

FOR PITY'S SAKE

Jonah 4:5-11

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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? (JON. 4:11).

Why does God ask questions? Some theologians argue that God's questions in the Bible indicate a deficiency in his knowledge; God simply doesn't know. But this view is at odds with the Bible's teaching about God; Job, for instance, tells us that God "looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens" (Job 28:24). Moreover, this approach makes poor sense of the passages in which God asks questions. When God asked newly fallen Adam, "Where are you?... Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Gen. 3:9, 11), it was not because God did not know where Adam was or what he had done. The purpose was to drive home to Adam the enormity of his sin. Likewise, when God asked Cain, "Where is Able your brother?" it was not because God did not know about the human race's first murder. Rather, it was to demand an account of Cain's actions in his own words. God's questions, writes Peter Williams, "are meant to teach us something, or to expose to us our inner selves when we are guilty of sin or disobedience... So whenever we read the Bible and come across God asking a question, we ought to ask ourselves, 'Is God addressing that question to me, and if so what am I meant to learn from it?'"¹

¹ Peter Williams, *Jonah – Running from God* (Epsom, Surrey, UK: Day One, 2003), 95.

JONAH'S PITIFUL ATTITUDE

So it was with the three questions that God asks to Jonah in the conclusion of this book. Jonah was exceedingly angry that God had spared wicked Nineveh: so angry that he wanted to die. So God asked him, "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jon. 4:4). Jonah thought that he did, so he set up a booth to the east of the city, sitting out in the hot sun to watch what would happen. God responded to Jonah's situation by appointing a plant to come up over Jonah and shade his head. Then, at dawn the next day, God appointed a worm to attack and kill the plant. Again, Jonah was so unhappy that he said, "It is better for me to die than to live" (Jon. 4:8). So God asked a second question, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" Jonah replied bitterly, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die" (Jon. 4:9).

God's purpose in these questions was first of all to expose Jonah's self-centered attitude. We see this, first, in what it is that makes Jonah happy. Amidst all the complaints from Jonah that fill his book, there is only one time when he is glad. Jonah was not happy when God blessed his preaching with the mass repentance of Nineveh. Instead, he was comically miserable, since they did not meet his ethnic and moral requirements for salvation. Undoubtedly, most of their practices were out of accord with Scripture and their grasp of doctrine was outrageously deficient. Jonah responded as a most determined fundamentalist: he would not associate with the newly saved Ninevites; he would not mingle in their city; he would not share in their worship or participate in ministry with them. Despite the clear evidence that God had accepted Nineveh's repentance, Jonah did not accept them. Instead, he set up his booth outside Nineveh's east gate, willingly accepting isolation and needless hardship, all of which he embraced as a sign of his exceptional holiness. Jonah would do his own thing: and his own thing was to watch hopefully for signs of their failure and demise.

If Nineveh's salvation did not make Jonah happy, then what did? The answer is given in verse 6: "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." Perhaps the most amazing instance of grace in

the book of Jonah is God's provision of this plant to cover Jonah from the burning Mesopotamian sun. Whatever materials Jonah found to make his little booth, it could not have offered much protection from the searing elements. So God appointed a supernaturally growing plant – scholars believe that it was a gourd or a castor-oil plant, which grows quickly and produces broad leaves – which gave Jonah shade. At this, the prophet was “exceedingly glad.” More literally, the prophet who “was angry with a great anger” over Nineveh's salvation (Jon. 4:1) now “rejoiced with a great joy” over his castor-oil plant. How wonderful things now were for Jonah! In the comfort of the shade provided by God's wonderful grace towards him, he could watch and wait for God's terrible wrath to annihilate the city of Nineveh.

What was God exposing in this, but Jonah's self-centered attitude towards God's grace, with the miserable spirit it inevitably produced? This is a spirit all-too-common among God's people. What amazed Jonah about grace was only what it meant to him personally – whether it be in the form of a great fish or a little plant – along with the narrow circle of people he cared about. What the gospel might mean for others concerned him little, except that he had personal reasons not to like the idea of grace for the Ninevites. So there he sat in misery, seething outside the city, while the wind and the sun blasted his body and mind.

