

Should Not I Pity Nineveh?

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- [0 : 0 0] And this is the word of the Lord. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, oh 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 and steadfast love and relenting from disaster.
- Therefore now, oh Lord, please take my life for me. For it is better for me to die than to live. And the Lord said, do you do well to be angry?
- Jonah went out of the city and he set to the east of the city and he made a booth for himself there. And he sat under it in the shade till he could see what would become of the city.
- 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.
- [1 : 0 1] But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant so that it withered. And 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 he said, it is better for me to die than to live. 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. 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, 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. This is God's holy word, Simon. Thank you so much for reading that.
- As I was sitting down there, I was thinking about whether I should make a joke. But then I thought the Bible forbids to make jokes about the elderly or short men, so not tonight.
- [2 : 1 5] We've made it. This is the last sermon in our Jonah Sermon series. And in God's providence, tonight's passage is all about bringing hope to a great city.
- And we've heard Derek and Katrina talking about their vision that they have of planting a hope church, a church that brings hope to a great city. Today's chapter is really, really interesting.
- It's really important because the rest of the book is very parallel. We had parallels in chapter one and chapter three. Jonah going to the meeting the Mariners, pagans, they come to God.
- And chapter three, Jonah going to Nineveh, they come to God. They repent, they turn around. In chapter two, we have Jonah talking to God, praying to God, having experience of faith.
- In chapter four, in the first few verses, we have the same thing. But then we have that little bit that sticks out in the very end. And that is very important. That's done on purpose.

[3 : 16] To tell you, this is where it all comes together. This is where you now understand the whole point of the book. And on the most basic level, there are two things that we can see in this chapter today.

First of all, God's compassion for Jonah. Second of all, God's compassion and love for the city. God is patient, God is compassionate.

We will talk about that today. How can God's love be seen? God's love and compassion for Jonah. Well, the whole story, the whole chapter, is God performing heart surgery on Jonah, as it were.

And God is very creative in that. He uses objects. Jonah is a prophet we've said in the last few weeks, who has run away from God and God has pursued him.

And then finally, Jonah went to Nineveh and preached, but then he's really, really angry. And now God's pursuing him again. God is patient. God is trying to make a point to Jonah.

[4 : 23] He's trying to make him understand more of his character. We see Jonah in this chapter rebelling again.

How do we see that? We see that in Jonah leaving the city. He goes to Nineveh, he preaches, they repent. He gets really, really angry. He has a little argument with God.

It ends with God asking him, do you do well to be angry? And then we don't get a response from Jonah. Because Jonah knows, of course, I don't do well to be angry, but he doesn't want to admit it.

If you have a fight with your partner, with your friend, or with your parents, what's the most annoying thing that can happen? If they say something in that argument, that is, that you know is true, right?

You argue with someone and the other person makes, a point that is really true and you know it, but you can't admit it, so you just walk away. That's what's happening here. Jonah goes outside the city and there he sits in his anger.

[5 : 22] And it's very interesting, he goes to the east of the city. Now, in the Old Testament, going east is never really a good sign. This is echoing books like Genesis, where we read that Cain, after being banished from Eden, leaves to the east.

Again, Jonah is leaving, trying to get away from the presence of God. It is a sign of rebellion that he's leaving to the east of the city.

We see that Jonah is now again in an environment that is dangerous and that symbolizes chaos. First he was in the ocean, which is dangerous.

Now he's in the desert, the wilderness, that is echoing the Israelites, sojourning through the wilderness after they've left Egypt.

It's dangerous, it's reflecting his spiritual state. He's surrounded by chaos, he's left the presence of the Lord. He's running away once again. And what does he do there?

[6 : 29] He builds a booth, he builds a little hut that is supposed to bring him shade. And shade in the Old Testament is often a symbol for God's protection, but in this case, it's a shade that he made for himself.

He built that little hut, he built that little booth. And he's sitting there still being angry, really, really angry. And now we see something very interesting.

Jonah's running away and God again comes and talks to him. God is once again showing Jonah his mercy. How does he do it?

