

The Books of Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: A Prophet Angry at Mercy

Jonah 4:1–11

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this final chapter of Jonah unveils the book's true subject: the wideness of God's mercy and the narrowness of the human heart. God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (4:2, quoting Exodus 34:6), and His compassion reaches even to violent, pagan Nineveh. Teach this as a foreshadowing of the gospel that God desires all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3–4) and sends to all the world. The scandal of grace is that it goes to people we would exclude, and that exposes whether we have truly understood grace toward ourselves.

Guard against any reading that lets us side with Jonah's resentment or treats some people as beyond the reach of God's mercy. At the same time, do not soften God's holiness into mere sentimentality; Nineveh was spared because they repented, and God's pity for the lost is consistent with His justice. The point is not that judgment is unreal but that God genuinely delights to save, and so should we.

This chapter is a heart-searching mirror, and it forms the student more than almost any passage in the Minor Prophets. It confronts self-righteousness, resentment, misplaced loves, and indifference to the lost. Teach toward an enlarged heart, repentance from resentment, and joy in the mercy of God that saved us and reaches out to all.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jonah is furious that God spared Nineveh, and he confesses he fled because he knew God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (4:1–2). What does it reveal about the human heart that the very mercy of God can become an offense to us when it is shown to people we dislike?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by naming the shock of verse 1: "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry." The greatest revival in the book produces not joy but rage in the prophet. This is the hinge that reveals the whole book has been about Jonah's heart, not about a fish or a city.

Move to Jonah's stunning confession in verse 2: he ran in the first place because he knew God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." This is a direct quotation of God's own self-revelation in Exodus 34:6. Jonah's theology was flawless; his heart was

twisted. He fled not because he feared God would fail to be merciful, but because he feared God would succeed.

Teach the disturbing truth this exposes: God's mercy can become an offense to us when it is aimed at people we resent. The elder brother in Luke 15 and the grumbling workers in Matthew 20 feel the same way. Grace to the undeserving offends us precisely when we secretly think we are the deserving ones.

Help the class connect this to their understanding of their own salvation. We resent grace going to others only when we have forgotten that we ourselves are saved entirely by grace (Ephesians 2:1–9). The cure for Jonah's anger is to remember that he, too, was a runaway rescued from the deep by sheer mercy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The book's true subject is the human heart, not the fish or the city.
- Jonah's theology was sound while his heart was twisted.
- God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger (Exodus 34:6; Jonah 4:2).
- Grace to the undeserving offends us when we think ourselves deserving.
- Resenting grace to others reveals we have forgotten grace to ourselves (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God's mercy to certain people offend us so deeply?
- How can someone have flawless theology and a resentful heart at the same time?
- How does remembering our own rescue cure resentment toward others?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jonah would rather die than watch his enemies forgiven (4:3). Is there a person or group whose blessing or forgiveness would genuinely bother you? What does your honest answer reveal about the condition of your own heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes Jonah's death wish ("it is better for me to die than to live," v. 3) and asks the searching question underneath it: is there anyone whose forgiveness or blessing would genuinely bother us? Jonah would rather die than see his enemies saved.

Help the class answer honestly. Most of us would never say aloud that we want someone destroyed, but we can detect the milder forms in ourselves: a flicker of disappointment when someone we resent prospers, reluctance to pray for an enemy's good, satisfaction when a rival fails. These are Jonah's anger in smaller clothes.

Make the diagnostic clear. The people whose blessing would bother us reveal the boundaries of our love. We are happy for grace to flow toward those we like; the test of a heart shaped by the gospel is whether we can rejoice in grace toward those we do not.

Move toward repentance and prayer. One of the most transforming practices is to pray sincerely for the good of someone we resent (Matthew 5:44). It is hard to keep hating someone we are genuinely asking God to bless.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Our resentments reveal the boundaries of our love.
- Anger at others' blessing is Jonah's spirit in smaller forms.
- A gospel-shaped heart can rejoice in grace toward enemies.
- Praying for an enemy's good reshapes the heart (Matthew 5:44).
- Honest self-examination exposes hidden resentment.

Discussion Prompts

- Is there anyone whose forgiveness or blessing would genuinely bother you?
- What do our resentments reveal about the boundaries of our love?
- How might praying for an enemy's good begin to change your heart?

