

Jonah - Mercy and Justice

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- [0 : 0 0] 556. 556. And it's a good psalm to prepare us as we come to listen to God's Word.
- Let's read Psalm 25 verse 1. To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. In you I trust, O my God.
- Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame.
- But they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse. Show me your ways, O Lord. Teach me your paths.
- Guide me in your truth. And teach me, for you are God my Saviour. And my hope is in you all day long.
- [1 : 1 1] Remember, O Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.
- According to your love, remember me, for you are good, O Lord. Good and upright is the Lord. Therefore, he instructs sinners in his ways.
- He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.
- For the sake of your name, O Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.
- Who then is the man that fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him. He will spend his days in prosperity and his descendants will inherit the land.
- [2 : 1 8] The Lord confides in those who fear him. He makes his covenant known to them. My eyes are ever on the Lord. For only he will release my feet from the snare.
- Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have multiplied. Free me from my anguish.
- Look upon my affliction and my distress. And take away all my sins. See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me.
- Guard my life and rescue me. Let me not be put to shame. For I take refuge in you. May integrity and uprightness protect me.
- Because my hope is in you. Redeem Israel, O God, from all their troubles. Amen.
- [3 : 2 7] Well, I'm going to ask Seth to come up. And I'm going to pray for you. Is that okay, Seth? You don't mind people praying for you? That's a good start. So let's pray for Seth.
- Father, we thank you for Seth. And we thank you for him being here this morning. We pray that you would use him to speak your words to us.
- Fill him with the power of your spirit. And may your spirit be at work within us. Bringing us on to be the people you call us to be. May we not leave this building without an encounter with you.
- Hearing you. And knowing you more deeply. We pray this for your glory. And for our good. Amen.
- Well, thank you. It's great to be here. I like this church.

- [4 : 3 5] I like to be here. It's great to see just a glimpse of what God is doing on this side of the county. If you would just turn in your Bibles to Jonah.
- I wonder if this could lower a little bit. I'm not quite as tall. Okay, not that much. Right. Turn your Bibles to Jonah. If it's the church Bible, it's on page 927.
- Now, last Sunday, it was only a week ago that we were celebrating Easter. And if we're thinking about Jesus at Easter, which we should be, not just chocolate eggs and bunnies and things, then we're probably focusing on his love for us.
- We're probably focusing on his power to rise from the dead, to give us that as well, that we'll be able to do that as well. But there is something else going on at Easter, maybe not quite so comfortable, and that is God's judgment for sin.
- Because Easter wouldn't have happened if Good Friday hadn't happened first. Jesus rose from the dead, but before he rose from the dead, he had to die.
- [5 : 5 0] And why did he die? Because of our sin and our rebellion, it was that serious. That's what it took. If there had been an easier way to save us, then God certainly wouldn't have made Jesus go to the cross.
- If all roads lead to heaven, as some people say, then why on earth would God send Jesus to die just to open up one more road to the same place? Jesus prayed in the garden, if it is possible, let this cup be removed.
- But it wasn't removed. It wasn't possible. There was no other way to save us than dying the death that we deserved for our sin.
- So yes, God's mercy is incredible. It's amazing. And it's to be celebrated. But we're not going to understand quite how amazing it is unless we have some idea of the judgment that we deserved, of what we're actually being saved from.
- But if we only emphasize one or the other, we can go off either way. We can emphasize God's mercy so much that we forget about God's judgment. Or we can emphasize God's judgment so much that we forget about his mercy.
- [7 : 0 0] We can go off balance quite quickly. And this morning, we're going to look at a prophet, Jonah, who got the balance wrong in both directions at the same time.
- Which might seem a bit crazy, but it's true. He's an interesting case, and I think we can learn a bit from him. So let's look at just the first couple of verses there in Jonah. It says, The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai.
- Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me. So right at the beginning here, we see a command. God's judgment is to be preached to Nineveh.
- So there's God's justice. Why will God be judging Nineveh? Well, he says right here, he says, Their wickedness has come up before me. They're wicked. We don't know everything there is to know about the ancient empire of Assyria, which Nineveh was the capital of most of the time.
- But we know enough, we've discovered enough to know that they really were quite wicked. Even by the standards of the people around them, they were wicked.
- [8 : 1 0] And the standards weren't very high. They worshipped false gods, and their gods were capricious and cruel, and the people that worshipped them became like them. And it was normal in those days for war to be very brutal.
- I suppose war always is brutal. But the Assyrians took torture and intimidation and cruelty to just new highs, new lows maybe is a better way to say it.
- They were horrible. I won't go into detail. It's well documented. If you want to know, you can find out just exactly how terrible they were. But we know very well they were wicked.

