We ask how could a kingdom continue in sin like that over centuries while they rejected the pleadings? Well, look around. For some of you, look into your own heart and ask the same question. How can you continue like that? It's really not a rhetorical question. How can you do that? We see the enslaving power of sin, we see the deadness that we have in Christ, we see how dead and spiritually lost we are when we reject all of those extensions of grace, those offers of grace that come in a sincere way from a good and gracious God. There is a whole kingdom of people like that, that mirror the same spiritual attitudes that are found, sadly, in some of you here this morning.

Now, what is God's response to that is the question of the moment. The people were divided. This northern kingdom was wicked and Jonah was a prophet to these northern people and what was God's attitude toward them? What did God do in the midst of history in that time surrounding the nature of the ministry of Jonah? Well, look back, we looked at it last week, look back at 2 Kings with me for just a moment. 2 Kings 14 where as we said last time, there is a lesser known passage that refers to our prophet Jonah here, and in 2 Kings 14:23, you get a little bit of the historical context of the ministry that Jonah conducted in their midst. In 2 Kings 14:23 we read, "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah." So he's placing this brief history about an episode in the northern kingdom, he places it in context by referring to the reign of a king

of Judah and that's how Scripture does this, it'll set the kings in context of the ministry and the reign of, better stated not in the ministry but in the reign of the king in the other nation. So that's what's going on here. It says during the reign of this king of Judah, here's what happened in the northern kingdom of Israel.

So verse 23 with that little bit in mind, "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and reigned forty-one years." Samaria being a unit within the northern kingdom of Israel. He reigned for 41 years, notice that because that's going to be important in just a moment.

And what does it say about this king Jeroboam, the second king who carried that name? Verse 24, "He did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel sin." So he did evil. He was a wicked man. He was not a godly man. He did not depart from the sins of his forefathers and yet there's this interesting statement about what happened during his reign of 41 years, it was actually a time of national prosperity, of national expansion for the northern kingdom of Israel. Look at verse 25, speaking about what Jeroboam II did. In verse 25 it says, "He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah," if you look at a map, you'll see the kingdom was expanding to the north and to the south, "according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher."

Now why would the Lord do that? Here's the question, here's the question: why would God send a prophet to his wicked people? On what basis do they deserve that when they're an evil sinning people like that? On what basis, I ask you, my friends? On what basis would there be prosperity attending to their national life under those circumstances? Why expansion of national prosperity? Why a prophet in their midst? Why such stability of a 41 year reign of a king when he was evidently undeserving of it? It can't be, it can't be because of any intrinsic merit in those who were the recipients of the blessing. It can't be because of any merit in the citizens. The Scripture explicitly disclaims that in this passage and in the whole context of its record of the history of the northern kingdom. You see, these tensions are real and these are no minor abstract questions about a people who lived long ago that no one really remembers today, except in times like this where we call it to mind. None of you have been thinking about this this past week, I would venture to say. So why do we even care? What does it even matter what was happening there 2,700-2,800 years ago? Well, the reason that it matters, as you look at the Scripture, is that it tells us something about the nature of the eternal unchanging God that they experienced that kind of blessing in the midst of their spiritual destitution.

Look at this in verse 26. What happened to this unworthy people at that time in their history? Verse 26, "For," Yahweh, "the LORD," all caps, "saw the affliction of Israel, which was very bitter; for there was neither bond nor free, nor was there any helper for Israel." He had compassion on them. He saw that their affliction was bitter and God brought blessing to them of a temporal nature even though they didn't deserve it because he had compassion on the bitter nature of their circumstances. What kind of God is like that, I ask you? What kind of God shows compassion to people who are rejecting him?

This is the tension of Scripture. This is the tension of any serious contemplation about the nature of the world in which we live. It is the nature of the tension which says how can a man be just before a holy God when he brings no righteousness of his own to the table.

