

JONAH IS TAUGHT THE DEPTH OF GOD'S MERCY JONAH 04:01–11

Introduction

There are occasions in life when all of us need people to be caring, compassionate, and merciful. When dealing with any critical situation — severe illness, divorce, death, to name a few — the human heart longs for others to be understanding and kind hearted, perhaps even forgiving. During such times, people from all walks of life (believers, in particular) should extend a helping hand to the person or persons in need.

There are times, however, when people are hesitant to reach out to others. When a person's lifestyle is so wicked that we do not want to be associated with the individual; or when we feel the individual does not deserve to be helped, we may not show kindness and compassion. We might hold back in judgment. But we can be assured of one truth: God knows every heart and longs to have mercy on every individual. Even if a person has rejected and cursed God's Holy Name, the LORD will shower His mercy upon the individual if he or she will do but one thing: repent. The person must turn away from the life of sin and turn to the LORD, showing love for God and His people. The person must also turn to God for mercy and begin to be compassionate toward others.

Surprisingly, this is the subject of the present Scripture. Jonah, who had been showered with God's mercy time and again, is shown to have a hard heart. He does not understand the depth of God's mercy, that God's mercy can reach down to the depth of human depravity and save the most wicked, in this case represented by the Assyrians. Jonah has difficulty accepting the fact that God could save a people as wicked and cruel as them. It is this great lesson on God's mercy that Jonah must learn. This is, *Jonah Is Taught the Depth of God's Mercy*, Jonah 4:1-11.

- I. The displeasure and anger of Jonah: over Nineveh's being spared (vv. 1-4).
- II. The depth of God's mercy (vv. 5-11).

I. *Jonah 04:01–04 The Displeasure and Anger of Jonah: Over Nineveh's Being Spared*

Jonah was very upset, even angry over God's goodness to the Ninevites (v. 1). The Ninevites had repented — turned from their wicked ways — and God had been merciful to them. Instead of sending His judgment down upon the people, the LORD had relented — and turned back His wrath. Thus the Ninevites were spared (3:10). They would not be destroyed as God had warned through the preaching of His prophet Jonah.

Why would the repentance and salvation of the Ninevites displease Jonah so much? Why would his response be so negative? After all, he had been the instrument whom the LORD had chosen to warn the Ninevites of impending judgment. Instead of showing

displeasure, Jonah should have been rejoicing and praising God. But he was not. He was, in fact, furious with the LORD. Note the Scripture and outline:

1. Jonah discussed his anger with the LORD. He did not keep the anger stored up in his heart, nor did he rant and rave or share his anger with others. He did exactly what he should have done. He got alone and prayed, sharing with the LORD why he was so upset and angry (vv. 2-3). Addressing the LORD, Jonah said that he knew what the LORD would do when He first called the prophet: the LORD would save Nineveh. Surprisingly, this is a clear admission that Jonah held prejudice within his heart against the Ninevites because of their wicked lifestyle and their brutal mistreatment of other people. Jonah was having difficulty accepting the fact that God would save a people who were so utterly depraved. He even admitted that this was the very reason he had earlier rejected God's call and fled to Tarshish.

Jonah went on to confess that he knew God's character. The word *knew* or *know* in this sense means a close, intimate, experiential knowledge. In other words, Jonah had personally experienced or benefited from these wonderful traits of God in his own life. He knew that God was...

- gracious and merciful or compassionate
- slow to anger and abounding in love
- willing to relent or turn away from executing His judgment (1:15-17; 2:10; 3:1-2)

When Jonah looked at the Ninevites he saw a cruel, wicked people who oppressed and subdued others through the most violent acts of brutality imaginable. In Jonah's mind, a people so ruthless and evil needed to be punished, not saved. Sadly, the prophet was so discouraged and distressed over the situation that he asked God to take his life (v. 3).

Combining all that Jonah said with his requests to die, the spiritually mature reader is left wondering what could be troubling Jonah so much. Could a prophet whom God used so powerfully really have a deep-seated prejudice within his heart? Or could he really misunderstand the love of God so much that he could not accept God's saving the most vile sinners? How could he be so ignorant of the part that true repentance plays in arousing the forgiveness of God — even for the most wicked?

