

Should Not I Pity?

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- [0 : 0 0] Our scripture reading this morning is from the book of Jonah chapter 4. If you're turning there in your pew Bible, it's on page 921.
- If you're new here, it's our habit to go passage by passage through a book of the Bible. And so this is our last week looking at the book of Jonah. We've been here four weeks before. Next week we're going to start a summer series called the Summer in the Psalms.
- And we're not going to go through all the Psalms. But we will pick a few passages this summer. So we hope that you'll join us for that. But we're going to read now Jonah chapter 4 and finish the story of Jonah.
- Jonah 4. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly. You'll remember the Ninevites have just been forgiven.
- That's the context of this statement. It displeased Jonah exceedingly. And he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is this not why I said when I was yet in my country that this is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish?
- [1 : 1 3] For I knew that you are a generous God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster. Therefore, now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.
- And the Lord said, Do you do well to be angry? Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade till he should see what would become of the city.
- 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.
- But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant so that it withered. 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. But 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.
- [2 : 2 5] And the Lord said, 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 I not 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?
- Amen. This is God's word. Amen. So last week, you know the story. Jonah came. He preached to the Ninevites. And the Ninevites were saved. And if the story had ended in Jonah chapter 3 last week, you could have said, And they lived happily ever after.
- And in fact, isn't it true that usually when you tell the story, when you teach it to children, that's where the story ends. He preaches the gospel to them or he preaches judgment to them. And then they repent and they live happily ever after.

And that would have been the case, except you come to Jonah 4 and you find out that not everyone did live happily ever after. Because while the Ninevites rejoiced, Jonah fumed.

[3 : 26] He was angry. And this is a strange ending to a story, right? If this were a movie, this is the kind of ending to a movie that I hate. Because it doesn't tell you what happened.

Do you notice that it actually doesn't end? It really just ends with God asking Jonah a question. Do you do right to be angry? And we don't know whether Jonah walks away from that bitter or with more faith.

And most people agree that this is not just artistic license. It's not just a clever way of ending a good story. But there's a reason that the book of Jonah ends with a question.

And it's because you are the ending of the story. This is a story that readers were meant to look at. And they're meant to read that last question by God and answer that question for themselves.

So the way that Jonah, the way that the story is written, it's God asks the question. Jonah doesn't answer it, but he hands the paper to you. And it's almost like, you know, in Jonah chapter 4, God comes and he sits down with Jonah.

[4 : 31] And they have a heart-to-heart. But what, the purpose of the story is really for God to have a heart-to-heart with each one of us. Where God is coming to you and me. And he's saying, what do you think about my pity?

What do you think about what I did to the Ninevites? So you could say that really your life and my life is Jonah chapter 5. And the way that we live our lives is an answer to the question, am I not right to pity the Ninevites?

Because the way that we live shows whether we think it's right that God would pity a people like this. So what we're going to do this morning for just a moment is to look at how God reasons with Jonah.

You know, he comes down and has a conversation with him. And the way that he does that is he reasons with Jonah by showing him a picture first. And then we're going to talk about why the question, the last question, has to be personal.

It's not just a question of logic. So that's what we're going to do for the next few moments. And what I just said was that God gives Jonah a picture in chapter 4. And of course, God had just given Jonah a really great picture of his pity by forgiving this entire city.

[5 : 39] But when you read Jonah chapter 4, you realize that it didn't make any sense to Jonah. That's the problem. So he looks at God's pity and he says, I don't get it.

If you read verse 2 of that last chapter, this is the verse that we've been waiting for this whole book. So really up until verse 2 of chapter 4, you don't know really why Jonah ran away from God.

Why we went through all this trouble to end up preaching in Nineveh. But then he says it in verse 2. He says, That's why I made haste to flee to Tarshish. For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

Jonah, he knows his theology. He's a good prophet. He's quoting here from Exodus 34 where God revealed himself to the Israelites. And God said, I'm gracious. I'm abounding in steadfast love.

I relent from disaster. And Jonah is saying to God in this moment, he says, God, I knew this was just like you. Just like you to forgive the Ninevites. And so he understands that God would forgive the Ninevites.

[6 : 47] But what he can't get in this moment is why would that be a good thing? Why would you ever worship a God who would forgive a people like this who've done so many bad things? It's kind of like saying, I can understand how a judge could forgive a parking ticket, but I could never understand how a judge could forgive a murderer and let him go free.

