

The Reluctant Prophet & the Great City: God for the City

Jonah 4:1-11

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on April 13, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ One of the most encouraging things that happens in the life of our church is our annual **Compassion Project**. Every spring for the last four years, we've identified social issues in our city and made intentional efforts as a church to raise awareness, mobilize funds, and rally people to action, to acts of compassion. So far we've highlighted the *homeless* in our city and *victims of human trafficking*. In the weeks to come, we'll focus on the most helpless on both ends of the spectrum: the *unborn* and the *elderly* (the very young and very old).
 - ▶ **Now this Project has been a priority because our mission as a church is to make God-loving and compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations.** It's that emphasis on being and making compassionate disciples that compels us to pursue these initiatives. We desire to love our neighbors as ourselves. As we seek our own salvation in Christ, we seek their salvation in Christ. As we long for God's peace (*shalom*) in our lives, we long for *shalom* to break in on their lives.
 - As we enjoy God's compassion in the way he has met our needs spiritually and physically, we want to extend that same compassion to our city by striving to meet its spiritual and physical needs. We want to help others and help each other become more compassionate disciples of Christ.
- ❖ Now these days, in many churches, it's popular to talk about compassion especially in regards to social issues. Some say that it helps attract people to Christianity when churches put emphasis on this. Talking about compassion resonates with non-believers.
 - ▶ But that's not always true. Some people actually reject Christianity because of God's compassion. I know that sounds strange. **But there are people in our city who reject the God of Christianity because he dispenses his compassion in ways that don't make sense to us.**
- ❖ No one objects when they're the recipients of God's compassion. And no one is offended when God calls us to extend that same compassion to the poor and needy. Mercy to the marginalized and victimized in society resonates with everyone. Everyone is down for social justice and mercy ministries.
 - ▶ **Everyone loves God's justice. Everyone loves his compassion. But, of course, that's assuming they serve our purposes and meet our expectations: When it's compassion for us and justice for our enemies.**
- ❖ But this morning's passage will challenge that. It's going to push the boundaries. It'll force us to ask: ***How will I react when God shows compassion to even my enemies?*** This is the real test of what it means to be a compassionate disciple. *Are you compassionate only on your terms? Or are you compassionate in the same way that God is compassionate?*
 - ▶ I think it's very attractive when a congregation is known for their compassion. I think a Compassion Project can go along way in adorning the gospel and commending Jesus to non-believers.

- ❖ But let's make sure we're preaching and practicing compassion on God's terms – a compassion that goes beyond the world's expectation. A compassion that extends to the least and greatest in society. And I'm not just talking about the least and greatest in wealth and privilege. I mean the least and greatest *sinners*.
 - ▶ Let's preach and practice a compassion that extends even to our enemies, to those we consider the worst, the most underserving of anything good from God.
- ❖ Friends, this kind of compassion has the potential to offend. It certainly offended Jonah. Let's finish the last chapter and see how he wrestled with God's compassion. I want to make two observations and then offer some applications.
 - ▶ **1)** I want us to consider Jonah and his frustration. We see him crying out for commonsense justice. **2)** I want us to consider God and his compassion. We see him crying for a wicked and rebellious city. **3)** I want to leave you with some applications for how to both show and grow in God's compassion for our city.

Jonah Cries Out for Commonsense Justice

- ❖ Let's start with Jonah and see him cry out for commonsense justice. But first remember the context. Our story began with Jonah being called to go and preach to Nineveh the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Jonah was to warn them of a coming overturn of the city.
 - ▶ But we saw last week how implicit in this warning is a sliver of hope. If the Ninevites heed God's warning and repent of their evil ways, if they experience a turnaround, then God won't cause an overturn. He'll do a turnabout. He'll show compassion.
- ❖ Now it's this very possibility that vexes Jonah. In his day, the Assyrians were the big, bad, imperialists bent on world domination. And Jonah was a Hebrew of Hebrews. We're first introduced to him in **2 Kings 14:25** where he's prophesying the expansion of Israel's borders during the reign of Jeroboam II.
 - ▶ **So for a prophet who participated so directly in Israel's expansion, the last thing he wants is to play a part in sparing the very nation that threatens the existence of his own.** So he ran. He fled in the opposite direction of Nineveh.
 - As the story goes, God has a unique way of bringing him back on track to preach that message of repentance to Nineveh. And at the end of chapter 3, we see the Ninevites do a turnaround and God do a turnabout.
- ❖ That brings us to chapter 4:1. "*But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.*" The Hebrew says, "it was exceedingly evil (*ra'ah*) to Jonah". *What was so evil?*
 - ▶ It's what we read in chapter 3:10, "*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil (ra') way, God relented of the disaster (ra'ah) that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*"
 - Now this is quite revealing: **When the Ninevites turn from their evil, God calls it good and turns from his anger. But Jonah sees their turnaround, and he calls it evil and he gets angry.** For Jonah, this is all wrong. This is a disaster.

