

A Heart for the Nations: The Pitiful and Pitiless Prophet

Jonah 3-4

The Week of October 8, 2017

THIS WEEK'S CORE PRACTICE

Tangible Compassion: Disciples of Jesus Christ seek to show compassion to those in need, and in doing so, minister to Jesus Himself.

The following is an excerpt from the article entitled "Contagious Compassion" that appeared in *Christian History* in 2007 and was written by James D. Smith III and Kimberly Dawsey-Richardson:

Harvard historian Clarissa Atkinson has observed, "Today, an awareness of dangers we can't seem to stop makes us, in some ways, more like medieval people than like our own great grandparents." If so, there may be no better mentor for us than the medieval saint and Doctor of the Church, Catherine of Siena. She lived in a time of almost apocalyptic fear.

The Black Death and the institutional convulsions of the Catholic Church caused a devastated populace to cry out. Catherine stepped courageously beyond her own fears and society's conventions to heal the sick, speak truth to papal authority, and build a network characterized by dialogue and reconciliation in Christ's name. . .

Catherine Benincasa was born in 1347, probably the 23rd of 25 children. As a young girl, she was known for her unquenchable cheer and golden brown hair. At age six, while walking home from church with siblings, she had a vision of Christ smiling and blessing her. The sense of affirmation that God was calling her to ministry was powerful and permanent.

Though her mother longed for a "normal" daughter, Catherine refused to be stereotypically feminine. On one occasion, she frantically chopped off her hair in hopes of being rejected by a suitor and being taken seriously by her family. She was steadfastly devoted to God's call and even dreamed of joining a monastery disguised as a boy. She did not want to marry or become a nun, yearning instead to serve God in her own way.

After great perseverance, she persuaded her family to let her join the Third Order of Saint Dominic at the age of 16. She participated in the community's devotional activities (in addition to her own stringent disciplines) while she lived at home, largely in her room. Seeking purity, humility, and communion with God, she wrestled for three years to gain dominion over her heart and fleshly impulses. Hers was a total surrender, with Word and sacrament as the foundation.

These three years concluded with a fervent awakening to the needs of the world outside. God led her away from thinking that she could not help her neighbor without losing her mind ("I want only to do good," she thought, "but let it be *my* way.") And he gave her a devotion that reflected Jesus' words: "Not my will, but yours be done." Arguably, the supreme test of her Christian character was her response to the most devastating pandemic in human history—the Black Death—and its aftermath.

In the mid-1330s, there were initial reports of a widespread epidemic in China. Traders carried the infection to the Middle East and Europe. Contemporaries called it "the Great Mortality" and "the Black Death" because the skin of sufferers would often become blackened from infected lesions and hemorrhages beneath the skin. As more than half of the local population in many areas died, traditional social systems broke down and economies were left in upheaval. Dread and depression shrouded the land. . .

Catherine . . . faced the grim realities and found hope in God as the greatest Reality of all. The result was a courageous, compassionate, and creative path of ministry. Catherine's devotion to the sick was as contagious as the Plague itself, charismatically drawing others to touch lives and transform situations. In the midst of poverty, terror, and stench, she and her entourage spread the aroma of Christ through selfless service.

Catherine resolved to love as Jesus loved in all circumstances. . . While many she touched were overcome by physical ills, others struggled with injustice and the ills of a devastated society. One prisoner, caught in the grip of a system plagued by rivalry and power plays, sought Catherine's company in the moments before his beheading. "I have just taken a head into my hands and have been moved so deeply that my heart cannot grasp it," she told her confessor Raymond of Capua. "I waited for him at the place of execution . . . he arrived like a meek lamb and when he saw me he began to smile. He asked me to make the sign of the cross over him

... I stretched out his neck and bent down to him, reminding him of the blood of the Lamb. His lips kept murmuring only 'Jesus' and 'Catherine,' and he was still murmuring when I received his head into my hands ... my soul rested in peace and quiet, so aware of the fragrance of blood that I could not remove the blood which had splashed onto me." . . .

The title of Catherine's most famous work, *The Dialogue*, expresses her life's theme. Catherine actively sought to restore wholeness and find the best possible outcome in each situation—a ministry made possible by her rich, deepening dialogue with God. In *The Dialogue* she records the Lord's innermost conversations with her: "Your love should be sincere: you should love your neighbors with the same love with which you love Me."

