



# **CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS**

**7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613**

**(319) 277-0924**

**[INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG](mailto:INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG)**

**[WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG](http://WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG)**

## God Is: Merciful and Compassionate

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Jonah 1:1-3 (ESV)

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

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Dear friends,

Have you ever gotten angry or upset with God? Well, you're not the first. The Bible is full of stories about people who got angry with God. Such is the case in our story for today about Jonah. God called Jonah, his prophet, to go to Nineveh to call out against it for their evil had come up before him. He was to preach to them, which was an unusual commission, because the prophets were typically sent to preach to their own people to get them to repent. Now we have Jonah called to preach God's word to foreigners, powerful enemies of Israel. Jonah refused, took a ship headed to Tarshish, which was in the opposite direction, to escape God's presence (as if a person could do that), and at this point, we're not told why Jonah responded that way. Well, God throws a wrench in Jonah's plans and hurls this great storm upon the sea. The sailors were struggling to keep the ship afloat and they were afraid. While this is going on, Jonah's inside fast asleep and the sailors wake him up and say, "Get praying to your God for help." They eventually drew straws to find the guilty one among them who had caused this storm. They believed in that kind of thing. And Jonah drew the short straw. They said, "What

have you done?" And he explained that this was God's doing to get him, that he that he's the God who created the sea and the land. So they might as well just throw him into the sea and then it'll calm down. They tried rowing all the harder to spare Jonah's life, though, as well as their own, but it was to no avail. They prayed to God and then threw Jonah into the sea and it calmed. And these pagan sailors worshipped God and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him, which is amazing when you think about it. Jonah was a successful evangelist without even trying. These pagan sailors got saved. In the meantime, God had mercy on Jonah, saved him, by appointing a great fish to swallow him and keep him alive. He was in the belly of the fish for three days, cruising the Mediterranean.

Now people ask me, "Do you really believe that?" And my response is, "Well, Jesus loved it and referred to it in his ministry. He believed it. So, do I have any reason to question it?" And is anything impossible for God? After all, our God who resurrected Jesus from the dead could do that. Surely this fish thing is no big deal in comparison. In the fish, Jonah prayed a prayer of thanksgiving to God for showing mercy. After three days, God had the fish spit him out on dry land and God recommissioned Jonah. And this time Jonah went to Nineveh to tell this nasty, wicked people God's going to destroy the city for the evil ways. It was a short message as he walked through the city: "In forty days, Nineveh shall be overthrown, destroyed." It might have been a short message, but, boy, it packed a punch. It was effective. Lo and behold, the people of Nineveh believed God. The king of Nineveh actually proclaimed a time of fasting and penitence and everyone, great and small, even the animals, were to be covered with sackcloth, which was a sign of contrition and repentance. And they were to call upon the Lord in prayer and they would stop their evil and violent ways. And the king said, "Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we don't perish." Well, when God saw what their city-wide response was, he relented of the disaster that he said he would bring upon these people and he didn't do it, he spared them. He showed them mercy.

Now, you might think that God's prophet would be rejoicing. After all, we got revival going on here. But he wasn't at all – Jonah was displeased. He was angered by this. He was so angry that he prayed to God to just take his life. He'd had it and he revealed his true colors. You see, it wasn't fear that was driving him away from doing God's commission in the beginning. It was something dark within him. He was struggling

with his theology. His God was not to act like this towards Israel's hated enemies. I mean, listen to his prayer, he says,

Oh, Lord, is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? That's why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God. Slow to anger and abounding and steadfast love and relenting from disaster. Therefore, now, oh Lord, just take my life for me. It's better for me to die than to live.

He knew God. He knew God's ways. He knew God was merciful, compassionate, full of steadfast love. And God gently responds to Jonah, "Jonah, is it right for you to be angry at me?" Well, Jonah didn't respond, he just left the city, set up a camp outside and waited to see what would become of Nineveh. But maybe God would see things his way. He was hoping for a wrathful fireworks display in Nineveh. And while he waited, God appointed this big plant to give him shade, keep him comfortable from the heat. Even then, God's being good to Jonah. And Jonah's glad for that.

But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm to attack the bush, and it withered. And God appointed a scorching east wind. And then the sun beat down on Jonah's head until he was faint. And again he cried out, "God, just take my life. It's better for me to die." God said, "Is it right for you to be so angry about that plant, Jonah?" "Yes. Angry enough to die," said Jonah. "Let me get this straight," God says, "you pity a plant for which you did not labor or make it grow, which came into being in a day and perished in the night." And the story closes with God asking a final question, making a comparison. "If you're so worried about that plant, so filled with pity for it, should I not have pity about Nineveh – the great city, which there are more than 120,000 persons who don't know their right hand from their left?" In other words, they're morally and spiritually unaware. And also their animals? In other words, "Don't I have the right to show compassion, to have compassion for these 120,000 people. Aren't they more important in comparison to that plant?" And angry Jonah looks rather ridiculous at this point, doesn't he? The question's left unanswered. We don't know Jonah's response. Could be that the question is left for readers like us to answer for ourselves.

