

## **The Image of the Invisible God: Compassion**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 19:41-44

This whole sermon series is an extended answer to the question: who is God? In every sermon we've been studying different attributes, different characteristics of the triune God and we've done that by watching Jesus. Colossians 1 says that Jesus is the "image of the invisible God." Hebrews 1 says that Jesus is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." Basically, the Bible says, you want to know who God is? Look at Jesus. So that's what we've been doing. We've watched what Jesus does and we've listened to what Jesus says, and we've said, "That's our God! That's the triune God who loves us! That's the God whom we serve."

Today we will continue to journey into the heart of God by watching Jesus, and we'll do that by zooming in on a picture of Jesus from the gospel of Luke. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He's been on his way to Jerusalem for a while. He's come down from Galilee and he's coming to Jerusalem to die. He knows that his presence in the city will shake things up and eventually lead to his crucifixion. As he completes his journey, Jesus rides down the road from the Mount of Olives. He comes around a corner and for the first time the City of Jerusalem comes into view. The disciples let out a little cry of recognition. "Finally. We're here." Jesus has a very different reaction. His face crumples. Tears stream down his face. Jesus weeps and they are not happy tears. Jesus speaks, but when he speaks, he speaks words of lament and his voice shakes with emotion. Why is Jesus weeping? Let's hear Luke's account. Read Luke 19:41-44

Why does Jesus break down when he sees the city? Why does his voice shake with emotion? Why is his heart breaking at the end of his journey? It's because he sees into the future. He knows what's going to happen to Jerusalem. Because of the city's sins, because of the city's stubbornness, because of the city's failure to recognize what would bring them peace, Jerusalem is going to fall.

In 70 AD, 50,000 Roman legions, led by general Titus, will lay siege to the city. It will be a brutal siege. All supplies to the city are shut off, so the people of Jerusalem become hungry and desperate. Some of these desperate people try to flee the city. If they were caught, the Romans would crucify them just outside the city walls so the residents of the city, friends, family, could see. Eventually the Romans come into the city and destroy it. They burn everything. People gather in the temple for refuge; the Romans set fire to the temple with everyone inside and burned them alive. In the end everything in the city was levelled, and 10's of thousands of people died. For 60 years after the destruction, Jerusalem was an uninhabited ruin.

Jesus sees it all coming. He sees the temple burning, he hears the screams of the people trapped inside, he sees the suffering people hung up on the crosses outside the city wall. And so, through his tears he laments, "They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. Not one stone will be left upon another". Jesus sees all misery and it brings him to tears.

Even though the event that brings it about is terrible, I love this picture of Jesus weeping, I love this picture of Jesus overcome with emotion, because it shows that Jesus was a man of strong feelings, and this particular emotional display brings us to the heart of Jesus. Most of the stories of Jesus don't let us in to his emotional world. Most of the time Jesus does stuff and says stuff and we don't hear how he's feeling when he does it. But once in a while the Bible tells us or shows us Jesus emotional life, and this is definitely one of those places. Luke shows us Jesus weeping, and in those tears we see that the heart of Jesus is full of compassion.

Actually, of all the human emotions, compassion is the emotion most often directly attributed to Jesus. By directly attributed I mean the Bible says, 'Jesus felt compassion.' In our passage, it doesn't say directly that Jesus felt compassion, though I think we can say that from seeing his reaction. Just like when Jesus clears the temple, even though it never specifically says Jesus was angry, we can reasonably conclude that he was ticked.

So, there are times in the Bible where the Bible shows us a scene and we can guess Jesus' emotion, but there are only a very few times where the Bible explicitly tells us that Jesus is feeling an emotion. Of those times the emotion, the feeling, most often attributed to Jesus is compassion. Joy is specifically attributed once. Anger once. But there are 6 times where the Bible tells us that Jesus' heart is moved with compassion. In Matthew 9:36 Jesus sees the crowds who've gathered to see him, this swirling mass of human beings, all of them searching, and it says, "He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." In Matthew 14:14 Jesus sees a big crowd of sick people coming to him for healing and "He had compassion on them and healed their sick." In Matthew 20 Jesus has compassion on two blind men who call out to him for healing. In Mark 8 he sees the crowd of 5000 people gathered to hear him preach and he has compassion on them, a compassion which leads him to do the miracle of the loaves and the fishes.

And then there's this: there is only one time in the Bible where it says explicitly that Jesus was angry. You find that in Mark 3:5. "Jesus looked around at them in anger," it says. What is he angry about? He's angry at the people around him for their lack of compassion. Go look it up.

Jesus' heart is full of compassion, so full of compassion that his heart aches. That's the sense of the word 'compassion' in Greek. In Greek, the word for compassion is *Splangkna*. It's also the word for bowels. Which is weird, until you think about what deep compassion feels like. When you really feel for someone who is hurting, it's gut wrenching. Deep compassion is gut wrenching. When Jesus sees the poor, when Jesus sees the sick, when Jesus sees the harassed and helpless, when Jesus hears the cry of the hurting, when Jesus sees the hungry, Jesus is gutted. His heart is wrenched with compassion.