Question 3

Student Question:

God responds to Jonah's anger not with rebuke but with a question: "Do you do well to be angry?" (4:4). What does God's patient, probing question teach us about how He deals with us in our sin and resentment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 4 records God's response to Jonah's rage, and it is remarkable: not a rebuke, not a thunderbolt, but a question. "Do you do well to be angry?" God deals with His sulking prophet the way a patient parent deals with a child, inviting self-examination rather than crushing him.

Teach what this reveals about God's character. He is "slow to anger" not only toward Nineveh but toward Jonah. The same patience God showed the pagan city He now shows His resentful servant. God's gentleness with us in our sin is itself an expression of the mercy Jonah is resenting.

Help the class see the power of God's question. A good question does what a lecture often cannot: it gets past our defenses and invites us to look honestly at ourselves. God is not asking because He needs information; He is asking so Jonah will examine his own heart. God often works in us the same way, through the probing question of conscience and Scripture.

Apply it pastorally. When we are angry or resentful, the kindest thing God can ask is, “Do you do well to be angry?” It is an invitation to bring the anger into the light rather than nurse it in the dark. God’s questions are a mercy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God deals with our sin patiently, often through questions, not just rebuke.
- God is slow to anger toward His own resentful servants.
- God’s gentleness in our sin is itself an expression of mercy.
- A good question gets past our defenses and invites honesty.
- God’s probing of our hearts is a kindness, not a threat.

Discussion Prompts

- What does God’s gentle question reveal about how He deals with us in our sin?
- Why is a probing question sometimes more powerful than a rebuke?
- How is God’s patience with Jonah itself an example of the mercy Jonah resents?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jonah went out, made himself a shelter, and sat to see what would happen to the city (4:5), apparently still hoping for its destruction. Where are you tempted to sit on the sidelines hoping for someone’s downfall rather than longing for their good?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question draws on verse 5: Jonah leaves the city, builds himself a booth, and sits down “to see what would become of the city.” He is still hoping, it seems, that judgment might fall after all. He pulls up a chair to watch for fireworks of destruction.

Help the class recognize the spectator-of-downfall posture in themselves. It shows up as following the saga of someone’s failure with a little too much interest, waiting to be proven right about a person we have judged, or quietly hoping a difficult coworker or relative finally gets what is coming to them.

Contrast this with the heart of God, who does not sit waiting for downfall but works for repentance and life (Ezekiel 33:11). The believer’s posture toward others, even difficult others, should be longing for their good, not watching for their ruin.

Move toward a concrete reorientation. Invite the class to identify someone whose downfall they have been half-watching for, and to consciously begin praying and hoping for that person’s good instead. The shift from spectator-of-ruin to intercessor-for-good is deeply transforming.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We are tempted to spectate on others' downfall rather than long for their good.
- Watching for someone's ruin is the opposite of God's heart.
- God works for repentance and life, not destruction (Ezekiel 33:11).
- The believer should long for the good even of difficult people.
- Becoming an intercessor for someone changes how we see them.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to sit and watch for someone's downfall?
- How does God's heart differ from the spectator-of-ruin posture?
- Whose good could you begin praying for instead of watching for their failure?

Question 5

Student Question:

God "appointed" a plant, then a worm, then a scorching east wind (4:6-8), just as He had appointed the storm and the fish. What does this continued sovereignty over plant, worm, and wind teach us about how God patiently arranges even small circumstances to reach our hearts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 6-8 return to the language of divine appointment: God "appointed" a plant, then "appointed" a worm, then "appointed" a scorching east wind. The same sovereign God who appointed the storm and the fish now arranges a plant, an insect, and a weather pattern, all to teach one stubborn prophet a lesson about his heart.

Teach the patient pedagogy of God. He does not give up on Jonah; He keeps working, now through gentle comfort (the plant) and now through discomfort (the worm and wind), to bring Jonah to self-knowledge. God is willing to use the small circumstances of life as instruments of formation.

Help the class see God's hand in their own small circumstances. The minor comforts and inconveniences of a day, an unexpected kindness, a frustrating loss, a change in the weather of our lives, can be God's appointed tools to expose our hearts and draw us toward Him. Nothing is too small for His purposes.

Keep the emphasis on God's kindness in this. He could have simply condemned Jonah's attitude; instead He patiently constructs an object lesson. God's willingness to teach rather than merely condemn is grace, and it invites us to ask what He might be teaching us through our own ordinary days.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God sovereignly governs even plant, worm, and wind.
- God patiently uses small circumstances to form our hearts.

