

Cursing God's Compassion

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Jonah 3 and 4.

Jonah is angry in chapter 4. That Jonah is angry isn't so surprising – everyone gets angry sometimes – what's surprising is the anger's source. Jonah is not angry because someone has done him an injustice, Jonah isn't angry because something precious has been taken from him, Jonah isn't angry because someone has hurt someone he loves, no Jonah is angry because of God's compassion. Jonah is angry at God's compassion! In verse 2 Jonah tells God, "Take my life, it is better for me to die than to live!" Why? "Because you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." God you are compassionate and gracious and I can't take it anymore!!!

What's going on here? One thing for sure: this is a serious business. The description Jonah gives for God in verse 2 is not something he made up. Jonah is quoting a kind of Old Testament creed. When God revealed his back to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34 – remember I preached on that a couple of months ago – Moses saw "*The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God. Slow to anger and abounding in love.*" This is God's description of his character. Throughout the Old Testament prophets and poets use these words to sum up who God is. Psalm 103, Numbers 14, Nehemiah 9, Psalms 86, 111, 145, Joel 2 – they all call God: *The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God. Slow to anger and abounding in love.* Only they do it with favor. They think God's compassion is a good thing! Jonah sees it and says it makes him want to die.

Why? Because of Nineveh of course. After his famous false start, Jonah had finally overcome his fear; he had gone to Nineveh and announced God's destruction upon it. "Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" He had done his prophetic duty, and now he wanted action. Would it be fire and brimstone for Nineveh like Sodom and Gomorrah, would it be flood, pestilence, famine? Jonah couldn't wait for this city to get what it deserved. The fact of the matter is that no one in Jonah's day could stand Nineveh. No city inspired such anger, such revulsion. In the northern kingdom of Israel, Jonah's home territory, the animosity was particularly sharp. The Israelites had been tormented, threatened, killed, plundered, tortured, and marauded by Nineveh's armies. The Israelites hated this so-called great city. If you want a little taste of that hatred, read through Nahum one time. Nahum was a prophet who came on the scene a little later than Jonah, but he gives you a sense of how a typical Israelite felt about Nineveh. Here's a sampling: "*Ah city of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty – no end of plunder! The fire will devour you, the sword will cut you off. It will devour you like the locust. Your wound is mortal [O Nineveh]. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you.*" (Nahum 3:1,15,19) I think it's pretty clear how Nahum feels. He feels like Jonah! If God destroyed Nineveh they would clap their hands. They would applaud. So Jonah sits, on his little hill east of the city, under his vine. He's got his lawn chair out, he's got a lemonade in one hand and a bowl of popcorn in the other, and he's waiting for God to start the fire and brimstone show. But instead of brimstone and shouts of terror from the streets, he hears shouts of joy, he hears people singing. Instead of lamenting God's

judgment, they're celebrating God's forgiveness. "That's it!!" he fumes, "A little fasting, a little sackcloth and God overlooks 50 years of murder!!!" Jonah gets up and he throws down his lemonade, he curses the compassion of God and asks to die.

We think of compassion as a good thing, but there are kinds of compassion, given to certain kinds of people that we have a hard time accepting. Back in 1996 during a playoff hockey game between the Detroit Red Wings and the Colorado Avalanche, Claude Lemieux, an Avalanche forward laid a dirty check on Red Wing player Kris Draper. He hit him from behind in such a way that Draper broke his jaw and required something like 200 stitches to put his face back together. The Red Wings players and fans were enraged. Not only was it a dirty hit, it was Claude Lemieux who'd done it; everyone in the league knew he was a dirty player. The next year Claude Lemieux and the hated Avalanche came to Hockeytown to face the Red Wings again. The arena was electric. Everyone was on the edge of their seat, lemonade in one hand and a bucket of popcorn in the other, waiting to see what would happen. Sure enough, in the middle of the game, after Lemieux had laid a questionable hit on another player, Darren McCarty jumped on Lemieux and in time tested hockey fashion, threw off his gloves and started fighting him. This led to another time tested hockey tradition: the brawl. Every player on the ice started fighting one another. Six fights going on at once, including the two goalies, Mike Vernon and Patrick Roy. It was sweet revenge for the Red Wings fans. The evil Lemieux got the beating he so richly deserved. For those of you who aren't into hockey, this brawl has mythical status among Red Wings fans. It is universally regarded as one of the great moments in Red Wings history. Fans get misty eyed when they talk about how Darren McCarty pummeled Claude Lemieux. [I once rented a van down at a rental place on South Division and inside the rental office the guy had an original photograph, blown up to 8x10, of the two goalies fighting in that brawl. It was signed by Mike Vernon. He beamed like a proud parent when he talked about that picture. He told me that someone once offered him \$2000 for it.] But now, instead of Darren McCarty jumping on Lemieux, imagine that Claude Lemieux had come into the Red Wings dressing room before that game and had apologized for what he'd done. Imagine that before the game the PA announcer had said, "*Attention everyone. Claude Lemieux and Kris Draper have made their peace and so there will be no need for any revenge or booing or nasty talk here today.*" What do you think the crowd's reaction would have been? I think there would have been a lot of booing and a lot of anger.