You see, the Jonah story is so much more than a fish story to entertain. It's a story, a teaching, that gives us another picture of God, that has implications for those of us who belong to him. Yes, we see some things about him that we've covered earlier in the sermon series: we see his greatness and power with the storm on the sea, and appointed

a great fish and a plant and a worm and a scorching wind, and things happen. And we see the power of his words: Nineveh heard the word and believed and repented. We're also reminded that God hates evil, but he's also gracious and merciful, which is good news for a hopeless sinner like me. I can turn my heart towards home to him and be forgiven. But that last line of the story is meant to teach us something important: that God is compassionate and merciful – not just towards his own, but the whole world. Everybody – even those we don't like or those we consider to be enemies or vile or wicked. God cares about them, too.

And that's what made Jonah angry. He didn't want God to have pity on them. He didn't want them to receive mercy. It was OK for God to give mercy to him when he saved him from drowning, though he had been disobedient. And it was good for God to have compassion and show mercy to his own people whom he saved from slavery in Egypt, and show mercy even as it continued to show disobedience. But not these Assyrians. They were an evil lot who had made life miserable for Israel. Jonah and his people had a deep-seated prejudice and hatred for them. They wanted him to burn. “Not them, oh Lord, just destroy them, do the world a favor.” And that's why he ran. He knew God. “I knew this would happen,” he said, “that's why I fled. I know that you're gracious and merciful and slow to anger and abounding and steadfast love, relenting from disaster.” Yep, that's our God, all right.

This story has implications for the reader. The Jonah story was first read by Israel, who was called to be a light to the nations; who were blessed to be a blessing to the world as Abraham's descendants. But after being kicked around a lot by other nations during their history, they developed into an exclusive club which did not care one bit about outsiders. In fact, they prayed and longed for their destruction. God's vision for them had gotten lost along the way, they'd become a holy huddle. They didn't have the time of day for unclean outsiders, and God is saying in this story, “Let go of your prejudices, your bitterness towards others, and get back to the original plan for which you were called. It's time to break huddle.”

And there's a lesson here for the Church of Jesus Christ as well – you and me – who have been called to go make disciples of all nations. All nations. It's a calling to keep our eye on the ball. We're to be about the business of the great commission: not just the people that we like, but to all the people, the world, letting our gospel light shine before others so that they may turn from the old way of living and follow Jesus Christ who

gives eternal life and be saved. You and I know it's all too easy to become a holy huddle in our local church as we get distracted by our routines and in-house issues, and we also can get rather angry and defensive towards those that are outside of the faith, and keep ourselves separate from them and tucked away from the evil culture around us. We get in this defensive mode and soon we forget why we exist, and that's to bring people to Jesus. And the Jonah story is God telling those of us in the church, "Hey, hey, hey, hey: it's time to break Huddle. Remember, I so loved the world that I gave my only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

And this word from God, I think, speaks to us as individuals. We're reminded once again that our God compassionately cares about everyone. He doesn't want anyone to perish. Not even those we don't like or those opposed to our faith in Christ who, like the Ninevites, don't know their right hand from their left when it comes to morality or spiritual matters. Because they're created in the image of God and Jesus died for them to. This God has compassion for them. "Do I?" is the question we need to ask. The Jonah story challenges us to do a personal inventory and ask, "Are there some deep-seated prejudices in me that are getting in the way of my reaching out to every person? As God's own, through mercy and Christ, do I reflect God's mercy to everyone, no matter who they are?" Jonah needed to repent for his lack of mercy; that would have been the appropriate ending for the story. And if I'm totally honest about it, so do I. And maybe that's to be our take away today: to repent. To admit that we have some prejudices. And after you've received his mercy – and you will – then it's time to go for him to all kinds of people, likable and unlikable, with good news of a God who has mercy and is compassionate and loves them deeply. And he goes with you and he'll help you in doing that.

Kent Hughes tells a story about his wife's friends who were on missionary furlough. They'd been looking forward to this furlough time with anticipation. It would be the first time the wife was going to have a place of her own, a new townhouse-style apartment with a patio. And she's creative and made the patio the focus of her decoration. Well, after a few months, new neighbors moved in and the word to describe them would be "coarse." There was loud music day and night, a constant flow of obscenities, they urinated in the front yard in broad daylight, they disrupted her peace. She could see nothing good in them. She asked the Lord to help her to be more loving, but all she got back was disgust and rejection from the neighbors. The crisis came when she returned home to discover that the neighbor's children had sprayed orange paint all

over her beautiful patio: the walls, the floors, everything. She was furious. She tried to pray, but found herself crying out, "I cannot love them. I hate them." Well, knowing that she had to deal with the sin in her heart, she began to converse with the Lord in her inner being, and a scripture was brought to mind: "Above all things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." And in her heart, she questioned, "Lord, how do I put on love?" The only way she could picture it was like putting on a coat. So that's what she determined to do. She chose to wrap herself in the love of God. As a result, she began to experience a deeper life of Christ within. She made a list of what she would do if she really loved her exasperating neighbors. Then she did what she had listed. She baked cookies for them. She offered to babysit for free. She invited the mother over for coffee and the most beautiful thing happened. She began to know and understand them. She began to see that they were living under tremendous pressures. She began to love her enemies. She did good to them. She lent to them without expecting anything back. The day came when they moved and she wept; an unnatural, unconventional love had captured her heart, the supernatural love and compassion of Jesus.

How about you? How about this story calling you to go: go make disciples, go show compassion to all peoples in Christ's name. Have a merciful attitude, even towards the ones you've never liked or cared about before. God is calling you today go. And make disciples of all nations.

Amen.