- God works through both comfort and discomfort to teach us.
- Nothing is too small to serve God's purposes.
- God's willingness to teach rather than merely condemn is grace.

Discussion Prompts

- What does God's control over plant, worm, and wind teach about His care in small things?
- How might God be using ordinary circumstances to shape your heart right now?
- Why is it grace that God teaches Jonah rather than simply condemning him?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jonah was "exceedingly glad" about the plant that comforted him, then despairing when it died (4:6–9). How do you see your own emotions rising and falling more over personal comforts than over the things that matter most to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on the wild swing of Jonah's emotions: "exceedingly glad" about the plant (v. 6), then so angry at its death that he wants to die (v. 9). His moods rise and fall entirely with his personal comfort, while the fate of a whole city leaves him cold. His emotional thermostat is set to self.

Help the class examine their own emotional life honestly. What actually moves us? For many of us, a slow internet connection or a minor inconvenience can ruin a morning, while news of people far from God barely registers. Our emotions are a revealing map of what we truly value.

Avoid mere guilt-tripping. The point is not that we should never enjoy comforts or feel frustration, but that a heart aligned with God will increasingly be moved by what moves Him: the lost, the hurting, the things of His kingdom. Misaligned emotions are a symptom of misaligned loves.

Point toward the slow work of reordering. As we draw near to God, spend time in His word, and pray for the people He loves, our hearts gradually begin to break over what breaks His and rejoice over what brings Him joy. The thermostat can be reset, but only by drawing near to the fire of God's own heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Our emotions reveal what we truly value.
- A self-centered heart rises and falls with personal comfort.
- Aligned hearts are moved by what moves God.
- Misaligned emotions are a symptom of misaligned loves.
- Nearness to God gradually reorders our affections.

Discussion Prompts

- What everyday things move your emotions most, and what does that reveal?
- How do our emotional reactions map our true values?
- How can drawing near to God begin to reset what we care about?

Question 7

Student Question:

God exposes the disorder in Jonah's heart: he pitied a plant he did not labor over, while feeling no pity for a city of people (4:10–11). How does this confront the way we can care intensely about our own comfort and conveniences while remaining indifferent to people's eternal welfare?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 10–11 deliver God's climactic argument, exposing the disorder in Jonah's loves: "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow... And should not I pity Nineveh?" Jonah grieved over a weed he did nothing to create, while feeling nothing for a city of people made in God's image. His compassion was real but radically misplaced.

Teach the principle of rightly ordered loves. The problem is not that Jonah cared about the plant; it is that he cared about a plant more than about people. Disordered love cares intensely about lesser things (comfort, convenience, possessions) while remaining cold toward greater things (people, their eternal welfare, the glory of God).

Bring this uncomfortably close to home. We can be passionate about our hobbies, our homes, our preferences, and our comforts, while feeling little for our lost neighbors or the spiritual condition of those around us. The contrast between how we feel about an inconvenience and how we feel about a soul is exposing.

Point to the value God places on people. Nineveh's worth is measured not in its wealth or power but in its persons, more than a hundred and twenty thousand made in God's image. To care about what God cares about is to learn to see people the way He sees them, as immensely valuable and worth pursuing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jonah's compassion was real but radically misplaced.
- Disordered love prizes lesser things over greater ones.
- We can care more about comforts than about people's eternal welfare.
- God measures a city's worth in persons made in His image.
- Rightly ordered love learns to value what God values.

Discussion Prompts

- How can we care intensely about comforts while remaining cold toward people?
- What would it look like to value people the way God values them?
- Where do you sense your loves are out of order?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jonah's compassion was badly misplaced, centered on his own comfort rather than on people. Where do you need God to reorder your loves, so that you care about what He cares about, especially the people around you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question follows directly from God's argument and asks the student to invite God to reorder their loves. Jonah needed his affections rearranged so that he cared about what God cared about. So do we.

Help the class understand that we cannot simply will ourselves to care about the right things. Reordered loves are cultivated, not manufactured: through time in God's presence, through prayer for specific people, through serving those we are tempted to ignore, through asking God to give us His heart for the lost.

Make it concrete. Suggest practices that reorder loves: learning the name and story of a neighbor far from God, praying daily for one person's salvation, serving someone whose welfare we have ignored. Loves often follow actions; as we invest in people, our hearts begin to follow.