Keep in mind what Jonah said in his prayer: from the moment God commissioned him to go to Nineveh, he knew that God was going to save the Ninevites. Despite their extreme wickedness, their unspeakable cruelty, and their brutal abuse of other people, he knew God would save them if they truly repented. Obviously, Jonah was having great difficulty understanding the depth of God's mercy, why God would be so forgiving of a people that callous and vicious in their behaviour. However, there was probably another reason for Jonah's anger and displeasure as well.

Nineveh's repentance probably meant the end of Jonah's ministry to his own people.

The Jews wanted Nineveh destroyed, not saved. If Nineveh was destroyed as a result of Jonah's preaching, the Jews would probably flock to his preaching. But since the Ninevites repented and were saved, the Jews would likely never accept Jonah again — not after he went to their bitter enemies and led them to escape God's judgment. Very few Jews would embrace any person who stepped forth to stop the destruction of the Assyrians, nor would any other nationality so brutally oppressed. In Jonah's mind, his reputation and ministry were over forever. For this reason he was extremely distraught over the repentance of the Ninevites.

2. God's response to Jonah was soft and tender. The LORD asked His dear prophet a thought-provoking question: Was it right for him to be angry over the Ninevites' repentance and salvation?

That is all God asked. Nothing else! The LORD expected Jonah to think through the question. Of course, Jonah's anger was not justified. His anger was *not directed against the wickedness of the Ninevites but against the repentance of the wicked people* and the mercy God had showered upon them. Jonah's wrath and resentment, his lack of understanding and compassion were completely unwarranted. Once again he was committing a serious sin against the LORD (see note, Eph 4:26-27).

Thought 1. God warns us: we must not allow anger to become embedded within our hearts. Embedded anger can take over and consume our every thought, even our lives. If we allow it, anger will smoulder within us and eventually erupt in a fit of rage or hostility, causing discord or dissension or worse. Listen to what God's Holy Word says about anger and the outgrowth of it:

Gal 5:19-21 *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

Mat 5:22 *But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.*

Rom 1:18, 29, 31-32 *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips,...they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.*

Eph 4:26-27 *"In your anger do not sin:" Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.*

Jas 1:19-20 My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

Psa 37:8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret — it leads only to evil.

Prov 14:17 A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated.

Prov 16:32 Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.

Prov 19:11 A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.

Eccl 7:9 Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.

II. Jonah 04:05–11 The Depth of God's Mercy

Above all else, Jonah needed to learn the depth of God's mercy. With that in mind, God set out to teach His dear prophet the amazing truth that His mercy can reach anyone, even the person who has sunk to the lowest depths of human depravity.

1. In order to think through the LORD's probing question, Jonah sought solitude outside the city, some place east of Nineveh where he could still observe the capital. Because of the blazing hot sun, Jonah quickly constructed a temporary shelter. Then he sat down in the shade provided by the shelter, watching and waiting to see exactly what would happen to the city. If the Ninevites had genuinely repented of their sins and truly turned to the LORD, nothing would happen at the end of the 40 days. But if their repentance was superficial or hypocritical, the prophet knew that God would carry out His judgment upon the city when the 40 days were up. God's holy wrath would immediately destroy the city by fire. Therefore, Jonah left the city in order to stay safe as well as to observe whatever might take place at the appointed time.

Although Jonah had built the temporary shelter for shade, the leaves of the bush he had used for the roof had apparently withered rather quickly. Subsequently, the LORD had mercy upon His dear servant sitting there exposed to the heat of the sweltering sun.

2. God caused a fast-growing plant to cover Jonah's shelter, a plant that provided enough shade to ease his discomfort (v. 6). Note that the provision of the plant was a direct act of God's compassion and mercy. Of course, Jonah was very grateful for the vine and the shade it provided.
3. Unknown to Jonah, the LORD was planning to use the vine to teach him a much-needed lesson on the depth of God's mercy (vv. 7-9). At dawn on the very next day, the LORD sent a worm to kill the vine, quickly causing the leaves to wither and allowing the sun to beat down on the prophet (v. 7). The LORD then sent a scorching east wind, a desert sandstorm. The pelting sand, the blistering wind, and the blazing hot sun probably exceeded 120 or more degrees Fahrenheit. Understandably, Jonah grew faint and felt totally exhausted. He felt as though his life was slipping away.