In the fearful chaos of her own "Dark Ages"—fraught with plague, schism, poverty, and fragmentation—Catherine's voice emerged with clarity and compassion. Her own mother, who had previously thwarted Catherine's attempts to live unconventionally for God, joined the Dominican Third Order after being widowed, and worked closely with Catherine and imitated her life. Catherine's life challenges us today as it exemplifies P. T. Forsyth's advice: "You must live with people to know their problems, and live with God in order to solve them."

It is our hope that the people of LCC are known for their expressions of tangible compassion to our neighbors.

This Week's Complementary Passage

Isaiah 49:5-6 (ESV)

⁵ And now the Lord says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him - for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has become my strength -
⁶ he says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

This Week's Text for Study –Jonah 3-4 (ESV)

STEP ONE ...

READING what the passage says
(*Read it at least three times*)

Jonah 3-4 (ESV)

¹ Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸ but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

¹ But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ² And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. ³ Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

⁵ Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. ⁶ Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. ⁸ When 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.”⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.”¹⁰ And 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.”¹¹ And 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?”

STEP TWO - OBSERVING how the passage moves

Return to the passage and **Mark key words, phrases and movements:**

- Circle all of the words in these passages that speak of the Triune God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit, etc.).
- Underline the significant verbs/action words in these passages.
- Highlight Jonah 3:1.
- Highlight Jonah 3:3.
- Highlight Jonah 3:5.
- In Jonah 3:7a-9, underline the King of Nineveh’s proclamation: “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”
- Highlight Jonah 3:10.
- In Jonah 4:2, underline the phrases: “he prayed to the Lord” and “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”
- In Jonah 4:3, underline the phrase: “please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”
- In Jonah 4:4, underline the sentence: “Do you do well to be angry?”
- In Jonah 4:6-7, underline the phrase: “God appointed” each time it appears.
- Highlight Jonah 4:10-11.

STEP THREE - Ask the five “W” questions and the one “H” question:

1. **Who** is speaking? Who is this about? Who are the main characters? And, to **whom** is it speaking?
2. **What** is the subject of the passage? What does the passage say about the subject?
3. **When** do or will the events occur? When did something happen to a particular person, people, or nation?
4. **Where** did or will this happen?
5. **Why** is something said or mentioned? Why would or will this happen? Why at this time? Why this person?
6. **How** will it happen? How is it to be done? How is it illustrated?

STEP FOUR ...

UNDERSTANDING what the passage means
This commentary is intended to enhance your own study of the text.

Jonah 3-4 (ESV)

3:1-4:11 - In this second division of the book Jonah preaches the message God commanded, and the people of Nineveh respond with genuine repentance (ch. 3). When the Lord turns from threatened judgment, we learn the real reason why Jonah had fled the first time: he feared that God would show mercy to the hated Assyrians (4:2). In the object lessons that follow, the wideness of the Lord's mercy and compassion is revealed (4:5-11).

3:3-**"Jonah arose and went."** Having learned that the call of God is irrevocable (cf. Rom. 11:29), Jonah responded to the Lord's renewed commission. Though he obeyed God this time, Jonah was "displeased" with the prospect of Ninevite repentance (4:1, 2).

"Nineveh was." Some have suggested that the use of the past tense ("was") indicates that the city was no longer in existence at the time of writing. Given the city's destruction in 612 BC by the Medes and Babylonians, this interpretation would date the narrative sometime after the late seventh century BC. The past tense does not preclude an eighth-century date, however, for it may simply indicate the status of the city when the prophet arrived.

"An exceedingly great city, three days' journey." The Hebrew is difficult to translate. Many commentators interpret these phrases as a reference to the physical size of Nineveh. Archaeological exploration has shown that the city was between seven and eight miles in circumference with an estimated population of 120,000 people. Others suggest that the first formula should be translated "a very important city," or more literally as "a great city to God" (emphasizing its significance rather than size). This latter reading fits the context better. The second expression (literally "journey of three days") could indicate the duration of visit appropriate (in terms of ancient Near Eastern diplomatic protocol) for an emissary to such an important city.

3:5-**"The people of Nineveh believed."** Jonah's worst fears were realized when the people believed, repented, proclaimed a fast, and adorned themselves in sackcloth (the traditional mourning garb of the ancient Near East). The repentance was swift and city-wide.

