

WEEK 24

JONAH - “God Is Merciful”

BACKGROUND

The king of Israel during Jonah’s ministry was Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–29). King Jeroboam II was the son of King Jehoash (a.k.a King Joash). King Jeroboam II ruled the Northern Kingdom of Israel for forty-one years. Jeroboam II ruled the entire region east of the Jordan down to the Dead Sea. Jonah prophesied about this extension of Israel’s territory (2 Kings 14:25). Jeroboam II’s long reign allowed him to increase his luxury through oppression and vice. Israel prospered while iniquity flourished (Amos 2:6–8; Hosea 4:12–14). Jonah’s contemporaries include Hosea (1:1) and Amos (1:1). After the people of Nineveh repented, Jonah had the opportunity to establish a relationship with the Ninevites. Instead, he positioned himself alone, outside the city, under a bush.

Did Jonah do the right thing being alone? Why or why not?

AT-A-GLANCE

1. Jonah’s Complaint (Jonah 4:1–4)
2. Jonah’s Gourd (vv. 5–7)
3. Jonah’s Rebuke (vv. 9–10)

1. Jonah’s Complaint (Jonah 4:1–4)

Jonah had just preached to the Ninevites, and the Ninevites were spared the judgment of God. Instead of being happy about God’s grace toward the Ninevites, Jonah was angry. He said he was angry because he knew God would show mercy to Nineveh and this is why never wanted to go to Nineveh. His theological knowledge of God is correct, God is merciful. Jonah just didn’t want God to be compassionate to an enemy of Israel.

The extreme hate that Jonah has toward the Assyrian people can be seen in his request for God to kill him. Jonah would rather be dead than for the Ninevites to experience God’s grace. God prods Jonah with a question. He asks Jonah if it is right for him to be angry about His grace.

Why do we sometimes get upset when God is gracious to people we don’t think deserve it?

2. Jonah’s Gourd (Jonah 4:5–7)

Jonah, fuming in anger, walks outside the city. As he sits in his makeshift shelter, God causes a large, leafy plant to shade Jonah. At this act of kindness, Jonah is thankful to God. The plant provides shade to ease his discomfort. Then God causes the leafy plant to dry up and wither.

Jonah is outraged. He expresses anger and frustration as he did when he realized the grace the people of Nineveh experienced. God spared the people of Nineveh, but He wouldn't spare this plant. Jonah actually wants to die after he experiences the heat without the plant's shade.

How can we deal with our anger in healthy ways?

3. Jonah's Rebuke (Jonah 4:9-10)

God questions Jonah's right to be angry. He provokes Jonah to express his emotions over a small thing, such as having shade. Jonah retorts that he is right to be angry about this plant. After all, it gave him shade and allowed him to be comfortable in the heat.

Then, the Lord rebukes Jonah. Jonah feels sorry about the plant but does nothing to cause it to grow. This plant had a short life span, and Jonah is upset about it. God allows Jonah to see a larger picture when he declares that there are 120,000 in Nineveh who don't know their left from their right and also animals. God wants to show mercy to His creation. He has compassion, and His love ranges wide over humanity.

How can we let go of control over others and recognize that God is the One really in control?

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURE

1. Is Jonah justified in his anger at God (Jonah 4:2)? Explain why.
2. Why do you believe God spared the city (v. 11)?

DISCUSS THE MEANING

1. What does the verbal exchange between God and Jonah in this chapter teach us about speaking the truth in love?
2. The book of Jonah concludes with God giving mercy to both Jonah and the inhabitants of Nineveh. What outcomes can Christians expect when extending mercy instead of callousness?

[1] But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

Rather than being excited over the success of his mission to Nineveh, Jonah is exceedingly displeased with God's action. He is "very angry" that God forgave the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh and spared them the punishment which He had declared early against them. Here, Jonah explicitly confesses the reason, previously unexplained, for his attempt to escape from the command of God. He does not think that the Ninevites deserved mercy from the Lord. Consequently, he is extremely angry when the city is spared rather than destroyed. There are three Hebrew words used to describe Jonah's anger: ra`a` (rah-AH), which can be translated as "evil," "hurt," "wicked," or "displeased;" ra` (rah), which can be understood as "evil," "wickedness," "hurt," or "mischief;" and chârâh (khah-RAH), which can be translated as "to burn," "to be hot," or "to be angry." Jonah was enraged and dejected that God's mercy had been extended to the people of Nineveh, the enemy of his people, Israel.

[2] And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. [3] Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.

With anger and frustration, Jonah complains to God, accusing Him of "injustice" for being merciful to the city of Nineveh. He knows who God is and knows His character. He knows that God is gracious, merciful, kind, and compassionate and forgives those who repent of their sin and come to Him. Jonah is aware of the possible outcome of the message he is called to preach in Nineveh: they would repent, and God would forgive them.

Now that Nineveh has repented, the anger of God against the city is averted, and they are spared. Jonah cannot handle this; for this reason, he has tried to flee to Tarshish. In his "selfish" prayer, he rhetorically questions God's character by asking, "Was not this my saying when I was yet in my country?" Is he expecting a positive answer from the Lord? Of course not. He attempts to flee to Tarshish because of his knowledge of God's unchanging character: "For I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil." He cannot reconcile himself with this knowledge.

He, therefore, begs the Lord to take away his life. The conjunction "therefore now," from the Hebrew word `attah (at-TAH), reflects why Jonah seeks to die. Using this conjunction here also implies that the time for discussing the matter is over. There is nothing else to

do but to fulfill the request. Jonah seems to say, "Since I know you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, of great kindness, and are eager to not bring destruction onto people, and I know you cannot change, let me die. It is better for me that way than to see these people forgiven." This statement clearly indicates the extent and degree of his anger and displeasure at what God has done (v. 1). He is so furious that for the second time, he would prefer to die (see 1:12).