He makes a little plant grow into a big plant that gives Jonah even more shade. He's showing him grace, he's showing him mercy. Though that is not all that is going on in that passage.

It's not that God just wants to do something nice for Jonah, he also wants to teach him something. So what does God do? He makes a plant grow, it gives Jonah shade, Jonah is really, really happy about it, exceedingly glad it says he has these, he's like a roller coaster.

[7 : 36] First he's happy, then he's angry, then he's happy again. And then he becomes angry again, why? Because God sends a little, he appoints a worm.

So we see in the whole book, God is using creation and animals and plants and wind and weather and all the elements to bring Jonah back on track.

And here he now appoints a little worm. And it says the worm attacks the plant, which is very interesting, the verb in Hebrew for attack, it's a military term.

So in my mind, I don't know if I'm just weird, but in my mind the worm is wearing a helmet and has a little sword in its hand. And it's attacking the plant and the plant withers and it's gone.

And that is not enough, no. God actually sends a wind that makes Jonah's name and Jonah's little booth crumble and now Jonah sits there without any shade in the hot sunlight and he is angry.

[8 : 39] I told you last week he's burning with anger. He is like that little man in the movie Inside Out, like the little anger figure in your head that his head's on fire, he's really, really not pleased with the situation.

What's the point of all of this? I think we can take a lot of symbolism in this text and we can take more obvious points, we can go a little deeper.

One of the obvious points is this. God is giving Jonah a plant, giving him mercy and he takes it away.

When does God take the plant away? When does he take the shade away? At noon, just when Jonah needs the shade the most in the hot sun in the Middle East.

The plant is mercy, the worm means judgment. God is making Jonah feel on a very, very small scale what judgment actually feels like.

[9 : 42] Because Jonah is sitting outside of the city praying for God to destroy the city. Hoping that God will actually, hoping and praying that God will actually kill all these people, that the city will be destroyed.

And God says, Jonah, you don't know what you're asking for. You have no idea what you're asking me to do. The same with his booth.

Jonah is making this little booth. He's sitting there creating his own little world, building up his own little, construct his own little house and it almost feels like he's trying to do things his own way.

And even that doesn't work. God takes that away too. He says, your own ideological ideas, your own agenda is also not gonna work. You are dependent on me. And these people in Nineveh are depending on me.

And we see that as well in how God uses creation. He appoints the fish, he appoints the worm, he appoints the wind and weather and the sea and the sun. And he says, no, everything is depending on me, even salvation.

[10 : 59] And though Jonah said in chapter two, salvation belongs to the Lord, it seems like he still doesn't understand what that means. Because if you don't want other people to experience God's grace, then you have to be ready to also have a taken away from you.

God says, I'm taking this little plant from you. I'm taking away the mercy that I've given you. And you're so angry.

And you're asking me to take the mercy away from Nineveh. They don't even, they have had no revelation about me. They had one reluctant prophet, Jonah, who went there, who preached a couple of sermons.

That's all they knew about me. And even then they turned away from their sin. And you're asking me to destroy them? They don't know the left hand from their right hand. Listen, if we don't experience what it means to fall under judgment, if we don't experience suffering to a certain degree, we will never understand what it means that God will judge some people.

God is sovereign. God doesn't want people to die. How can we, how can Jonah, who has experienced God's mercy, sit there and wish that God takes away the mercy from the Ninevites?

[12 : 30] It's not that Jonah doesn't like God's mercy. It's only that he doesn't like that God is extending it to other people. How can you, how can I, how can Christians just judge people in their minds and send them to hell?

Do we know what we're talking about? Do we actually know what it means that a soul can be lost for time and eternity? We should never, ever speak lightly of that.

God is teaching Jonah that. And the text, chapter four here, is also showing that in a different way. There is another little parallel to a different prophet in the Old Testament.

Jonah says he's angry enough to die. There was another prophet who said he wanted to die. Elijah, remember when Elijah was running away, when he had preached and preached, preached his heart out and Israel didn't repent.

He was sitting in the wilderness under a tree and a plant, and he expressed his wish to die. Elijah said because Israel did not repent.