3:6-**"The king of Nineveh."** Apparently a reference to the mighty king of Assyria. Although it is highly unlikely that Assyrian records would note this unusual occurrence, some scholars have associated this event with the religious reforms of Adad-nirari III (810-783 BC). The reign of Assur-dan III (772-755 BC) has also been suggested.

"He arose. . . and sat in ashes." The king's response was as immediate and spontaneous as that of his subjects. Royal authority gave way to penitent humility. He exchanged his robes for sackcloth, his throne for a bed of ashes (cf. Job 42:6; Is. 58:5).

3:7-**"Decree of the king."** With the royal edict mandating prayer, mourning rites, and a fast for man and beast, Nineveh's repentance was complete. The inclusion of animals points to the thorough and genuine nature of their repentance. Later, it was customary among the Persians to include domestic animals in the rites of mourning.

3:8-**"Let everyone turn from . . . violence."** This royal admonition addressed the most prominent of Nineveh's sins. Physical violence and social injustice were hallmarks of the Assyrian Empire (Nah. 3:1).

3:9-In this verse the king gives personal and corporate expression to the hope that genuine repentance will avert the divine judgment. The structure of 3:5-9 conforms to the typical Old Testament pattern of reporting corporate repentance (Jer. 36:3; Joel 2): (a) threat of judgment, (b) penitent response, and (c) divine decision to withhold punishment.

3:10-**"God saw what they did."** The prophetic warning (v. 4) had an implied condition, namely, that judgment was imminent - if the city did not repent. In turning "from their evil way" the Ninevites met that condition. The Lord's change of mind (i.e., His sovereign choice to make His own action depend upon human response) is fully compatible with God's sovereignty and immutability, since He ordains the means as well as the ends of His sovereign will (Jer. 18:7-10).

Jonah 4 - The book concludes with angry Jonah receiving a lesson in divine mercy and compassion from God Himself. Strikingly, we are not told how Jonah responded to this instruction. Instead, we are left with the contrast between Jonah's resentful attitude and God's great mercy to the Ninevites.

4:1-**"It displeased Jonah exceedingly."** The Hebrew is particularly vivid (literally "it was evil to Jonah as a great wrong"). Jonah's emotion is expressed in the strongest language possible: his greatest fear was that the Lord would bestow forgiveness on Israel's most hated enemy.

4:2—“**You are a gracious . . . relenting from disaster.**” The reason for Jonah’s initial flight to Tarshish is revealed. Despite his blatant disobedience and narrow-mindedness, Jonah understood the character of God. Here he echoes a liturgical formula describing God’s mercy to an undeserving Israel (e.g., Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 103:8; Joel 2:13). Only here and in Joel 2:13 does the reference to divine repentance (“he relents over disaster”) conclude the formula, an inclusion appropriate to the context of Nineveh’s repentance and deliverance.

4:5—“**Jonah went out . . . made a booth.**” Grateful for his own deliverance, Jonah still refuses to accept that of the Ninevites. Hoping that the Lord will execute judgment, Jonah leaves the city for a vantage point from which to view the destruction of the city.

4:6—“**The Lord God appointed a plant.**” Probably because of the shortage of timber in this dry region, Jonah’s shelter was not adequate to provide protection from the hot Near Eastern sun. The type of vegetation provided is uncertain; some suggest the castor oil plant, which grows quickly to a height of 15 feet.

4:7, 8—The same divine hand that in mercy had provided the great fish and the shade now brings a worm to kill the plant, and a hot east wind (likely the feared sirocco of the Mediterranean world) to torment the bitter prophet.

4:9-11—The divine intention of the object lessons is now revealed. God’s magnificent compassion for the people and animals He created and sustained (v. 11) is contrasted with Jonah’s petty concern for the plant (v. 10). The reader recalls the compassion of Jesus as He looked upon the multitudes (Matt. 9:36; Mark 6:34; 8:2), and His statement in Matt. 10:29 that not a sparrow will fall to the ground apart from the will of the Father. In its infancy, the largely Jewish New Testament church would again wrestle with this issue of the wideness of God’s mercy, as the Lord opened the hearts of the Gentiles to obey the gospel (Acts 11:18; 15:14; 28:28).

Resource for Commentary: *The Reformation Study Bible* found at www.biblegateway.com.