Not only did Jonah's self-centered attitude towards God's grace make him miserable, but it also rendered him useless. God can judge others without our help! What he calls his people to do is enter into his work of salvation. What Jonah should have been doing is mingling among the Ninevites, encouraging their newborn faith, gently correcting their manifold errors, and lovingly teaching them the gospel. James Boice comments: “[Jonah] was not called to be a spectator, any more than Christians are called to be spectators of the world's ills and misfortunes today. He was called to identify with those people and help them as best he could by the grace of God.”²

Like the other questions in the Bible, God's questions to Jonah call for us to consider ourselves. Do we look upon the gospel as a

² James M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vol. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1:308.

consumer product for our own personal benefit? Have we set up our little booths outside the culture, content to enjoy God's mercy for us while savoring the misfortunes of a God-alienated world? To put it in Jonah's terms: what makes us glad? Are we grateful for God's grace to us and delighted about signs of grace in others? Or do we delight in being right, and thus in the fact that others are wrong?

GOD'S GRACIOUS DEALINGS WITH JONAH

God was gracious in providing Jonah with his plant, but his true purpose is revealed in his sovereign, patient, and wise dealings with the miserable prophet. God had a plan for Jonah's plant, starting with a worm that he appointed to arrive the following morning: "When dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered" (Jon. 4:7). And God wasn't done: "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 said, 'It is better for me to die than to live'" (Jon. 4:8). This led to God's second question: "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'" (Jon. 4:9).

This shows God's *sovereignty* in dealing with his people. The expression "God appointed" appears over and over in Jonah. In chapter 1, God sovereignly "hurled a great wind" at Jonah's ship (Jon. 1:7), and then "the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah" when he was cast into the sea (Jon. 1:17). Now in chapter 4, God "appointed a plant" to shade Jonah (Jon. 4:6), then "appointed a worm that attacked the plant" (Jon. 4:7), and "appointed a scorching east wind" (Jon. 4:8). This makes clear that the outward circumstances of Jonah's experience were sovereignly appointed by God. So it is in our circumstances: it is God who appoints the great fish that delivers us, the shade that gives us comfort, and the worm and east winds that try our souls. The lesson is that it is always God with whom we have to do, as he sovereignly appoints even the details of our lives.

This episode also shows God's gracious *patience* in dealing with his servants. How much the Lord had put up with in Jonah! But he was still patiently prodding, patiently challenging Jonah's thinking, patiently correcting the attitude of Jonah's heart. It is in this patient

grace of God that any of us find our hope to persevere in faith, since we are so much like Jonah in our indwelling sin. How many times God might well have given up on us! But he does not. In amazing condescension – more patient than the most loving mother of toddlers or the most enduring father of teenage children – God bears with our weakness and sin and never gives up on our salvation. He sees the end from the beginning and knows the glory he will win for himself through his patiently persevering grace.

On one occasion, Jesus expressed a sanctified frustration in his wayward disciples, exclaiming: “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you?” (Lk. 9:41). The answer is best seen in Jesus’ ensuing ministry. How long would he endure his disciples’ failing with loving patience? All the way to the cross, where he died for their sins, and then to the open tomb, by which he secured the ministry of the Holy Spirit to sanctify our souls.

God’s dealings with Jonah also show the *wisdom* of God’s dealings with his people. In granting and then destroying Jonah’s dearly beloved plant, God had a two-point program for his growth in grace. The first point was to show Jonah that he needed to get out of himself. Jonah was consumed with his own petty affairs; his view of life was dominated by his narrow opinions and his personal comfort.

Indeed, Jonah shows that a self-centered person will grow increasingly petty and ridiculous. At the start of the chapter, he wanted to die because God did not conform to his narrow view of salvation; now Jonah is angry enough to die because his precious plant had withered. He shows us that if we are consumed by our own problems and outlook, our spiritual life shrivels. Jonah had reduced his spirit to the level of the plant, easily withering under the slightest assault. He was consumed by a little nothing of a gourd. Many Christians are this way: what concerns them most are all the little nothings of church life – the color of the carpet, their standing in the church pecking order, minor details of the musical performance – while giving no concern to the greater matters of the gospel. Even the greatest of believers – like the prophet Jonah – can reduce themselves to spiritual pigmies unless they elevate their perspective above the small concerns of self.