[13 : 46] Jonah said because Nineveh did repent. And it's supposed to create a little bit of an irony here. Elijah was persecuted, he was frustrated. He longed for nothing but for Israel to turn back to God.

And he's exhausted and he's depressed and he's ready to die. Jonah, he just preached and Nineveh did repent. He's doing okay. It's simply the fact that God had taken away his plant.

It's simply the fact that God had extended his mercy to other people and he wants to die. All of this, it makes you wonder, did Jonah ever get it?

Did Jonah ever get it? Did God ever understand what God is all about? What God's mercy is all about? Did he ever understand that he was called to be a blessing to others?

Do we understand that? Do you know that you are blessed so you can be a blessing to others? Did Jonah understand that he was saved by grace?

[14 : 53] Did Jonah understand that he was saved by grace? That he did not deserve it? That God is sovereign in creation? That God is sovereign in salvation?

The truth is we don't know. You see, God does all of this. He makes the plant grow. He's trying to hold a mirror into Jonah's face, showing him how he has doubled standards, where his inconsistencies are in his theology, how he has such a distorted view of mercy, how his heart is so full of hate and judgment.

And in the end, God asks him a question. He says, you're mad about that little plant and you didn't even make it. I did. Why shouldn't I pity this great city?

You pity the plant. Why shouldn't I pity that great city with hundreds of thousands of people in it and much cattle?

What's Jonah's answer? What's his response? We don't get an answer, because what happens in that moment is that this book is turning to you. It's turning to me. It's turning to us.

[16 : 07] And it's saying, you are a Jonah. Why shouldn't God pity the city? Why shouldn't God save your enemies?

The people that you can't stand, the people who are bullying you, the people who are political enemies, the people who are making your life hard, who are mocking you for your faith. Why shouldn't God pity them?

God loves Jonah and he's showing him his mercy again and again by waking him up, by holding a mirror in front of him. Why? Because God sees us as we are.

He loves us as we are. He accepts us as we are. But by his grace, he does not leave us where we are. God works in us. God pursues Jonah.

God shows his compassion to him. All of this is just a big lesson for him. All of this is a big lesson for us. So we understand that mercy and grace and salvation belongs to the Lord.

[17 : 08] Secondly, we see God's love for the city. Throughout the book of Jonah and Nineveh, it is referred to as a great city. Every time preach against Nineveh, that great city.

Go to Nineveh, that great city. Why shouldn't I pity Nineveh, that great city? At one point it even says that great city to God. In that time, it was probably the largest, the biggest city in the entire world.

120,000 people, it says, live there. It could be even more than that. Sometimes in the Bible, 120,000 just means a lot of people.

A lot of people. God says, like the plant, I saw Nineveh grow. I saw it, how the people in there were developing and just increasing in number.

And there are so many people that I created. God pities the city. He loves the city. He doesn't love the sin. He doesn't love the violence. He doesn't love the people do things that don't please him.

[18 : 19] But he loves the people. He loves the city. If you're here tonight, chances are high. It's likely that you live in a great city too, unless you're a visitor.

But you probably are from Edinburgh or around Edinburgh. A great city. God loves that great city. Look around you.

The beauty of architecture, the culture, the art, all the diversity, the different individuals who walk about every day.

We live in a great city, friends. There's an application here for us. It is that God sends us to the city. Now let's talk a little bit why.

Have you ever thought why did God send Jonah to the city? Why not a little village somewhere? It's quite obvious, isn't it? If you send Jonah to a little village on the countryside and God does the same thing, everyone turns around and repents.

[19 : 23] You've got 100 people maybe, but you send Jonah to the city, you've got 120,000 people who get saved. You send Jonah to Nineveh and the news will spread to the countryside, in any case.

God wanted to save that city because it was a great city to him, because there were so many people in there who didn't know the right hand from their left. They didn't know the God who created them.

We need to understand this. We are a church who, in the heart of Edinburgh, a great city, on the royal mile, this is part of our vision.

This is part of the values we have here. A gospel movement. A city-wide gospel movement. That is what happened in Nineveh.

That means that if we preach and we live the gospel in Edinburgh, like Jonah did at some point in chapter 3, God will do great things.