- ❖ Then in vv2-3 Jonah says a prayer. This is his second prayer. Chapter 2, in the belly of the fish, was the first. Now if you compare the two, these prayers couldn't be more different.
 - ▶ In the belly, Jonah is thanking God for saving his life. But here he's asking God to take his life. In the belly, he's so thankful for the hope of God's "*steadfast love*" (2:8). It's an attribute worth praising. But now here he considers that same love as a weakness in God, as the reason why he let the Ninevites off the hook.
 - Jonah's dealing with the same God and the same steadfast love and yet ends up with totally different reactions. *Why? What's the difference?* The difference is that, in one case, Jonah considers the object of God's love to be deserving, namely himself. While in the other, the object (the Ninevites) is undeserving.

- ❖ Jonah's operating out of a worldview where there is no real surprise when moral, religious, upright, servants of God like him are shown compassion and steadfast love. It's to be expected. But it's a complete shocker (a travesty of justice) when God gives immoral, irreligious, wicked rebels the exact same thing. **Jonah is a strong proponent of commonsense justice. What goes around comes around. You reap what you sow.**
 - ▶ But here God's justice makes no sense to Jonah. This is all wrong. This is exceedingly evil! Jonah's furious. And that leads God to pose the question in v4, "*Do you do well to be angry?*" Are you justified in your anger? Are you right to feel that way? Now Jonah doesn't respond. Maybe he's giving God the silent treatment. But there's no doubt he thinks he's right to be angry. In fact, he thinks God's not angry enough.

- ❖ But here's Jonah's problem: He seems to forget that he was once a rebel who ran from God. (It was just a few days ago!) He seem to forget that God showed him mercy and relented from his fierce anger. **If God were to be as angry towards Jonah as Jonah is towards the Ninevites, then Jonah would've sank to the bottom of the sea.**
 - ▶ But instead, under the waves, he finds mercy. God delivers him from death with the help of a fish, and in chapter 2, Jonah can't stop thanking God for his mercy and steadfast love. But then suddenly he stops in chapter 4 when he sees that same mercy and love given to the Ninevites. "How dare you, Lord."

- ❖ The inconsistency is glaring, but I don't think he sees it. But let's be honest, do we see it in ourselves when we do the same? Just think with me. ***Personally, who would you consider an enemy?*** Maybe you have someone in mind. Picture that person. Or maybe you can't think of a specific person. Perhaps your enemy is more like a category of people – terrorists, racists, bigots, those on the opposite end of a political or ideological spectrum.
 - ▶ Who's your enemy? Now picture them standing before God and simply saying, "Sorry. Forgive me." And with that alone, God responds and says, "Yes". He turns from his fierce anger and relents. He doesn't bring down on their heads a cold, hard justice but instead a loving, gentle mercy.
 - What would you call that? Would you call it evil? Would you call it a disaster?

- ❖ Let's bring it back to our Compassion Project. It's not hard to feel compassion for the boys and girls enslaved in sex trafficking. We get that. We might even say they're deserving of compassion, of God's and ours.
 - ▶ But would you extend that same compassion to the pimps and johns who enslave and exploit these young people? Do you pray for their deliverance as well? And if they happen to receive God's mercy and turn from their evil, do you celebrate with them or do you look at them skeptically and question the genuineness of their repentance?
 - That's what Jonah did when he sat outside to the east of the city to see what would become of it. Maybe it's false repentance and judgment is still coming.

- ❖ **Friends, our problem, like Jonah, is that we prefer a God who operates purely out of commonsense justice. We're fine with that because, deep down, we think we stand on the right side of it.** That's called being self-righteous, right in your own eyes.
 - ▶ But if we take the Bible's depiction of the human condition seriously, then we have to deal with the fact that Scripture condemns us all. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). None is righteous; no not one (Rom. 3:10). **When it comes to justice, God doesn't stand with us against the wicked. No, he stands alone against all of us.** We are the wicked. We are on the wrong side of justice.

- ❖ That means I have no right to expect or to demand God to show me mercy and compassion, and I have no right to be angry when God shows it to someone I consider an enemy. Because if I'm a Christian, if I believe in the gospel, it tells me in **Romans 5:10** that while I was an enemy of God, I was reconciled to Him by the death of His Son.
 - ▶ *If I consider it a travesty that God shows mercy to enemies, to wicked people sinful to the core, then why should I claim that mercy for myself?* I shouldn't. Unless, of course, I'm still under the impression that I'm not wicked and sinful to the core.