Now in Jonah's time, they had already started to build a reputation for themselves. They'd already started to expand their empire, taking over some of their neighbors. They hadn't got to Israel yet, but they definitely were a threat.

They kind of stalled for the moment when Jonah was around because they were having some internal rebellions. They were having some famines and things. But Jonah knew that the first chance they got, they would love to come and conquer Israel and be just as cruel and merciless as they had been to everyone else.

[9 : 25] So he knows what's going on here. He knows that these people really are wicked. And what is his response? Sorry. What's his response to God's command to go and preach judgment on them?

Verse 3. Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. Or Tarshish or Tarshish. Anyway, that place. He went down to Joppa where he found a ship bound for that port.

After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. He ran away. But why would he run away? He didn't like them.

We see later that he really wanted God to judge them. He wanted it very badly. And here God is telling him that he's going to judge them and that he should go and announce that to them.

So why not go and tell his enemies that they're doomed? What would stop him from wanting to do that when he wanted them to be judged?

[10 : 31] Well, basically, the reason is that Jonah knew something about God. It's something that he had seen himself because God had already used him to prophesy to Israel.

We see this same Jonah show up in 2 Kings, chapter 14. And I'll just read to you. In the 15th year of Amaziah, son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam, the son of Jehoash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria.

He reigned 41 years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord. He didn't turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit. He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from the Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant, Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-Hepper.

The Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, slave or free, was suffering. There was no one to help them. And since the Lord had not said that he would blot the name of Israel out from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam.

So here's Jeroboam, a bad king. And yet God sends a message with Jonah that says, I'm going to bless you. I'm going to bless Israel through this bad king.

[11 : 51] So Jonah already knew that God was inclined to show mercy to people even when they didn't deserve it. Because obviously Israel had done nothing to deserve this mercy.

This was an evil king. The people, the king had never repented. The people had never repented. And yet God says, I haven't told them that I would destroy them.

So I'm going to bless them instead and give them another opportunity to repent. And turn back. He knew also very well what we've read already, how God had revealed himself to Moses.

We've had it read already in Exodus 34. The Lord, the Lord, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents of the third and fourth generation. So there's justice in God's dealings with people, yes.

[12 : 54] But Jonah knew that there was more than only justice. There was mercy and forgiveness even for those who had rebelled and sinned. And that kind of forgiveness had already been shown over and over and over and over again in the history of God's people, Israel, and even in the nations around them.

In Jeremiah 18, God says specifically, he says, if at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I planned.

So God has said it very clearly, very specifically, and Jonah had seen the pattern in history. That when God announces judgment against people for their sin, he leaves them an opportunity.

often many opportunities to repent and be forgiven. So why did Jonah run away? He ran away because he knew that if he announced God's judgment against the Assyrians, there was the very real possibility that they would repent and that they would not be judged because God would spare them.

It wasn't actually specifically part of the message because the message was only go to the great city and preach against it because of their wickedness. It wasn't in the message itself, but the very fact that God was giving them warning before he destroyed them, before he judged them, showed that he was giving them a chance to repent, to avoid the judgment.

[14 : 31] And Jonah just could not stand the thought of that happening to his enemies. And if we look at chapter 4, if you just turn over to chapter 4, Nineveh actually does repent.

It happens just as Jonah was afraid of and God spares them from the judgment that he had warned. So in 4, verse 1, to Jonah this seemed very wrong and he became angry.

He prayed to the Lord, isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home. This is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love.

Where have we heard that before? A God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life. It's better for me to die than to live. He's pretty upset.

And here he is quoting Exodus 34, word for word, God's character, but he's not quoting it as a praise. He's quoting it as an accusation against God.