Here, we see a man who is so patriotic that he puts his love for his people above the will of God and the salvation of 120,000 people of Nineveh. Jonah becomes so angry and enraged at the saving of 120,000 people from destruction—people he converted to God through his preaching—and so angry at the goodness of God that he prefers to die. "It is better for me to die than to live," he says. Is he justified in being so angry?

[4] Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry? [5] So Jonah went out of the city, sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.

The Lord confronts Jonah in verse 4 and poses the same question to him: "Doest thou well to be angry?" This question can be framed in various ways: "What right have you to be angry?" "Are you right to be angry?" "What justifies your anger?" and so on. In other words, the Lord is, on one hand, asking what gives Jonah authority to question Him or to meddle with His own authority and plan. By questioning Jonah, the Lord implicitly establishes His sovereignty and authority. God alone is the Lord and Creator of all things, and Jonah has no right to question His sovereignty and authority. What God does with His creation is within His control and power. Jonah seems to have forgotten that the Lord says, "I will... be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy" (Exodus 33:19, KJV). Through this question to Jonah, the Lord implicitly makes it clear that no person merits His grace or His acts of mercy, but that His will is the basis for bestowing His blessings.

God's blessings, grace, and mercy come not because humanity wills them, but because God is good, gracious, and merciful and does all things for humanity of His own free will and for His own pleasure. The question here reminds one of God's encounter with Job, although the encounter with Jonah is not as explicit as that with Job (Job 38).

Of course, just as Job could not answer the Lord's questions, so likewise Jonah cannot answer Him. Rather, still indignant and expecting God to do something (i.e., carry out His threat against Nineveh), Jonah goes to a solitary place on the city's east side. There, he builds a booth to protect himself from the sun, awaiting God's anger and punishment to come upon the city. He is still hoping that God will destroy the city. He is still so clouded with fury that he finds it difficult to see and understand that God's ways are not humankind's and that God's thoughts differ from the thoughts of humankind.

[6] And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd.

The Lord caused a plant to grow over Jonah and give him shade. The word "gourd" is qiqayon (Heb. ki-kah-YONE), and many commentators believe this to be the castor oil plant. This plant has abundant large leaves and small gourds on the branches. It is more than able to give shade to the traveler in the Near East.

Jonah's reaction to the plant is one of joy. Not only is he glad (Heb. samach, sa-MOK, which means to rejoice and sometimes religiously), but he is exceedingly (Heb. gadol) glad, which describes Jonah's strong intensity. This is an unusual amount of emotion for a plant that gives shade.

[7] But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. [8] And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.

Next, God prepares a worm to eat the plant. This worm is the coccus ilicis. The Hebrew word for this worm (Heb. tola', toe-LAH) is also used for the scarlet dye, which was taken from the decayed shell of the female of the species. Throughout the night, the worm smote (Heb. nakah, na-KAH) the plant. The literal meaning of the word is "to kill" or "wound." The sense here is to blight with disease.

After this, God sends a vehement (Heb. kharishi, kha-ree-SHE), or hot east wind, to blow on Jonah. It was intolerable enough for Jonah to become tired and wish that he was dead. It is this same phrase he used in verse 3. This exposes Jonah's twisted emotions as he wrestles with life. He is upset about the plants withering as much as he is upset about the Lord sparing Nineveh.

[9] And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. [10] Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:

Next, the Lord questions Jonah's priorities. Jonah responds with justification for his anger. The Lord says that Jonah had pity (Heb. khus, KHOOS) on the gourd. The word means "to spare" or "to have compassion on someone or something." Jonah had not invested any effort in causing the plant to grow. The Lord also points out that the plant had a short life span, showing that Jonah's angry fits are petty.

[11] And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

The Lord's question stemmed from Jonah's reaction to the withering of the plant (vv. 6–10). How could Jonah be concerned about the death of the gourd but remain unconcerned and indeed angry about the well-being of the people of Nineveh? Here again is another rhetorical question. The author contrasts Jonah's relation to the plant and God's relation to the people of Nineveh. The Lord questions Jonah, saying, "If you are so concerned about the well-being of one ordinary plant, do you have any reason I should not have mercy on 120,000 persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand and their animals? Why do you wish that they should perish?"

The expression, "persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand," is an idiomatic expression that tends to refer to the ignorance of the people of Nineveh regarding the Law compared to the Israelites. The expression can also refer to innocent children; in that case, the 120,000 persons do not refer to the entire population of Nineveh at the time but to the number of children in the city. In either case, the expression directly corresponds in meaning with its Igbo (Nigerian) equivalent. In Igbo, the idiom runs "innocent children who cannot differentiate their left hand from their right," and for children, it has a positive connotation. If used for adults, though, the connotation is negative and expresses ignorance or stupidity. In either case, it also denotes the helplessness of the people in question.

The addition of the phrase "much cattle" signifies the extent of destruction that would have been meted out to the city of Nineveh had they not repented—total destruction of both people and property. However, the ignorance of the people and the helplessness of the animals do not constitute the basis for the exercise of God's mercy; they are mentioned to reveal Jonah's lack of sympathy, his blindness, and his selfishness, which result from his religious exclusiveness, patriotic spirit, and hypocrisy. The book gives no conclusion and leaves us wondering whether or not Jonah's anger is abated and whether he changed his attitude toward Nineveh or not.

However, the story of Jonah does give us an understanding of the Lord's salvation plan and the revelation that in His sovereign mercy and grace, God does not discriminate between peoples—Jews and Gentiles. Quoting the Old Testament passage, Paul writes, "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Romans 9:14–15, KJV).