Verse 27, "The LORD did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash." I detest the dryness of my eyes when I read a passage like this. I feel it inside but I detest the dryness of my eyes when I read a passage like this, and it should move you as well to realize that in the midst of their rebelling against him, the Lord had compassion upon them. The Lord sent them a king who brought deliverance of a temporal nature to them, brought prosperity and stability to them, 41 years he reigned. He was a man of some natural human ability to be able to do that and it was during that reign in the midst of a disobedient king and a disobedient people that Jonah ministered and there were still signs of compassion of God upon them even though they were guilty before him.

Now I ask you again, beloved, why would God do that? Why not send judgment upon them immediately in the midst of their sin? Why show this favor to them? I repeat myself for the sake of emphasis. It was not because there was anything deserving in them. It was not because God owed them mercy, that God owed them this window of kindness. It was not because of their deserving that God did not forget them. It's because that's who God is. The Lord had mercy on Israel's affliction despite their long history of disobedience. Jeroboam, the kings, expanded the kingdom, gave them security. What I want you to see is this, beloved, this is really really really important if we're going to understand the book of Jonah together in the days to come, if we are going to know God for who he really is, we need to grasp and understand something like this: that when Jonah was ministering, that's what the surrounding culture, the surrounding nation was like, a long history of unbroken disobedience.

So what can we say in the midst of that? God gave undeserved favor to his people through the ministry of Jonah the prophet. That, beloved, is compassion. That's compassion. That is grace. That is undeserved favor being shown to a disobedient people and it begs the question as you contemplate this, you realize that the question screams for an answer: why would he do that? If you measure it by human merit, there is no reason for that. If you measure it by standards of human justice, no one would do that. Why would God do that? Beloved mark it, mark it, this explains why there is a Gospel of Jesus Christ to be proclaimed. Why would God do that? It's because it is his nature to be that way, because God intrinsically inherently is good and compassionate toward undeserving people.

Let's look at some things from Scripture to reinforce this in our minds. Look at Psalm 145. Let's look at verse 6. Let's slow down here and contemplate the character of the God who is before us in his word here this morning. Psalm 145:6, speaking to God, speaking to the Lord as you see Yahweh in verse 3, in verse 6 it says, "Men shall speak of the power of Your awesome acts, And I will tell of Your greatness. They shall eagerly utter the memory of Your abundant goodness And will shout joyfully of Your righteousness." And what is that righteousness like? What is the holiness of God? What is an aspect?

Where do we see it reflected as the great white glory of his being hits the prism of the explanation of Scripture and shatters into a great multitude of colors to be seen in greater richness in their individual wonder? Verse 8, "The LORD is gracious and merciful; Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The LORD is good to all, And His mercies are over all His works." He's good to all. Even those who are in rebellion against him, God is still good to them. The God of love, the God of mercy, the God of sovereignty still shows his good faithful favor even to men who won't give him the time of day.

We are reminded of that in the words of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 5. Turn back there with me, if you would. Matthew 5. Jesus is explaining for his disciples the implications of the law of God. He says in verse 43 as he quotes from a passage from Leviticus, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" He's referring to a Scripture text, yes, but it had been perverted in the days of the Pharisees, that loving your neighbor meant that you could hate your enemy and Jesus is reversing their false perversion of what the Lord taught and he says in verse 44, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," verse 45, why should you be that way? "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven," what does he do, "for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." He shows faithful indiscriminate good upon the inhabitants of the earth. He doesn't just send sun on his people, he doesn't just send the refreshing necessary rains for a harvest on those who belong to Christ, those who worship him, he does that act of goodness also for those who despise and reject him. He gives this unprompted generous goodness out of the compassionate nature of his own holy heart.

That's who he is. That's what he does, beloved. That's what God does every single day throughout all the earth. Let's banish from our minds any thoughts of God being stingy, God being unkind. Let's think biblically about the nature of things and realize that it is God's nature to extend goodness even to those who reject him. This is striking. This is critical to understand when you think it all the way through. This is a word of hope to those who are lost in sin; that there is an ear in heaven that would hear them when they cry out for compassion, when they set aside their rebellion and call out in spiritual bankruptcy, "God, have mercy on me, the sinner! God, have compassion on me! God, help me!" And in an unreserved call of humble faith, to know that the God who has been compassionate on wicked people before is the same God now and will receive that prayer for mercy in a sense of compassion.