Keep Christ central. The supreme reordering of our loves comes from beholding the love of Christ, who valued us when we were His enemies (Romans 5:8–10). As we grasp how He loved us, we are freed and moved to love others, even our Ninevehs.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reordered loves are cultivated, not manufactured by willpower.
- Prayer, presence, and service reshape our affections.
- Our hearts often follow our actions and investments.
- Caring for the lost begins with concrete steps toward real people.
- Beholding Christ's love for us reorders our love for others (Romans 5:8–10).

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most need God to reorder your loves?
- What concrete practice could help you begin caring about what God cares about?
- How does Christ's love for you, while you were His enemy, move you to love others?

Question 9

Student Question:

The book ends with God's question, "And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons... and also much cattle?" (4:11). How does this closing question reveal the heart of God for the lost of all nations, foreshadowing the gospel going to all the world, and how does it expose any narrowness in our own hearts about who deserves God's mercy?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it rests on the book's final, deliberately open question: "And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (4:11). The book ends not with a tidy resolution but with the heart of God laid bare.

Teach the wideness of God's mercy as the climax of the whole book. God's pity reaches even to violent, pagan Nineveh, the very enemies of His people. The phrase "who do not know their right hand from their left" pictures their spiritual lostness; God pities the lost precisely as lost. This is the heartbeat of the gospel: God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

Connect this to the missionary trajectory that runs through all three of these prophets and bursts into the open in Jonah. The God who pities Nineveh is the God who would send His Son for the world (John 3:16) and commission His church to take the gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Jonah, written centuries earlier, is a startling preview of God's heart for the nations.

Now turn the question on the class, as God intends. The book ends with a question and no answer about Jonah because the question is really being asked of every reader. Is there a Nineveh in our hearts, a person or group whose salvation we would rather not see? The gospel that saved us is the same gospel that reaches them, and to resent that is to stand with Jonah outside the city, sulking under a dead plant.

Hold mercy and holiness together. God's pity for Nineveh is not a denial of His justice; Nineveh was spared because they repented, and God's compassion always moves toward bringing the lost to repentance and life. The good news is not that sin does not matter but that God delights to save sinners who turn to Him, and that delight should become ours.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's mercy reaches even to His people's enemies.
- God pities the lost precisely as lost ("do not know their right hand from their left").
- God desires all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4).
- Jonah foreshadows the gospel going to all nations (Matthew 28:18-20).

- The open-ended question is really aimed at every reader.
- Resenting God's mercy to others is standing with Jonah outside the city.
- God's pity moves the lost toward repentance and life, not away from justice.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the closing question reveal the heart of God for the lost of all nations?
- Is there a Nineveh in your heart, a person or group whose salvation you would rather not see?
- Why does the book end with an unanswered question, and how does that question land on you?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole chapter, and indeed the whole book of Jonah. Name one specific way Jesus is using this story to enlarge your heart toward people you have written off, to free you from resentment, and to make you glad rather than grudging about the wideness of God's mercy.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question asks the student to look back over the whole chapter, and the whole book, and name one specific way Christ is enlarging their heart, freeing them from resentment, or making them glad about the wideness of God's mercy. Press for a concrete, personal answer.

Gather the threads of the entire book: the runaway prophet, the relentless pursuit of God, the prayer from the depths, the repentance of a great city, and the exposure of a heart that resented grace. The journey of Jonah is, in the end, the journey of every heart from narrowness toward the wideness of God's mercy.

Help different people land differently. For one, the lesson is releasing a long-held resentment. For another, it is letting God reorder loves that have grown self-centered. For another, it is simply marveling that the same grace that saved a runaway prophet and a pagan city saved them too.

Close in prayer that asks God to give us His heart for the lost, to free us from every Jonah-like resentment, and to make us glad, not grudging, about the boundless mercy that reaches even our enemies, and even us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Transformation is specific and personal.
- An enlarged heart, freedom from resentment, and joy in mercy are the chief fruits.
- Jonah's journey mirrors every heart's journey toward God's wideness.

- The same grace that saved Jonah and Nineveh saves us.
- Self-examination should end in prayer for God's heart toward the lost.

Discussion Prompts

- Name one way Christ is enlarging your heart through the book of Jonah.
- What resentment is God inviting you to release?
- How does it change you to know the same grace that saved Jonah and Nineveh saved you?