SUMMARIZING the message (PAUL)

Summarizing the Message **The Pitiful and Pitiless Prophet** Jonah 3-4

I. **Jonah Goes to Nineveh:** *The God of Multiple Second Chances* (1-5).

God summoned Jonah a second time. This time he obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh. Despite his “fish-bed” conversion, all was still not well with Jonah. For three days, he walked around the massive city delivering a message of condemnation to a people he thought unworthy of compassion (3:4). It was probably the worst sermon in history. He delivered it with heartless indifference to a people he thought unworthy of compassion. Yet, it provoked an astonishing response. They heard Jonah preaching but they believed God (3:5). God, in His mercy, will often use us in spite of ourselves.

II. **The People of Nineveh Repent:** *God’s Compassion for the Lost* (3:6-10).

The preaching of Jonah wafted into the king’s palace. The king of Nineveh heard Jonah’s message and responded with self-denying humility. He donned sackcloth and sat on a pile of ashes. He then issued a proclamation which he had published and distributed through Nineveh. The king’s message was actually far better than Jonah’s sermon (3:7-9). The Word of God produced an amazing transformation that affected the entire country. Too bad the story doesn’t end right there.

III. **Jonah’s Anger:** *The Danger of Being Tone-deaf to the Gospel* (4:1-4).

Nineveh’s surprising repentance stood in direct contrast to Jonah’s stupefying reaction. What God saw caused Him to relent from bringing calamity on Nineveh. What Jonah saw made him resentful and angry at God. Jonah was an exceptional theologian: “For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love [hesed], and relenting from disaster” (4:2). He spoke of the warmth of God’s love but his own heart was bitterly cold. He knew about God’s grace but he was still trapped inside a dungeon of racism and xenophobia.

He liked the idea of God saving people, as long as they were worth saving. Jonah's circle was tightly drawn. Rather than rejoice, he played the victim. He begged God to take his life. The Lord forced him to look at himself (4:4).

IV. The Lord's Compassion: *God's Patience with Us in Announcing the Good News* (4:5-11).

Spurning any form of self-assessment, Jonah headed out to an area east of the city, built a booth, and hoped against God's love that God would wake up and destroy the city. God appointed a plant to quickly grow and provide a comforting shade (the same word for appointing a plant is the same word used when God appointed the great fish to swallow Jonah). Jonah liked the plant but when a worm devoured the plant and then desert sun and sirocco, also appointed by God, made him faint, he begged for God to take his life again. God questioned the prophet a second time: "Do you have a right to be angry?" Obstinate as ever, Jonah said in effect, "Darn right, I do. I'm angry enough to die." In the end, God got the last word (4:10-11). God rebuked a stubborn prophet (and those like him) and revealed His love for all people everywhere.

STEP FIVE ...

EXPLORING the passage through discussion (PAUL)

Questions

1. As you begin sharing, take some time to finish the following statement: "I stopped running from God when"
2. What does it tell us about God that He would re-commission Jonah to go to Nineveh? Do we deserve second chances?
3. Share about a time when God gave you a second chance.
4. Jonah's message was pretty clear in verse 4. How should we understand the fact that God relented and did not destroy the city (10)?
5. What do you think was the real reason behind Jonah's anger (4:1)?
6. To whom in your life have you been showing anger instead of extending grace?
7. What do you think is the overall point of the book of Jonah?
8. How can we strive to have a heart of compassion that looks more like God's? Specifically, how can we learn to love more broadly and deeply?
9. What is one thing your group can do together to display God's heart for the world?

STEP SIX ...

APPLYING the passage to my life

Our desire is not to be merely hearers of the Word but doers. James 1:22

When you apply God's Word, you are thinking about what God might be saying to you through the Scriptures. Application involves action. Application makes your reading become a reality in your own life. Make your applications specific (State who, what, & when). You are encouraged to use the **S.P.E.C.K.** method to apply God's Word to your life. Remember that each passage of Scripture may not lend itself to answering all five of these questions.

S – Sins to confess and avoid (Are there sinful actions, attitudes, or thoughts that you need to confess to God based upon your study of these Scriptures?)

P – Promises to claim (List God's promises for you from these Scriptures.)

E – Examples to follow (What examples, for right thinking or right actions, can you take for you own life from these Scriptures?)

C – Commands to obey (List God's commands for you from these Scriptures and seek to be obedient to them.)

K – Knowledge of God to apply (God's character is visible throughout the Scriptures as an example to us. What attributes and/or attitudes does God display that you can apply to your own life?)

This Week's Memory Verse:

“For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”

Jonah 4:2b