Look at Acts 14. Remember, we're kind of expanding out, we're explaining an aspect and answering ultimately the question of why would God send Jonah to Nineveh. Well, to understand that we've got to have some kind of sense about the nature of what his character is like even toward pagan nations. Acts 14:16 reads, "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Even as the nations were going their own way, God showed them a common grace. God showed them a temporal mercy and allowed them to enjoy the fruit of their labors, to enjoy good meals, to enjoy the seasons of life for their hearts, for their bellies to be full, for their hearts to be full of a sense of

joy in the circumstances that they found themselves in, and Scripture declares that they enjoyed that goodness even as they rejected the God of the Bible. They enjoyed that as a result, as a gift from the good hand of God.

Look at it again in verse 17, "He did good," not the nations. "He gave you rains from heaven. He was satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Oh, do you realize, beloved, those of you who I am desperately tempted to name by name in the room today, but I won't because I don't do that. Do you realize that as you reject and break the law of God with your sinful life, with your indifferent cold heart toward his word and toward Christ, that you are not only sinning against his law and violating that, that you are sinning against incomprehensively good compassion and kindness which you have experienced every single day? That's really bad that your heart would be that perverse, that twisted to harden yourself against a God who day by day by day is showing you this kind of goodness and compassion. There is no excuse for that. That's the reality of it and Scripture says that that brings consequences; that God does not treat that lightly. While he continues to show this kind of grace and compassion day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, o individuals and two nations, and he gladly freely shows that compassion, beloved, the sin against that compassion, the sin against that kindness is storing up wrath, is storing up judgment.

Look at Romans 1:21. Well, let's go back to verse 20. The context, as you know, is the wrath of God against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Verse 20, "since the creation of the world," since the creation of the world, throughout all of time there has never been a moment where this has not been true, "His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks." They joined with the nine in Luke 17 that we read about during our Scripture reading, they went on their way, they received the benefit, they received the gifts of God, they went on their way, they never came back to worship and return thanks. Instead of that, instead of doing what they should have done, "but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures." They give to primates the worship that they should give to God. They ascribe to primates their origin when it actually came from this God who sustains their life and gives them breath.

And in verse 3 of chapter 2, Paul says, "But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?" Do you think that you can escape a final accountability for this blasphemy of life against the goodness and compassion of God, do you think that's possible? Do you think there will be no accounting? Do you think that? What do you think the outcome of that will be?

Verse 4, "do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience," how much of your sin God has tolerated and overlooked to bring you to this point here

this morning. "Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" Why would God do that? Why would God bear with our iniquities and our transgressions and our sins? It's because he carries this compassion toward us, this kindness, this undeserved favor toward us, and in the midst of our rebellion in life as he continues to sustain us and allow us to enjoy the benefits of common grace, he comes and he brings the Gospel to bear upon us. "Repent and believe in Christ. Repent and believe in the Gospel. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in Christ that you might be saved." That's who he is. This is great unfathomable goodness and kindness toward undeserving people. This is who God has always been. It's who he is now. It's who he always will be in the sense that his character will never change.

So we see this played out through Scripture and we come back to Jonah, turn back to the book of Jonah with me now with that little excursion completed, go back to Jonah and understand this, understand looking at Jonah 1:1, that "The word of the LORD," this Lord of whom we have been speaking, "came to Jonah and said, 'Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it.'" All of this so far to set in your mind the fact that Jonah was living in the midst of a nation that had been receiving the compassion of God, had been on the receiving end of mercy from God in a temporal way, he was in the midst of a nation undeservingly receiving God's grace and God comes and says, "I want to send you to Nineveh." That's God's compassion on a divided people. God's compassion was surrounding what Jonah was doing there in the northern kingdom and as the king enjoyed success under the prophetic word of Jonah going forth, expanding Israel's borders, God's compassion was attending to what Jonah was doing and the people and Jonah were on the receiving end of it. That's what the background of the book of Jonah is. God's compassion on a divided people.