[15 : 37] He's very much okay with God being gracious to Israel. He doesn't seem to have any problem delivering the message that God was going to be gracious to Israel in spite of their sin.

That's okay. Not upset about that. But when God is gracious to the Assyrians even after they repent, that's a problem. And that's why he runs away.

And it seems like he thought that maybe if he held back the message, that if he just didn't tell them, didn't give them the warning, maybe they really would be doomed because they'd have no opportunity to repent.

In his mind, he seemed to think that by running away, he would make sure that the Assyrians got what they really deserved. Of course, God wasn't so easily put off.

He sends this massive storm to the ship. The sailors are afraid. They realize it's the hand of God. But Jonah's response is interesting, I think. This is back in chapter 1.

[16 : 37] He talks about... Sorry. Jonah doesn't beg for his life. He doesn't say, God, you know, okay, fine, I'll obey you.

Just please save us. In fact, Jonah doesn't even pray at all. The sailors pray. They ask Jonah to pray, but he doesn't do it. All he says is just throw me in.

Which is basically just saying, just kill me now because you get thrown into a stormy sea in the middle of the ocean. Well, that's basically certain death. So, I mean, is it possible that Jonah was actually so committed to making sure that the Assyrians were judged that he was actually willing to make, to even die to make sure that that happened?

To make sure that the message would not get to them and that they wouldn't get the warning and that if he died, maybe they would die too. One thing that Jonah saw clearly, he saw clearly that the sin of the Assyrians was a serious thing.

And he was right. Their sin really did deserve God's judgment. There's no question about it. God had every right to announce judgment on Nineveh for all the wicked things that they had done.

[18 : 00] But God had every right to be gracious as well. And he had every right to be gracious to Israel and he had every right to be gracious to wicked Nineveh.

What Jonah can't see very clearly here is that God also had every right to announce judgment on Jonah himself. Jonah deserved the same kind of judgment that Assyria was getting.

After all, he had directly disobeyed God's clear command. He had tried his best to subvert God's revealed will, his stated will, and make things happen according to his own agenda.

He was very committed to that, even to the point of maybe even being willing to die for it. And he never even repents. If you look in chapter 2, he gives this long prayer after God saves him from his trying to kill himself.

in verse 3 of chapter 2, he said, You hurled me into the deep in the very heart of the seas and the currents swirled about me. All your waves and breakers swept over me.

[19 : 12] I mean, he's basically, he's saying God hurled him into the deep and it was God's waves that were over him. But is that really fair? I mean, wasn't it Jonah who asked the sailors to throw him in?

Wasn't the very fact that he was on the ocean a result of his direct disobedience? I mean, if he had gone to Nineveh, he wouldn't have had to cross an ocean. So, and look in verse 4.

He says, I've been banished from your sight, yet I will look again toward your holy temple. But, who banished him? Wasn't it Jonah himself that was doing his level best to get away from God?

To get away from God's sight? And yet, he makes it sound like he's doing something wonderful looking towards the temple after he's been banished. And in verse 7, he says, my life was ebbing away.

I remembered you and my prayer rose to you to your holy temple. He makes it sound like he's pretty great that in the middle of all this trouble, he's looking to the Lord, but there's no admission that he actually was the cause of all the trouble.

[20 : 21] That his rebellion against God was the reason for all of that trouble. He kind of promotes himself even in his prayer of thankfulness. He's quoting lots of scripture. He knows his Bible well, but there's something really missing here.

There's no repentance. There's no admission of doing anything wrong. And contrast that response with the wicked people of Nineveh when they heard his warning.

Look in chapter 3, starting in verse 5. The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, all of them, from the greatest to the least, and put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh. By the decree of the king and his nobles, do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything.

Do not let them eat or drink, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.

[21 : 31] They repented immediately. And even the sailors, in 116, it says, they feared the Lord. And offered sacrifices to him. So it seems like everyone is actually responding to God better than the actual prophet of God.

And yet even this rebellious prophet who can't admit his own disobedience is given a second chance by God. That's a great mercy. I mean, God didn't have to do that. He could have found somebody else who would be willing to go.