You see there are different kinds of compassion, and most kinds of compassion are well-accepted. Everyone's in favor of Compassion for innocents. Helping homeless children. Protecting young victims of abuse. Everyone is in favor of that. Compassion toward innocents is universally accepted. So is compassion toward friends and family, toward the people from our circle. They may not be innocents – some of them may be a long way from innocent – but they're our people! If they are in trouble, we help them. No one gets angry at compassion shown to family and friends. But in this passage God is showing a different kind of compassion. He is showing enemy compassion. God is showing mercy to enemies, to oppressors. Now God is showing compassion to killers, and there are plenty of people who object to this sort of thing.

Jonah's not the only one, He is joined in his anger by the prodigal son's older brother. He's furious with his dad for showing compassion to his wayward brother. He's joined in his anger by the full-day workers in the parable of the vineyard. They are

furious because those hired to work the last hour of the day got a full day's pay. And he is joined in his anger by all those people shouting "Crucify Him!" on Good Friday. They are furious with Jesus because when he came to Jerusalem he hit them with all these confrontational stories, and they heard that up in Galilee he was nice to tax collectors and sinners! "Yes I'm angry!" says Jonah, "angry enough to die!" There's only a fine line between being angry enough to die and being angry enough to kill, and who knows, if Jonah would have been alive 700 years later and he were there on Good Friday with the God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love standing there in front of him crowned in thorns, he might change his plea from 'kill me', to 'crucify him.'

Enemy compassion may be the most controversial kind of compassion, it may be the kind of compassion that sets people off, but here's the truth: We have been saved by enemy compassion. Let's remember Romans 5. "Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." While we were still sinners. The word is *echthroi*. It can also be translated as 'enemies.' While we were still enemies, Christ laid down his life for us. We have all been saved by enemy compassion. Of course Jesus' compassion is more than this initial burst of enemy forgiveness. Jesus accepts us as enemies but then he sends his Spirit in us to set about the work of transforming us into new creations. This compassion has a rigorous side. But at its beginning enemy compassion is the wonderful scandalous thing. This enemy compassion is scandalous stuff and potent too! Not only did it save us, when you show this deeper kind of compassion to others, the new creation comes to life and grows. In his book, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, Will Campbell tells the story of how he learned God's deeper, more controversial compassion. Campbell was a Christian Pastor who went down to Alabama to fight for civil rights in the south in the 60's. He was a charismatic man and once when he was challenged to sum up the gospel of Jesus in less than 10 words, he offered this memorable summary: "*We're all weasels, but God loves us anyway.*" (Actually he didn't say weasels; he used a more colorful word that I'm not comfortable sharing from the pulpit.) He made lots of friends who fought alongside him in the cause. One of those friends was a young man named Jonathan Daniels, a 24 year old divinity student from Harvard who was trying to serve God in that place. One morning, after Jonathan Daniels had been released from jail after picketing whites only stores, an off duty deputy named Thomas Coleman appeared with a shotgun and emptied it into Jonathan's abdomen ending his life. Campbell was devastated by this terrible injustice. And he was angry. He ranted and raved to his friends about these no good people down here in Alabama. He fumed at them using words like redneck, backwoods, ignoramus, cracker, wool hat, and Kluxer. He looked at the white residents of that state and he seethed. But one time in the middle of one of his seething rants, a friend pinned him to the wall. "Come on Brother, let's see if your definition of faith can stand the test! We're all weasels, but God loves us anyway. Was Jonathan Daniels a weasel?" Campbell admitted that since we are all sinners before the face of God that yes, even Jonathan his friend was a weasel. "What about Thomas Coleman! Was Thomas Coleman a weasel?" Campbell had no trouble with this one: That no good redneck so and so – yes he was a weasel and he deserved to pay. "OK pastor, which one of these weasels does God love more." The question cut Campbell to the heart, and he realized that his hatred of the racist people did not reflect God's feelings. God has compassion to offer, not only for the

victims of segregation, but on the racist cops too. The full depth of God's compassion hit Campbell so hard, he changed his life. He took up residence in Alabama and became pastor to, friend to, minister to the rednecks, the backwoods, the Kluxers – trying to change them through compassion instead of hate. Psalm 145:9 says, "*The Lord is good to all, and he has compassion on all he has made,*" even the rednecks, even Ninevites.

How badly does the world need enemy compassion right now? We really need it, don't we? We are so fractured. We are so divided into tribes. We divide ourselves into camps and advertise our camp with bumper stickers on our cars and slogans on our t-shirts. We get a lemonade and a box of popcorn and we sit in front our TV with our chosen news channel on, eagerly hoping that our enemy's camp will overturn. How badly do we need this enemy compassion that reaches across boundaries and tears down walls? Thanks be to God for the transforming enemy compassion shown to us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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