Experience shows that self-centered people are the most unhappy people: people who constantly complain, who are never satisfied, who take no joy out of life, and who give little joy to others and little glory to God. Unless our hearts become consumed with causes and glories far greater than those of self, we waste our gifts and calling and sit miserably under the beating sun of the world's trials, wishing we could die. Beneath it all was Jonah's bitterness for the Ninevites. Jonah's path to the loathing of life began with his loathing of Nineveh. He began, "How can I live when the Ninevites are saved?" That was the worm eating at his soul, so that now Jonah complains, "How can I live in a world that allows my precious little plant to die?" Leslie Allen writes, "A Jonah lurks in every Christian heart, whimpering his insidious message of smug prejudice, empty traditionalism, and exclusive solidarity."³ How, then, do we get out of ourselves?

FOR PITY'S SAKE

This is the point of God's third question, and the second point of God's message to Jonah: "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?" (Jon. 4:10-11).

God's point is that the way out of our self-consumed misery is to lift up our hearts to glory in the great scope of God's salvation, entering into his compassionate concern for the lost. The most joyful and most useful Christians are those with a passion for the gospel. They are also the ones who are growing in grace, their souls expanding as they are filled with excitement for God's mercy in the world.

God reasons this carefully with Jonah, arguing from the lesser to the greater. Jonah had loved his little plant, for which he exerted no effort, and which arose over him in a single night. It was a tiny, perishing little nothing. Yet there before him was a great city, filled with soul-bearing people. "Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city,

³ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 235.

in which there are more than 120,000 persons?” (Jon. 4:11). Even the cattle and other possessions were of far greater significance than Jonah’s plant?. Should not the temporal and the eternal well-being of thousands be of interest to Jonah, as it is to God?

Not only should Jonah note the sheer value of so many people and so great a city, but he should also have compassion on their plight. God describes Nineveh as a city “in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left” (Jon. 4:11). Many commentators argue that “persons who do not know their right hand from their left” refers only to the children in Nineveh. They argue from this the moral innocence of those who have not come of age and sometimes even for the certainty of salvation for all children. But the Bible teaches neither, and here this is not a likely explanation. Archaeological studies indicate that the whole population of ancient Nineveh could not have been much greater than 120,000 people.⁴ Moreover, God is not arguing for the rightness of his mercy for some of the people in Nineveh but for the entire great city. Therefore, “the expression refers to the spiritual and moral ignorance of the whole population of Nineveh.”⁵

The point is that God has mercy on sinful mankind, trapped as it is in ignorance and corruption. It is true that man’s spiritual bondage is man’s own fault, but God still has compassion on sinners. And is it not glorious that he does? Jonah thought it right to have pity on a worthless little plant, just as we are often consumed by our petty affairs. But can we not see the glory of God’s saving pity for a world lost in sin? Do we not see the glory in the words of Jesus Christ, suffering at the hands of cruel men: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34)? The sinful human race, like ancient Nineveh, is wicked and evil, guilty on account of its own sins and corrupted as the result of its self-centered choices. Yet God has mercy on the world! Should we not enter into his saving pity, opening our hearts to those bound fast in ignorance and darkness? If we do, we will tear down our little booths, enter into the world with holy love, and spread the grace of our saving God, making his cause of grace our own cause and in the process expanding our own souls.

⁴ Ibid., 234.

⁵ Williams, *Jonah*, 101.

God's final question to Jonah reveals not only the glorious motive for God's saving grace, but also its scope. God has mercy not only for the in-group but also for the out-group. God looks with saving pity on even the most wretched and wicked. And God's salvation concerns not only the spiritual aspect but also the physical and moral well-being of life, as he pities not only the Ninevites but also their cattle. David sang, "Man and beast you save, O Lord" (Ps. 36:6). What greater cause is there to fill our hearts? But are our hearts lifted up to God's saving grace for the world? Do we marvel at the pity of God for the lost? And do we glory in the vast scope of God's salvation – redeeming sinners of all kinds and transforming not only their eternal destinies but also their temporal lives?