Sitting there totally miserable, most likely suffering from dehydration, he wished for a quick death as opposed to a slow, painful death of dehydration (v. 8). But at that very moment, God rescued His dear prophet. And God questioned Jonah once again: Was it right for him to be angry over the vine's death? Obviously somewhat irritated, Jonah rashly replied, "Yes!" (v. 9).

4. The LORD now knew that Jonah was ready to listen to the lesson he absolutely must learn. Therefore, the LORD rebuked him by stressing three facts (vv. 10-11).
 - a. Jonah had been greatly concerned for his physical comfort when he lost the shade provided by the vine that died (v. 10). Although he had not given life to the vine nor nourished the vine to make sure it continued to grow, when it died, Jonah felt its loss deeply. He was greatly affected by the loss of its shade.
 - b. When it came to the spiritual welfare of the Ninevites, the prophet showed less concern for the 120,000 people of the capital who were lost and did not know the LORD than he had shown for his own personal comfort (v. 11a). Again Jonah had not given life nor sustained the life of the vine; still he grieved over its loss. Yet he did not suffer an ounce of grief over the 120,000 lost souls of Nineveh.
 - c. God asked Jonah a piercing question: Since the LORD is the Creator of all life, why should He not show concern and mercy for the lost souls of the great city of Nineveh? The LORD is long-suffering (patient), not willing that any person perish. God does not even want the animals (cattle) that are so dependent upon man to perish. God's mercy reaches out to all equally, showing no favoritism or discrimination whatsoever. This was the great lesson that God's dear prophet Jonah needed to learn. God's heart is filled with compassion for all people. He seeks to pour out His love and mercy on each and every one.

This was the answer to the LORD's question. Scripture does not reveal how or if Jonah responded. The great book of *Jonah* ends with God's thought-provoking question. As a result, every generation knows that no matter who they are nor how depraved they may be, if they truly repent — truly trust the LORD by following Him and His holy commandments — they will receive God's mercy and be saved.

Luke 1: 50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

Acts 15:11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.

Rom 3:23-24 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Eph 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.

Eph 2:4-9 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you

have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.

Titus 2:11-14 *For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*

Titus 3:4-7 *But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

Psa 103:17 *But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children.*

Psa 106:1 *Praise the LORD. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.*

Psa 119:64 *The earth is filled with your love, LORD; teach me your decrees.*

Lam 3:22-23 *Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

Joel 2:13 *Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.*

Micah 7:18 *Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.*

Thought 1. Sadly, the lessons we learn from Jonah — a believer, a man called by God, a prophet — are how *not* to behave. Jonah ran away from God, rebelled against God, disobeyed God, argued with God, and even questioned God's judgment. He also acted selfishly; he sulked; and he showed no concern for lost souls. Yet God has used the story of Jonah for centuries to teach the importance of obeying God, witnessing to the lost, and giving great hope to the most depraved of society.

As believers, we must not sit back and judge the wicked of the world. God loves them, too! There are a number of ways we can reach out to the lost and help fulfil the great commission. To name a few: we can pray; we can give financially; we can volunteer in an organization or activity; we can go to the mission fields of the world

— some right in our own back yards. The point is this: we all have to do something. If we do not do it, who will? Listen to what God's Holy Word says...

Mat 28:19-20 *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

Mark 16:15 *He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”*

Luke 24:47 *And repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*

John 3:16-19 *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.*

John 5:24, 28-29 *“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life”... “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”*

Acts 1:8 *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

Acts 4:20 *For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*

Acts 5:32 *“We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”*

Thought 2. As the great book of Jonah comes to a close, several commentators make excellent statements that are well worth quoting:

(1) John D. Hannah says this in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*:

As the book concludes, Jonah was angry, depressed, hot, and faint. And he was left to contemplate God's words about his own lack of compassion and God's depth of compassion. The LORD had made His points: (a) He is gracious toward all nations, toward Gentiles as well as Israelites; (b) He is sovereign; (c) He punishes rebellion; and (d) He wants His own people to obey Him, to be rid of religious sham, and to place no limits on His universal love and grace. (John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck,

Editors. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1985), p.1473).