God Cries for a Rebellious and Wicked City

- ❖ That's where Jonah is in v5. He's under that impression. He sees his anger as justified, and he sulks out of the city. The irony is if God were being fair, as Jonah wishes, then he would let Jonah go his own way and be done with him for good. But God's not done with Jonah because God is better than fair. God is merciful and compassionate, even to self-righteous prophets who like to wallow in self-pity.
 - ▶ God's going to use an object lesson to teach Jonah about compassion. Here's our second point. Here God reveals his heart for the lost. **Here we see God cry for a rebellious and wicked city.**

- ❖ If you look back at v5 it says as Jonah waits to see what would become of the city, he builds a makeshift shelter out of branches and leaves to avoid the scorching rays of the sun. But it's still not enough. He needs more shade.
 - ▶ So in v6, God appoints a plant. Scholars think this is a castor oil plant which has fairly large leaves. It provides the necessary shade, and it says Jonah is "*exceedingly glad*". There's finally a smile on his face the moment mercy starts blowing his way.

- ❖ Now notice how it says God gave him the plant “*to save him from his discomfort (ra’ah)*”. Again that’s the same Hebrew word used earlier for “*evil*”. I think there’s a double meaning here. On one level, God is simply shading Jonah from his discomfort. **But on a deeper level, God is saving Jonah from his own evil.** He’s trying to expose Jonah’s self-righteousness.
 - ▶ Notice what God does next in vv7-8, “*7But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. 8When 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.”*”

- ❖ So again Jonah expresses his desire to die just like back in v3. Same desire but notice different triggers. Earlier in v3, Jonah is disgusted when he sees God give mercy to the Ninevites instead of justice. “*Why are you being so compassionate to them? They don’t deserve it! God, you don’t make any sense. Just let me die.*”
 - ▶ But now here in v8, God dishes out pure justice with no mercy – just like Jonah wanted. He takes away the plant and scorches him with an east wind. And Jonah complains, “*Lord, why aren’t you more compassionate? I don’t deserve this. God, you don’t make any sense. Just let me die.*” He still doesn’t see his own wickedness. He still doesn’t think he’s sinful to the core. “*The Ninevites sure are. They deserve bad things to happen to them. But not me!*”

- ❖ In v9, God asks once again if he’s justified to feel so angry – this time over the plant. To which Jonah answers, “*Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.*” And then in vv10-11, the Lord shows the absurdity of Jonah’s overreaction and his lack of any compassion.
 - ▶ “*10And 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.”* In other words, Jonah you have so much compassion for this plant and you’re not even its creator. And you’ve only known this plant for a day. One day! And yet you’re up in arms over its destruction.
 - But I, God, am the creator of these Ninevites, and I’ve endured their wickedness with great forbearance for centuries. Nineveh is a really old city. It’s mentioned in Genesis 10. So this is a *how much more* argument. If Jonah has such pity for this plant, *how much more* should God have for this city?

- ❖ That’s what the Lord says in v11, “*11And 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?*”
 - ▶ **What’s interesting is that the word for *pity* literally refers to having tears in one’s eyes.** It’s used all over the Old Testament. Usually it’s telling the Israelites not to pity the one under God’s judgment (i.e. a Canaanite nation, a violator of the covenant, etc). It says, “*Your eye shall not pity them.*” “*Your eye shall have no pity.*” (Deut. 7:16; 13:8; 19:13, 21; 25:12) It’s always connected with the eyes. **It’s like saying don’t shed a tear for them.**

- ❖ So here God is saying he pities Nineveh. He's shedding a tear for them. The Lord is crying for their salvation. If you look v11, he highlights two more reasons why.
 - ▶ **First, he point to the sheer size of Nineveh.** God is so moved to pity because we're talking about 120,000 souls. 120,000 image bearers of God who are heading to either one of two destinations: eternal life or eternal condemnation. That's why he's crying.
 - **The second reason is because the Ninevites don't know their right hand from their left.** That's an idiom suggesting their spiritual confusion, their spiritual lostness. It's referring to their inability to make moral judgments. That doesn't lead God to overlook their wickedness, but it does move God to pity them in spite of their wickedness.