[20 : 27] I'm sure of that, because God does not delight in the death of many. God wants to bring hope to the city. Why a city?

If you go to a smaller place, and smaller places are great, they also need great churches, they also need the gospel preached, but if you go to a smaller place, maybe you'll reach the politician, but you'll never reach politics.

Maybe you'll reach a teacher, but you'll never reach education. Maybe you'll reach an artist, but you'll never reach culture. Maybe a philosopher, but you will never change the mindset of a large city, the way people live, what is right, what is wrong, what they wear, how they act, how they speak.

Now, if you reach the city, you reach all that, and then that can change the rest. And we can see that throughout the Bible, right? We can see Paul. Where does he go? He goes to Antioch, Rome, Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and many, many more cities, because he knew from there the news will spread like wildfire, and it'll reach all the villages and little towns in between the cities.

We have the privilege of being in a city, of reaching places and people in the city, of bringing about a movement.

[21 : 55] By the latter half of the second century Christianity had spread through media, Perseparthia, and Bactria. By the end of the fourth century, it was officially adopted as Rome's state religion.

It worked. You find all kinds of people in the city. God sent Jonah to the city because he had compassion and love for the city.

And that is what he wants us to do. To go into the city, to reach people in the city, to seek transformation, to seek real change, lasting change.

Why? Why should we do that? Why should we go to the city? Why should we not just stay comfortable in, I don't know, somewhere where you can have a garden, for example?

Why should we sacrifice things to be in a place that sometimes is pretty inconvenient? Because it's worth it. Because we have been forgiven.

[23 : 04] Our debt was taken away. So we have to make sure to let other people know that their debt can be taken away if they trust in Jesus Christ.

You see, if we don't do that, then we are not any better than the man in the parable that Jesus tells, who was forgiven all his debt, and who turned to the man who owed him money and put him in the prison.

That's what Jonah does. He goes to the city. Finally, he preaches. Afterwards, he says, I wish I hadn't done it. I wish they wouldn't repent.

Or like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, who is not delighted when his younger brother turns around and comes home. Are we like that?

Do we actually long for people to be saved, to give their lives to Christ, to experience transformation? Jonah is like the older brother.

[24 : 06] He doesn't understand grace well enough anyways. He doesn't want to go and bring the younger brother home. Are we doing that? Are we ready to go into the city with compassion?

Why shouldn't I pity the city? Why shouldn't I pity Nineveh? Why shouldn't God pity the city? Do you see what that reveals about God's character?

Pity, compassion. So often, Christians are empty of compassion.

How can we be empty of compassion if we have received compassion from God, the living God, if we have received forgiveness?

We see that in Jesus all the time, don't we? Jesus looks at the people in Israel and he's moved by compassion. They're like sheep without a shepherd.

[25 : 08] They don't know their left hand from their right hand. He goes to Jerusalem and he weeps. He's moved by compassion.

Will we be moved by compassion? Has the gospel changed our hearts enough to share the good news of Jesus dying for you?

Or is it just too awkward sometimes? Mercy isn't just the job of the Christian. Mercy is the mark of the Christian.

That's what Tim Keller says. What do you do when you meet someone you struggle with? You have compassion. What do you do if someone bullies you?

You have compassion. What do you do if someone calls you the worst names for the fact that you're a Christian? You have compassion. Why?

[26 : 05] Because our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ had compassion. You see Jonah, he's sitting outside the city, hating it. Jesus stands outside the city, weeping for it.

Jonah went outside the city to witness condemnation. He went outside the city to judge it. Jesus went into the city, he preached, and he was forced to get outside the city with a cross on his back because he couldn't see the city being judged.

So he was judged for it. Let us pray. Father, help us to have compassion on the people around us. As you had compassion with us.

Help us to love them as you loved us. Help us to love you well, to follow you well, and to reach this city, Father.

Bring about a movement of the gospel. Bring about transformation, change that lasts. Father, we pray for our church plans in this city that you would reach many, for you said you have many people in this city.

[27 : 20] In Jesus' name we pray, amen.