Now secondly, let's pivot and consider Nineveh for a little bit. God's compassion and point 2 we could define this way: God's compassion on a desperate people. God's compassion on a desperate people and we will probably talk about this a lot more in chapter 3. I just want to introduce this to your thinking now at the start to set this in your mind. Nineveh was a great city in the nation of Israel. We'll understand the city better if we understand the nation a little better. Assyria was one of the great nations of all of antiquity. Its center of power was located to the east of the Mediterranean Sea in the area now known as portions of Iraq and Syria, southeastern Turkey and northwestern Iran. Biblically speaking, Assyria is first mentioned in Genesis 2:14. Genesis 10 tells us that the man Nimrod founded the city of Nineveh. That brief discussion simply to give you a sense of the antiquity of the people that are involved in receiving Jonah's ministry.

Now as a matter of geopolitical stuff, the fortunes of Assyria rose and fell over the course of centuries. There is no need to trace that here except to say this to you. I could go into a lot of detail. I'm trying to keep this really brief so that we can stay fairly close to the text here. This is really important for understanding the whole book of Jonah and this is why we're spending just a little bit of time on it. It was the nature of world politics in the time prior to Jonah, and even during the life of Jonah, that the fortunes of Israel were inversely linked to those of Assyria. When Assyria was strong, Israel was suffering, Israel would



pay tribute to Assyrian kings. So when Assyria was strong, it was a time of suffering for Israel, generally speaking. In those times where Assyria was weak, Israel was free to pursue its own agenda without having to pay tribute to a foreign nation.

Now, what you need to know is that in the century prior to Jonah's ministry – stay with me here, this doesn't go on much longer – in the century prior to Jonah's ministry, Assyria was a nation that was flourishing. From 880 to 830 B.C., some 50 to 100 years prior to the time of Jonah, Assyria was strong and you can read about this in any book summarizing Assyrian history. But here's what happened, stay with me. Please, stay with me because this is really really important. What happened in the following 100 years is that there was a series of internal revolts within the nation of Assyria and the kingdom wasn't being weakened by their internal conflict. They were experiencing the biblical reality that a house divided against itself cannot stand and that period of weakness covered the time of Jonah's ministry. So keeping with what I said earlier, as Assyria was declining, Israel was gaining ascendancy once more. During the reign of Jeroboam II that we read about in 2 Kings 14, Israel is ascending. Why was that possible on a human level? Because Assyria was weakened, internally struggling, and during this time of decline, Assyrian military campaigns decreased and that gave room for the people of Israel to breathe, to expand, to enjoy a measure of prosperity in the outworking of the providence of God in the rise and fall of nations.

So as Israel was expanding, Assyria was weak and unable to stop it, unable to interfere. That little five minute summary provides the foundation for this very important statement if we're going to read and study the book of Jonah together and that's what we're going to do so we might as well hear this, right? It's in italics in my notes. As I say many times, it must be important because it's in italics. It was in the nation of Israel's interests for Assyria to be weak because when Assyria was weak, Israel could be strong, just speaking on a human level. It was better for Israel for Assyria to be weak. To say it another way, it was better for Jonah's people for Assyria to be weak. To say it another way, it was better for Jonah as a citizen of Israel for Assyria to be weak. And it's in that context that the word of the Lord comes to Jonah and says, "Go to Nineveh and preach." "Wait a minute, that's not what I want. I like the way things are. I don't want to carry the word of a blessing God to our natural enemies."