- ❖ **So this book ends quite dramatically. It ends with God weeping over a great city.** That's a unique image in Scripture. You don't see an image like that again until, ironically, you get to Palm Sunday, the first one, in the Gospel of Luke.
 - ▶ There you see Jesus riding into the great city of Jerusalem. **Luke 19:41** says he draws near to the city and begins to weep. There's another account where he overlooks the city and cries, "*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 were not willing!*" (Mt. 23:37)
 - **In Luke 11:32, Jesus actually describes himself a Greater Jonah.** Think about it: In our story Jonah goes outside the city to root for its destruction. But in the gospel, Jesus goes outside the city to rescue it (Heb. 13:12) – to accomplish its salvation by dying on a cross for the forgiveness of sins.

- ❖ God's tears for the rebellious and wicked find their ultimate expression in the cross of Christ. **At the cross we experience God's compassion at its fullest. He pities poor sinners like you and me and dies in our place.** He turns aside his own fierce anger and relents from bringing down judgment on our heads.
 - ▶ But in showing such mercy, in his willingness to relent and forgive the repentant, God in no way neglects nor violates justice. Because the gospel tells us that justice will always be served *in the end*. Evil and evildoers will never get away *in the end*.
 - **Because *in the end*, for every single person, justice will either fall on your head on the last day OR justice will have already fallen on the head of your Savior when he died on the cross in your place.** That's how God can be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

- ❖ *Friends, what will happen to you on that last day? Is justice coming for you or has it already been served through your Savior?* The book of Jonah illustrates beautifully that God is more than willing to forgive you, to show compassion and not condemnation. If you have yet to turn from your evil ways and receive his mercy and forgiveness, today is the day of salvation.

Applications for Churches for the City

- ❖ I'd like to conclude this series through Jonah by tying it back to our ministry theme for the year, which we're calling *For the City*. I picked Jonah as a book to preach because I saw related themes in it. So let me end by highlighting three ways we can both show and grow in God's compassion for our city.
- ❖ First, we have to **criticize the city with compassion**. Being discerning and critical of our city (of our culture) is necessary, but let's do it with compassion. That means neither enjoying it or avoiding it. You see God doing this with compassion. He sends Jonah into the city to call out the city for its wickedness, to warn them of coming judgment. But God does all of this with tears in his eyes.
 - ▶ **Some of us enjoy being critical**. We like to complain about what's wrong with society. We love pointing the finger at certain groups of people. If that describes you, if you can criticize the city without grieving for it, then you're not *for the city* in the same way God is *for the city*.
 - **But some of us are on the other end – we avoid criticism**. We avoid saying anything critical of our city, of our culture. We hate wading into controversy. But if that's you, that means you're thinking of yourself – you have compassion for yourself – but you don't have compassion for others because people need to hear the truth of God whether they like it or not.
- ❖ Second, if you want to have a compassion like God's, then **choose to live in the city**. Jonah is witness to one of the greatest revivals in history, and what does he do? He went out of the city and sat to the east of it to see what would become of it. In other words, Jonah fled the city. Instead of engaging it, he became merely a spectator of the city.
 - ▶ There are a lot of Christians who do the same. They drive around a big city like Houston and they say, "*Wow there's a lot of darkness in this city. There's a lot of brokenness. It's not safe here. It's not safe for my kids. It's not a good environment for them to grow up in.*" Some people flee big cities thinking they're fleeing a dark place.
 - But the darkness they're trying to flee is not in the city. Every time Christians flee cities to form communes and monasteries in the countryside, in the desert, on the mountaintops – every time they discover that the darkness has followed them to the countryside, to the desert, to the mountaintop.
- ❖ **Because the darkness is not in our cities. It's in our hearts**. Cities themselves are not evil. It's the people who reside in them that are evil. So instead of fleeing the city or merely being a spectator of the city, what if God were to raise up a generation that stays put, that chooses to live in the city and intentionally do life together as the church – as a city within a city – in order to shine gospel light into the darkened hearts of our neighbors?

- ❖ That leads to our last point: **Commit to loving your city**. God ends the book posing a question to Jonah, which is really being posed to his people in every new generation, in every new context. *And should you not pity Houston, that great city? Should you not shed a tear for your city?* Friends, if you want to be compassionate as God is compassionate, then that means loving your city.
 - ▶ This can happen in so many ways. Getting to know your neighbors. Babysitting their kids. Having them over for dinner. Volunteering at the school. Serving on boards. Coaching Little League. Or this could mean joining in one of our Compassion Project initiatives. Partner with Free the Captives. Come on an Elijah Rising Van Tour.
 - **Do all of this with the intent of following in the footsteps of our Lord who didn't stay put in the comfort and safety of heaven, who wasn't merely a spectator of humanity.** No, he chose to dwell among us, to move into our neighborhood, to intentionally engage us with love and gospel.