And in Jonah's mind, that's what's going on because Jonah knows that God is merciful, right? Because he's been shown mercy. God put him in the belly of the whale and saved him from drowning in the ocean.

So he's OK with the idea of mercy, but not this much mercy, not against these kinds of people. And so that's that's what he can't understand. And so what God does here in Jonah chapter four is he comes down and he meets with Jonah and gives him a picture that he can understand.

You know, in theology, sometimes we call this. I'll just give you one theology word today and that's it. But we call this God's condescension. And I love this word because it doesn't mean what we think it means.

You know, if you were to call me condescending, that would be an insult, right? You know, Hunter always talks down to you. But in theology, we say we praise God that he is condescending.

[8 : 02] And what we mean is he comes down from heaven and he's infinitely complex, infinitely mysterious. But when he comes down to us, he speaks to us in our language.

So there's a great old an old hymn that was written in the 1700s called How Condescending and How Kind. You would never say that about a person, but we praise God for condescending.

And he's condescending to Jonah here in this moment. And he gives him a picture. And so here's the picture. So what happens is Jonah goes out into the desert and he's looking back at the city and he set up camp.

And he's waiting to see what's going to happen because I guess he thinks that even though God was merciful, maybe God will change his mind again and really get him, you know, destroy this place.

Or maybe the Ninevites will turn against God and then he'll destroy the place. So he goes and he sets up camp. And to understand this story, I think only a Mississippian, a person of the South can really understand the gravity of what's going on here because we know about heat.

[9 : 04] Right. I think if you're from Minnesota, Illinois, maybe if you're from Illinois, I don't know if you can really understand the story because we know what it's like to be hot and we know the power of shade. And what happens is Jonah's sitting there waiting for the city to be destroyed.

And God sends a plant to grow up over Jonah so that he can sit in comfort. We know that. We know how good it is to sit in shade. And we also know equally how painful it is when, you know, there's that heavenly cloud above you and then it goes away and the sunshine's beating right down on you and you feel like you can't breathe again.

And that's what happens to Jonah. So the plant dies. So God sends the plant to shade him and then God kills the plant. And what happened?

Jonah's angry again. So twice in Jonah chapter four, Jonah's angry, but for very different reasons. But similar reasons at the same time. So think about it. At the beginning of chapter four, Jonah's angry that God doesn't destroy something.

And at the end of chapter four, he's angry that God does destroy something. He's angry that they don't destroy the Ninevites. And he's angry that they do destroy, that God does destroy the plant. And this is where God comes in.

[10 : 17] And I almost imagine this like a father coming down to his child and putting his arm around his child. Because he does. He just comes and reasons with Jonah. And he says, you know, he says, Jonah, I see you're angry.

Let's talk about it. That's effectively the conversation. And listen to how brilliant this is because of how simple it is. He looks at Jonah and he says, Jonah, you pity this plant.

You pity this plant that it lived and it died. And to be fair, that's a gracious interpretation of what Jonah's feeling right now.

Because really, Jonah's selfish. And he's mad about that he doesn't have shade anymore. But God gives him the benefit of the doubt and says, Jonah, you pity this plant that died. And Jonah says, yes. And then God says this.

He said, you know, I'm speaking off the cuff here. But this is effectively what he says. He says, God says, if you pity this plant, am I not right to pity these people? Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which there's more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left?

[11 : 23] Do you see the connection there? He's saying, Jonah, you have the capacity in your soul to pity something that you didn't put any work into that you hardly knew.

You still, you pity it. You wish that it hadn't been destroyed. And then he says, he's basically asking Jonah to put himself in God's shoes and saying, can you imagine my pity?

Am I not right to pity 120,000 people who I don't just know them? I made them. I formed every single one of them in their mother's womb.

Am I not right to pity people like that? And what God uses that simple picture of the plant to show who he really is.

And God is saying here, he's the kind of God. He pities people. He sees people who are, all of his creation, when it is suffering, he pities them.

[12 : 16] But then he says something else that's interesting. He says, it's not just that there's 120,000 people. He says there's 120,000 of them who do not know their right hand from their left.

And that's one of these, it's an ism. It's an old ancient ism. And it really means, when you say in the ancient world they don't know their right hand from their left, they're saying these are people who, they don't know the difference between right and wrong.

Now you've got to understand this really carefully. He's not saying these people are innocent. Because he's just told them, you've got to turn from your evil ways or I'm going to destroy you. But what he is saying is, and I think we all know this intuitively, you can become so lost in your life that you stop even, you can become so lost that you don't even know the way out.

