

Be Compassionate!

Jonah 4:1-11

Today is the last Sunday of our sermon series, “[And Are We Yet Alive?](#)” We’ve had time to find ways to revive and renew our lives, our church, our denomination, and even our nation through the messages of the Book of Jonah.

I’d like to remind you of the ways to revive and renew. We have to be fully obedient to God’s call, which is revealing God’s saving grace. We have to be prayerful. Before the outpouring of God’s blessing from heaven, God always leads His people to pray. We have to be repentant. Wherever there are repentant hearts of God’s people, there might be revival and renewal. Repentance is the very first station in our journey toward God’s Kingdom.

Last but not least, we have to be compassionate. Revival and renewal come when we reflect God’s compassionate heart toward the people around us. As we have experienced God’s compassionate heart toward us, God’s compassion has become our lasting mark as Christians.

What is compassion?

Compassion is one of the expressions (or dimensions) of God’s love in the Bible, with the others being grace, mercy, benevolence, and persistence (God’s long-suffering and patience). “**As a father has *compassion* for his children, so the Lord has *compassion* for those who fear him.**” (Psalm 103:13 NRSV). The Hebrew word for compassion is “**רָחַם**” (*raham*). Raham is translated as compassion or mercy in the New Revised Standard Version.

In today’s Scripture, Jonah poured out his antagonistic heart toward God without hesitation. “**O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.**” (Jonah 4:2 NRSV).

In Jonah’s harsh and bitter words, we can find insight into God’s mercy and compassion. According to Millard Erickson, “**God’s mercy is His tenderhearted, loving compassion for His people. It is His tenderness of heart toward the needy. If grace contemplates humans as sinful, guilty, and condemned, mercy (or compassion) sees them as miserable and needy.**” (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2013), 266). Why is God so gracious, merciful, and slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and relenting from punishment? It is because God sees the people in the world as miserable and needy due to their sins. The

people in Nineveh needed God's compassion and saving grace. Even though Jonah expresses his strong disagreement and anger toward God, his words still reveal the truth about God's compassionate heart, not only for the people of Nineveh but also for all people, including Jonah himself.

Let us think about God's compassion for Jonah.

From the beginning, Jonah didn't want to obey God's call to reveal God's saving grace to Nineveh. He knew God's compassionate heart, even toward the Gentile enemy of Assyria. Jonah's heart was not in line with God's heart.

When he was on a runaway ship, putting people in danger due to a fierce storm, he wanted to die. But God saved his life and guided him to meditate God's saving grace toward Jonah himself in the belly of a big fish. God was patient with Jonah.

Jonah was supposed to proclaim the message from God to Nineveh. But he proclaimed the message of judgment, not the message of repentance and salvation. "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed." (Jonah 3:4 NLT). God was patient with Jonah again. As Jonah himself cried, "God is a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment" (Jonah 4:2b NRSV), his understanding of God's compassion should've applied to himself first. He was a beneficiary of God's compassion. However, his anger toward his enemy seemed to be redirected toward God. Now, Jonah wanted to die again. "And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:3 NRSV). God said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 4:4 NRSV). What was Jonah's response? He didn't say anything to God and went out to the east side of the city. Jonah rejected and disrespected God. However, God's loving patience was not done with Jonah.

Jonah made a shelter for himself and waited to see what would happen to the city. He was expecting Nineveh's destruction. He was hoping for God's judgment on Nineveh. Even though he knew God's compassionate heart, Jonah didn't realize that he was surrounded by God's loving patience. His anger toward his enemy, his pride over Israel, and his frustration with God blinded his eyes and didn't allow him to clearly see what God was doing not only for Nineveh but also for Jonah himself.

Compassion is not a static word. Compassion is an action word.

Let us read the Scripture on the screen together. "The Lord God appointed a bush and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort, so Jonah was very happy about the bush." (Jonah 4:6 NRSV).

God's compassion never fails to see the needs of His people as some specific action is always carried out. God provided a shade for Jonah, who was disobedient and unruly.

The Greek verb for 'to have compassion' is “σπλαγχνίζομαι” (*splagchnizomai*) After this word in the New Testament, we always find action verb or verbs.

When Jesus raised a widow's son at Nain, he had a compassionate heart. “When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with **compassion**. “Don't cry!” he said. Then he walked over to the coffin and touched it, and the bearers stopped. “Young man,” he said, “I tell you, get up.” Then the dead boy sat up and began to talk! And Jesus gave him back to his mother.” (Luke 7:13-15 NLT).

When Jesus healed two blind men in Jericho, his heart was moved with compassion. “Moved with **compassion**, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.” (Matthew 20:34 NRSV)

When Jesus taught a great crowd, he was motivated by his compassion. “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had **compassion** for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.” (Mark 6:34 NRSV)

As you can see, Jesus' compassion is an action revealing God's saving grace from death, weakness, disease, and spiritual ignorance so that people can have a new life, new relationship, new beginning, and new direction.

On the following day, God removed the shade using a worm to attack the bush. With the sun beating down on Jonah's head, coupled with a scorching east wind, he was faint and wished to die again. “It is better for me to die than to live.” (Jonah 4:8b NRSV).

Like how Jesus taught a large crowd due to his compassion, God started to teach Jonah about His compassionate heart toward all people. God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” (Jonah 4:9a NRSV). Jonah was still angry and he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” (Jonah 4:9b NRSV). God was showing his loving patience toward Jonah unwaveringly and shared his compassionate heart for Nineveh. “You are **concerned** about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be **concerned** about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?” (Jonah 4:10-11 NRSV).

The Book of Jonah starts with God's call of Jonah. The first verb in God's call is "Arise." "Arise, go to Nin'evah, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." (Jonah 1:2 RSV). Jonah's heart was not after God's compassionate heart. That was the reason for his runaway. In the last chapter, God poured out His compassionate heart. The keyword here is "concerned." Jonah's concern was not the same as God's concern. Jonah's concern was for himself. However, God's concern was not only for the people and the animals in Nineveh but also for Jonah himself, Israel, and all the nations and tribes. Jonah's concern was for his temporary comfort. God's concern was for the eternal salvation, renewal, and revival of the people in Nineveh.

As the Book of Jonah closes with an open question from God to all of us, we must ask ourselves, "What are we concerned about? Is our heart in line with God's compassionate heart? Are we concerned about the people who do not know God and His grace?" God invites us to arise with His compassionate heart and proclaim God's saving grace to others.