

The Books of Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah

Lesson 5: A Prophet Angry at Mercy -- Jonah 4:1-11

Most stories end when the mission succeeds. Jonah preaches, the city repents, God shows mercy, and we expect the curtain to fall on a happy prophet praising God for the greatest revival in history. Instead, the book takes a turn that is almost shocking. Jonah is furious. The salvation of a hundred and twenty thousand people makes him so angry he wants to die. Chapter 4 is where we discover that the real problem in this book was never the fish or the storm. The real problem was always Jonah's heart.

And then Jonah says the most revealing thing in the entire book. He tells God why he ran in the first place: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Read that again slowly. Jonah ran from God not because he doubted God's mercy but because he was sure of it. He did not want Nineveh forgiven. He wanted them destroyed. And he was afraid that if he preached, God would do exactly the gracious thing God loves to do. Jonah's problem was not bad theology; it was a heart that resented grace going to the wrong people.

So God, ever patient, gives His sulking prophet an object lesson. Jonah storms out of the city and sits down to wait, half hoping fire will fall. God appoints a leafy plant to shade him, and Jonah is delighted, the only thing in the whole book that makes him happy. Then God appoints a worm to kill the plant and a scorching wind to bake him, and Jonah is back to wishing he were dead. He cares more about a plant that shaded his head than about a city full of people made in God's image.

The book ends not with a tidy resolution but with a question hanging in the air: "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?" God never tells us whether Jonah finally softened. The question is left open on purpose, because it is really being asked of us. Is there anyone whose forgiveness would make us angry? Is there a Nineveh in our own hearts, a person or group we would rather see judged than saved? The whole book has been building to that searching, gracious question.

Group Discussion: Jonah was angry that God showed mercy to people he thought did not deserve it. Why do you think God's grace toward certain people can be so offensive to us, and what does that reveal about how we understand grace toward ourselves?

Personal Reflection: God asked Jonah twice, "Do you do well to be angry?" Is there a resentment or anger you have been nursing that God might be gently questioning in you right now? What would it look like to bring it honestly to Him?

Read Jonah 4:1-11

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Luke 15:25–32, the elder brother angry at the father’s mercy to the prodigal; Matthew 20:1–16, the workers angry at the landowner’s generosity; Luke 6:35–36, love your enemies and be merciful as your Father is merciful; Ephesians 2:1–9, by grace you have been saved, and we were all once children of wrath; 1 Timothy 2:3–4, God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

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