Now, one other aspect about this from the perspective of Assyria. The fact that the nation of Assyria was weakened nationally had a natural consequence for their internal life as a country. The fact that there was national weakness at the highest levels of Assyria had an internal impact. It meant that there could be little pockets of strength for leaders in smaller provinces, in smaller cities where men could grow and rather than being dominated internally by their national leadership, we think of being dominated by Washington, DC at a state or a local level, well, when the national leadership is weak, nature, politics abhor a vacuum and it gives opportunity for men to become strong in smaller realms within the bigger whole, and these smaller leaders, they were technically theoretically subject to the Assyrian king but they actually exercised great independence in their own realm. Think of a strong state governor if there was a national weakness in

Washington, DC, just to give you a sense of it. Nineveh was a city like that in the days of Jonah, a strong, a great city in the midst of a struggling kingdom.

Now, for those of you that have done any reading on Nineveh, on Jonah, some commentators will say that Nineveh was at the time of Jonah the capital of the entire empire. That's really not accurate. Nineveh became the capital city of Assyria after the events of Jonah and that has impact on the way that we'll think about chapter 3 down the road. Here's what I want you to see: Nineveh was a great city in a time of otherwise decline in Assyria, a great city in a time of national decline. So in God's timing, now we can pull all of this together, in God's timing he sends his prophet into a weak and struggling nation but to a city that is experiencing generally speaking some strength. Jonah is sent outside his borders. Jonah is sent as a missionary on an international outreach but there's another aspect here of the history that I want you to hear, another aspect of background that is uncontested history that informs our understanding of the book of Jonah, which gives us a sense of perspective on the nature of the God who sent Jonah at this particular time. In God's timing, he sent Jonah to a people even in Nineveh who were desperate. God in his providential timing had prepared them to hear a message of judgment at a time at which they would repent under the sound of it.

One writer says this about the history of it and listen to me carefully here. Just stay with me just a little bit longer. I'm almost done with the whole message here and I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose you here, I don't want to see your soul lost to Satan in hell forever either. He says if Jonah came to Nineveh between the year 770 to 750, which is the window of time in which we see his ministry taking place as shown by the date of the king of Israel that we looked at earlier, listen to this, this is so cool: Jonah would have found the populace psychologically prepared to expect a total catastrophe. A serious plague had befallen the city in 765. A total eclipse of the sun had taken place on June 15, 763, which to the ancient mind was a sign of judgment. Another plague had followed in 759. Right at the general time in which Jonah was sent to Nineveh, the city was being decimated by plagues, the city had seen what they would have interpreted as a supernatural sign in the skies that they were about to be judged. Plague being not only a sign of physical weakness and death, but being a sign of judgment itself. A total eclipse being a sign of judgment itself. And it's at that time that God sends Jonah to Nineveh. God knowing full good and well what he was going to do, full good and well what the outcome of that ministry would be.

You say, "Why would he do that? God has his own people. He's got the Jews. Why would he even care about Assyria, that pagan nation that in times of strength were a great wicked people? Why would he do that?" Look at chapter 1 with me again, chapter 1, verse 1. Why would the Lord come to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me"? Why would he do that? Do you see the problem here? Do you see the struggle to understand? Their wickedness has come up to God, they are decimated, why would God send his prophet to them? They're not part of the covenant community. What's the point of this? Jonah rebelled. Jonah took a ship going the opposite direction because he preferred their weakness. He preferred to see their judgment take place. And do you

know what God preferred? This is one of those times where if I was strong enough, I would flip the pulpit to make my point. Do you know what God preferred in that historical context? God preferred to show compassion on a desperate people. God preferred to see their repentance rather than their judgment.

Look at Jonah 3:10. You know the story. We're skipping over most of it here this morning. We'll come back to it in the future. Jonah 3:6. Jonah was preaching judgment 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown, Jonah 3:4. And what happened? Verse 5,

5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. 6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes [symbols of repentance]. 7 He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. 8 But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. 9 Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."

You know what God did. Verse 10,

10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

1 But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.

He saw the city repent and he said, "Lord, that is exactly what I knew you would do! I knew that would happen, that's why I went away! I didn't want to see these people repent!" And in his narrowness of heart, aligned himself with the national interest of his people rather than the purposes of God.