(2) Joyce Baldwin says this in closing her commentary on Jonah:

The narration comes to an abrupt end with a probing question that remains unanswered. Did Jonah capitulate and admit to a self-centred enjoyment of God's favour while begrudging it to others? Did his fellow Israelites acknowledge that God's generous love far surpasses human ideas or fairness, and that his forgiveness of the undeserving should be a cause for rejoicing, not for resentment? Jonah had no right to God's favour; so who was he to deny it to anyone else? (Joyce Baldwin. *Jonah*. "The Minor Prophets," Vol. 2. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 1993), p. 590).

(3) Frank S. Page says this in closing his commentary on Jonah:

Some have remarked that the book of Jonah ends abruptly or somehow in an incomplete manner. On the contrary, the book ends in a way that draws attention and, therefore, increases its teaching potential. While the book does not tell the final effect of God's teaching session on Jonah, the ending is not anticlimactic. It is true no words are wasted, but the message of the book is succinctly stated in v. 11. The book ends with a clear contrast between the ways of God and the ways of Jonah. ...The story is deliberately left open-ended for those who study its message to complete in their own lives. (Billy Smith, Frank S. Page. *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, p. 283).

(4) Lloyd J. Ogilvie says this in closing his commentary on Jonah:

A final thought: Michelangelo's painting on the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican portrays the prophets, apostles, and patriarchs. Of all the faces he painted, none has a more radiant countenance than Jonah. We wonder if Michelangelo knew something we do not know about what happened to Jonah after the sudden close of his biography. Or, perhaps the artist hoped that Jonah did indeed accept God's pity and become a communicator of grace. We do not know. But what we do know is that our own portrait is not finished. And what it will be is dependent on the mercy we receive and give away in our Nineveh. (Lloyd L. Ogilvie. *The Preacher's Commentary on Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*. (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1990, 2003), p. 433).

(5) James Montgomeiy Boice closes his commentary on Jonah with these words:

The book ends with a question, a question that has no written answer. This is not a mistake. It ends on a question in order that each one who reads it might ask himself or herself the same question: Is God not right? Is He not great for showing mercy?

The lessons of this book are many. There are lessons that concern Jonah himself. He is a type of practically everything: a type of Christ (who was buried but who rose again), a type of Israel, a type of all believers (for we all run away from God at times and need to be disciplined). There are lessons that concern Nineveh and

the true meaning of repentance. There are lessons relating to the doctrine of God's sovereignty over men and nature.

But greater than all these lessons is the lesson of the greatness of the mercy of God. How great is God's mercy. We have a hymn that says, "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea. " But even that is not wide enough. The real measure of the wideness of the mercy of God is that of the outstretched arms of the LORD Jesus Christ as He hung on the cross to die for our salvation. That is the wideness of God's mercy. That is the measure of the length to which the love of God will go.

*How can we, who have known that mercy and benefited from it, be less than merciful to others? How can we do less than love them and carry the gospel to them with all the strength at our disposal? (James Montgomery Boice. *The Minor Prophets*, Vol. 1, p. 250).*

(6) Warren Wiersbe closes his commentary on *Jonah* with these words:

*Jonah had one more lesson to learn, perhaps the most important one of all. In chapter 1, he learned the lesson of God's providence and patience, that you can 'I run away from God. In chapter 2, he learned the lesson of God's pardon, that God forgives those who call upon Him. In chapter 3, he learned the lesson of God's power as he saw a whole city humble itself before the LORD. Now he had to learn the lesson of God's pity, that God has compassion for lost sinners like the Ninevites; and his servants must also have compassion. It seems incredible, but Jonah brought a whole city to faith in the LORD and yet he didn't love the people he was preaching to! (Warren W. Wiersbe. *The Bible Exposition Commentary — The Prophets*, 386). ■*