It is surely significant that the book of Jonah ends with God's last question. Indeed, the most important verse in the book of Jonah may be the verse that isn't there: Jonah 4:12. We read nothing of Jonah's response. But more important is how we respond to God's call of merciful grace, not only for us but also for the world. The best and only fitting reply is to offer all that have to the cause of his gospel:

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died
My richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride...

Were the whole realm of nature mine that were a present far too small
Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all."⁶

THE GOD OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

With this in mind, the best way to conclude our study of the book of Jonah is to recall its display of God and his glorious attributes.

First, Jonah displays the Lord in all his *sovereign* majesty. God's commands were sovereignly given to his prophet, and also sovereignly supervised by the chastening and empowering hand of God. Jonah could refuse God's call to preach in Nineveh, but he could not avoid God's ordained purpose through him. God could flee to Tarshish but he could not avert the chastising storm sent by the Lord. But just when God's sovereignty might have seemed bad news

⁶ Isaac Watts, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, 1707, 1709.

to Jonah, he learned that it is exactly what he needs, for God sovereignly sent the great fish to swallow and deliver the prophet. Even in the small matters of Jonah's life, it was God who sovereignly helped him and disciplined him to grow in grace. And it was by God's sovereign grace that an entire wicked city repented at the word of God's prophet. God said through Isaiah: "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose... I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it" (Isa. 46:10-11). If there is any story in the Bible that proves the truth of God's unremitting sovereignty, that story must be Jonah's. And if we realize the sovereign hand of God in all things, then we will receive the commands of his Word as sovereign calls to humbly obey.

The book of Jonah also reveals the Lord as a *holy* God. This is the issue that started Jonah on his way: God's holy anger at Nineveh's sins: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me" (Jon. 1:2). And it was because of that same divine holiness that God did not accept Jonah's rebellion. The great tempest that God hurled at Jonah's ship is but a picture of the greater judgment awaiting all who turn from his ways. The message God commissioned Jonah to preach in Nineveh is therefore a warning to all the world: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:4). Because God is a holy God, the wicked will not continue forever, and their liberty to sin has a divinely appointed end in fearful judgment. If God is holy like this, then surely the manner of his people must be marked out by the calls of holiness in his Word. "You shall be holy," God says to us, "for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16).

Thirdly, Jonah reveals the Lord as a *mighty* God, indeed, an omnipotent deity. Not only did Jonah fail to escape God's reach, but he also could not escape God's power. "I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land," Jonah witnessed to the pagan mariners (Jon. 1:9), and God's demonstrated power over the created realm was proof of his words. Moreover, God has power to change the hearts of beasts and men. He called the great fish and it answered his summons; God caused his word to be preached to the most wicked of kings, and the ruler of Nineveh "arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in

ashes” (Jon. 3:6) calling all the city to repentance. If God is so mighty as this, and if God is for us in our salvation, the surely we must live without fear before the world. Especially in our witness to an evil generation, God’s revealed power calls us to enter into the Ninevehs around us, proclaiming his justice and mercy with holy boldness.

But above all, Jonah presents to us the sovereign, holy, and omnipotent Lord as a God of mercy and grace. Why else would God’s plea of pity for the ignorant sinners of Nineveh be given the final word? One of our hymns declares, “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea.” Jonah learned that God’s mercy was wider than the boundaries of his native Israel, wide enough to include people from all lands and tongues, wide enough to bring in the most vile of sinners, including even a vicious tyrant like the king of Nineveh and a self-absorbed prophet like Jonah.

How wide is God’s mercy? Its true measure is the length of the outstretched arms of Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, on the cross of Calvary to die for our sins. If any will come to the Savior at his cross, pleading the mercy of God, that sinner will find God’s mercy wide enough for him to enter into eternal life. And at that same cross, God calls us to lift up our eyes above our petty little selves and see the glory of his grace as he looks in pity on the world. Looking at the eyes of God’s gazing out from the cross, how can we look on the lost with other eyes than his? And how can we do less, for pity’s sake, than to love the world with the mercy and grace God has shown to us?