That's why I love that picture of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. When you see Jesus weeping over the pain of those people who will suffer in the siege, you can be sure that he has the same sort of deep feelings over your suffering too. When you stand over the grave of a loved one and wonder how you are going to go on without this person, Jesus's compassionate face is turned to you and your grief is written on his face. When you are dealing with a life situation that leaves you wide awake at three in the morning, tears streaming down your face as you go back and forth between praying and worrying – the compassionate face of Jesus is turned toward you and the pain of your struggle is in his face. If you are a sinner, if you are someone who is struggling with an addiction to a sin that you hate, but you can't seem to shake, be assured that while Jesus hates your sin, that's not how he feels about you. The compassionate face of Jesus is turned towards and he feels the pain of your struggle.

When it comes to this picture of Jesus crying over Jerusalem, some commentators say this shows Jesus' humanity. Jesus is fully human like us and he shares our human frailty and that comes through in these tears. We should be comforted, they say, that Jesus shares our human frailty. That's right of course, but the implication of a comment like that is that the human side of Jesus feels our pain, the divine Jesus is less affected. Jesus' human heart is wrenched by compassion when he sees the suffering of people, but what about the heart of God? Does the heart of God feel our pain, our loss, our fear, our confusion?

I say to you that it is not just Jesus' human face that weeps on the road to Jerusalem; it's God's heart that is wrenched by his people's pain, it's God's face that is covered with tears. Why do I say that? Let's go deep, shall we? Deep into the Old Testament to what some people have called the most quoted passage of the entire Old Testament.

Do you know the most quoted passage in the Old Testament? I'll bet you won't guess it. It's Exodus 34:6-7. If you are choosing memory work for yourself or your children, Exodus 34:6-7 should be on your list because it's a very important passage. In Exodus 34:6-7 it is God revealing his heart. It's the first time in the Old Testament when God reveals his character to his people. Before that passage God has spoken to his people and God has done many things for his people. Before this passage, God has even revealed his name to his people. But before this passage God has never revealed his character, his heart. But in Exodus 34:6-7 he does.

He reveals his heart to Moses on Mount Sinai. Moses wants more strength to keep going as a leader of Israel, so he says to God, "Show me your glory," and God shows him his glory. God reveals his heart. And what

is the very first thing in God's heart? What is the very first thing God discloses about himself? Listen: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness rebellion, and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished, he punishes the children and their children for the sins of the parents to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generation."

When God reveals his heart to Israel, the very first thing he points to is his compassion. I am compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love, abounding in faithfulness. I maintain love to a thousand generations. Yes, he's also a God who hates sin and will not let the guilty go unpunished, thank heaven for that, but even his determination to fight sin and punish the wicked is an outpouring of his love and his compassion for the weak and the downtrodden.

These verses become the most quoted verses in the rest of the Bible. From this point on when prophets and psalmists and storytellers want to describe who God is and what he cares about, they return to these words. Psalm 103, Nahum 1, Jonah 4, Numbers 14, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 111, Psalm 86, Joel 2:13, Deuteronomy 5, Isaiah 49:15. Or Psalm 51. When David is overcome with guilt after his adultery with Bathsheba, what does he appeal to? Where does he put his hope? In the picture of God as revealed here. "Have mercy on me O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions." The tears on Jesus' face aren't just a human phenomenon; that's God's face. Those tears reveal the steadfast love and deep compassion at the heart of God.

There are some voices in the modern church these days that are down on compassion. There are voices that talk about compassion and compassion adjacent virtues like empathy and mercy like they are bad things, like they are a kind of weakness, like they are soft. You see books and articles with titles like 'the sin of empathy.' You see it in blog posts that talk about the wussification of Christianity. These people trumpet a more muscular and forceful brand of Christianity.

You know who these people remind me of? Jonah. At the end of Jonah, Jonah is mad at God because God forgave the people of Nineveh when they repented from their sin. God didn't destroy the city as he said he would. And so Jonah says to God, 'You know this is what bugs me about you! This is why I tried to run away from you instead of being your prophet. Because "I knew you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."' Jonah has read Exodus 34. And he says 'I knew you were compassionate and merciful and I don't want that! It's too soft for me.' To me, Jonah sounds just like some of those modern compassion haters.

The anti-compassion talk is especially strong among some people who like to talk about Christian manliness and what it means to be a manly Christian. They call empathy and compassion more womanly virtues and they want men to be less compassionate and more strong and forceful and aggressive. This is a false teaching. Compassion isn't a womanly virtue; it is a virtue at the center of God's heart. "The Lord the Lord the compassionate and gracious God." It's the first characteristic in his own self-revelation. The tears on the face of Jesus are not weakness; they are the strongest kind of strength. Of course, men need to be strong and forceful sometimes, of course we need to stand up to truth and confront evil (so do women), but as followers of Jesus Christ may the compassion of Jesus live in us and may it infiltrate us all the way down to the bottom of our hearts.

Because all our hope depends on Jesus' tears. You know that, right? The great thing about Jesus' tears and Jesus' compassion is that they are always more than a feeling. When Jesus feels compassion, that compassion leads to saving action. When he sees the hungry crowds on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he breaks bread to feed them. When he sees the crowds of sick people, his compassion leads him to start healing, spending the whole day listening to the stories of people's pain, breaking off pieces of himself so that they could be healed. When Jesus sees that the people are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd, in his compassion he sends out his disciples to help them. And when on the outskirts of Jerusalem, he weeps at the destruction of the city and for their sin and its consequence, in his compassion he rides down into the city

where he knows he will be stripped and tortured and crucified. And he does it because in his compassion, he wants us to be saved. Praise be to God for his saving compassion. May it be strong in all of us.

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