So the question is, then, here as we are here today, why did God do that? Why did he not see it Jonah's way because Jonah is one of his own covenant people, right? Right. He says it in verse 11, he says,

11 "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

He had compassion on the distressed. He had mercy on an undeserving people. Jonah was a forerunner in that sense of Christ, except Christ did it gladly, did it willingly. He saw distressed people who were like sheep without a shepherd and he felt compassion upon them, Matthew 9. God 700 years before that statement was made about Christ had that same compassion on a foreign city, desperate guilty of sin, yes, but in desperate straits and God said, "I will have compassion on them. I will show them favor they don't deserve. It will please my kind heart to show goodness to them." Beloved, that is compassion. That is what God is like and it's the same God that comes to us in the Gospel of Christ.

Go back to the passage that I opened our service with, Romans 5 and see it again, beloved. See it again. Romans 5:6, "while we were still helpless," while we were desperately dead in sin, while we were desperately guilty, while we were desperately under looming judgment, spiritually bankrupt, dead, unable to call out to God for help, "while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates," he manifests, he shows forth, "His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Do you see it, beloved? The same love and compassion that had mercy on you and saved your soul, if you're here in Christ today, the love and compassion that motivated God to have mercy on you in your state of desperation, was the same love and compassion that motivated him to have mercy on an entire city 2,700 years ago.

God had compassion on a desperate people then, when you called out to him for mercy in response to the Gospel because you were a lost and helpless sinner, God had mercy and compassion upon you as well. It's not by works. We have nothing to boast of. We have nothing to claim credit for. We are on the receiving end of undeserved mercy and compassion. It pleased God to do that for us, it pleased God to do that on an entire city 2,700 years ago.

Now that is compassion. We as Christians should give thanks. We as Christians should respond with a sense of worship, of adulation to this great God who had that kind of mercy on us. When we were equally undeserving, when we were equally outside the promises of the covenant, when we were equally outside the sound of the Gospel, God brought someone in a human way to present the word of the Gospel to you so that you could believe in Christ and you could be saved. That's the only reason we're here today, the compassion of God on unworthy sinners.

So we give him thanks. Maybe you're here convicted of your own sin, perhaps you think that your sin is too great to call upon, your sin is too great to be forgiven, that's not true. You see, it is the nature of God to have compassion on sinners who realize their sin in one sense is too great to be forgiven. It's too great to be worked off. There is nothing that you can do. Your life is like Humpty Dumpty, broken and cannot be put back together again. Sin has shattered any hope of righteousness that you might have before a holy God. But don't think your sin is too great to be forgiven. If you think that, you haven't yet seen how great the compassion of God is on sinners just like you. Jesus said, "The one

who comes to Me, I will never cast them out." Prostitutes came and wept at his feet and cleaned his feet with their hair and he forgave them. The cheating tax collector named Zacchaeus repented and found full forgiveness and a full entrance into the kingdom of God, Luke 19.

This is what God does. This is what Christ does. This is why he came. He came to bring forgiveness to undeserving people like you and like me. It's not too late. You are not beyond his compassion. As long as you have breath, God is offering you free full forgiveness grounded in the death and resurrection of Christ, guaranteed by his unchanging compassion, and he calls you to repent and to believe in Christ that you might receive it. That's hope. That's mercy. Don't reject it. Respond while there is time.

Let's pray.

*Father, we are grateful to you for the love and mercy of Christ. We have a sign, we have a signature moment in history seen at the cross of Calvary that puts your compassion on full display, that puts your love on infinite unchallengeable grounds. Christ died for the ungodly. Christ died for sinners. Christ died for us. We who are your people, Father, respond in worship. We thank you for this mercy that we know that we did not deserve and we honor you as the great holy God of compassion and we pray for those under the sound of our voice who are still outside of Christ. Father, may the love of God, may the kindness of God that has been on full display from your word here in this past hour, may that kindness of God lead them to repentance today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

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