But to Jonah's credit, he does go the second time, although his heart really doesn't change. We've read already from chapter 4 about how Jonah was angry with God when God spared the Ninevites.

But again, God is gracious with Jonah and he gives him this illustration at the end of the book about a plant. He makes this plant grow over Jonah and Jonah loves it because it gives him shade, makes him comfortable.

And then he takes it away and Jonah's angry. But basically, he's teaching Jonah that his perspective is just way too small. He cares so much about his own comfort.

[22 : 41] He cares about this plant. He cares about his own agenda. But he can't see the desperate need of a whole city full of people that God created. So what Jonah saw, he saw very clearly that other people's sins deserve God's judgment.

Which was true. But what he overlooked was that his own sins deserve God's judgment as well. He just took for granted that God had mercy on him.

And God did have mercy on him. But he didn't recognize his own even need for that. But God sees all of it. He sees all sin.

He doesn't pick and choose whose sin to take seriously. He doesn't pick and choose what sin to take seriously. We love to take sins that we don't struggle with seriously. And we love to kind of justify and overlook the sins that, you know, are more common to us.

But God doesn't do that. He sees all sin as serious as it really is. But thankfully, our only hope is that God is a God of mercy as well.

[23 : 51] But the question is, do we really realize realize and do we recognize our own need for God's mercy? I mean, Romans says, the wages of sin is death.

And all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Isaiah says, all of us have become like unclean. I'm sorry, all of us have become like one who is unclean. All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.

Even our righteous acts are like filthy rags. Even our best moments are tainted with sin. Whether it's wrong attitudes or pride or self-promotion or self-sufficiency.

I mean, it's clear that even our good deeds, even our good deeds can be done in rebellion against God. We might be like Jonah and we might look down on the really wicked people around us who are doing really wicked things and we think that we're way better than them.

But if we could see from God's perspective, it'd be obvious that even if our sins may be different, all sin is serious. All sin deserves God's judgment.

[24 : 53] We might try to justify our own sin. We might take God's mercy to us for granted like somehow we deserve it. But even while we're looking down on really wicked people around, we need to realize that our sin is so serious that the only way for God to offer forgiveness to us, the only way for God to offer mercy to us was for Jesus to take our punishment to the cross.

that's how serious our sin is. And following on from that, do we realize, okay, how serious our own sin is?

But also, do we realize how serious the sin is of other people? And do we realize their need for God's mercy as well? Jonah realized very clearly that people deserve God's judgment.

But he didn't want God to have mercy on them. But we might go to the other extreme and say, well, okay, and just focus only on God's mercy to everyone and say, ah, sure, you know, they'll be grand.

Even though God is just and he must punish sin. I mean, the only place where God's justice and mercy can meet is the cross of Jesus.

[26 : 03] Where Jesus met the demands of God's justice for us so that God could show us mercy. But do we even care enough about others to show them their need and also how God has provided mercy?

God gave Jonah a message of warning to give to Nineveh to give them a chance to repent and to be saved.

But he's given us a similar message. I mean, God's judgment for sin has not changed. There still is judgment for sin today just like there was back then. Jonah ran away from giving that message because he wanted them to be judged.

But we have lots of reasons for running away too. Maybe we don't want people to be judged. We wouldn't say that anyway. Maybe some people we do. But maybe we're just afraid of what people will think of us.

We're afraid of our reputation and people might make fun of us or see us differently. But the result is really the same. We'd still be holding back the message that they need to hear to be saved, to repent.

[27 : 15] So, we need to be quick to remember that we depend on God's mercy just as much as everyone else. We should be quick to share with others that they need God's mercy too but that he has provided it in Jesus.

We need to take sin seriously, not just everyone else's sin like Jonah did, but our own sin as well. But we also should recognize that in spite of the greatness of our sin, God has provided a mercy that is even greater.

It's not only for us. Jonah was very happy to accept mercy for himself but this mercy is actually for everyone.

And he's given us the privilege of sharing that message with others. The saying is that the ground is level at the cross and it's true. We all deserve God's justice and yet God has provided his mercy that is available to all.

And I think that a great thing for us to do now would be to sing Thank You for Saving Me is the next song. Thank you.