And that's what happens. Somebody develops an addiction or they go way astray. And in our language, we say sometimes that person is lost.

And we're not saying they're innocent. They may have made some terrible decisions, very awful decisions. But at the same time, we're saying we pity them because they're so lost, they don't know the way out.

[13 : 31] And that's what God is saying about these people is they've done terrible things. And at the same time, they are so far gone that they don't even know the way out of their own problems. And that's why God wanted to send Jonah in the first place to bring them back, to tell them how sinful they really were.

And then there's the cattle, which I won't say much about, but isn't that great? He says, Jonah, you pity this plant. Can you at least pity the cattle of Nineveh who've done nothing wrong?

But it reveals the heart of God that he takes sin seriously, yes. But he can look at the deepest, darkest soul. And he can still say, sinful though they are, I pity them.

And the best picture of this in all of scripture, I think, is Jesus. Whenever we looked at this a couple of weeks ago, when Jesus is going up to Jerusalem. But there's several times in the Gospels where Jesus looks out at Jerusalem.

And it's a city that is lost and that for all intents and purposes won't turn to him. Jesus knows they won't turn to him. And he says something like this. He says, oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers.

[14 : 42] In other words, this place who has done terrible things. How often I have wanted to gather you as gather your children as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings.

But you wouldn't let me. Isn't that amazing? In the heart of Jesus Christ, he can look at the most sinful people. And he can say, judgment is coming on you if you don't repent. And at the same time, he could say, oh, I pity you.

I wish you would turn to me so that I could gather you as a hen gathers her chicks. And God is showing Jonah here. This is my heart. This is who I am.

I am a God who is merciful and gracious and has steadfast love. So he does that. And then God, what he's doing, he's trying to bring Jonah along.

I think Jonah's problem here is it's not that he overestimates the sin of Nineveh. It's the he underestimates his own sin because he can say, I can understand how a God could forgive me, but I can't understand how a God could forgive those people.

[15 : 49] And one of the calls of a Christian when we read a story like this is to say, we want God to be pitiful because we wanted to pity the worst sinner because that's who we are.

All of us are in need of God's mercy. Do you remember there was a famous writer a century ago? His name was Alexander Solzhenitsyn. You may know him. You may not know him. But he was famous because he lived through communist Russia.

And he was in the famous gulags of Russia for eight years, these terrible prisons. He saw humanity at its worst point. And he wrote several books about it. But one of his most, probably his most famous quote coming out of that camp is he says, he said, the line separating good and evil passes not through states or between classes or between political parties, but right through every human heart.

And what he was saying was, you know, as a man who had seen people at their worst, what he came out of that learning was that this world is not full of good people and bad people.

This world is full of people who the line through good and evil runs through every single human heart. And it could happen to any of us that we could do terrible things. So that's what God is saying here.

[17 : 00] He can pity even the Ninevites. But then briefly and finally, why God's question here is personal. So the question you saw there at the end, he says, Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which there's more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also much cattle?

This is a this. Think about this as the ending to the whole book of Jonah as we talk about this. But this is not just a question of logic. He's not just bringing Jonah to the place where Jonah can say, I understand you, Lord.

This is always personal because God was calling Jonah all along to get involved in his own pity. Right. God was saying, I'm going to show these people pity.

And he was calling Jonah to be a part of that pity, to be his hands and feet, if you will, to go out into the world. And even as he pronounced his judgment, knowing that it was God's desire to bring these people back to himself.

So really, the question God is asking Jonah at the end that he's got to walk away with is, are you not right to pity Nineveh? If I'm right to pity Nineveh, are you not also right to pity Nineveh?

[18 : 15] And here's here's the truth. The closer you and I get to God, the more our hearts will reflect who God is. And if God is gracious and if God is full of pity.

And when you think of the word pity, it's synonymous with compassion and mercy. All these things hang together. But the closer you and I get to God, what must happen is that you and I become more and more full of pity and compassion and mercy.

And Jesus told his disciples that. You remember when Jesus, one of the things, one of the most radical things Jesus ever said to his disciples was he told them, love your enemies.

Right? He says this. He says, you've heard it said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your father in heaven.

You get the logic there? He says, if you really want to be a son of God, if you want to be a child of God, you're going to start looking like him in your heart. You're going to have pity.

[19 : 14] You're going to love your enemies, even the ones that persecute you. And then he says, because God, what does God do? He says, God causes the sun to rise on evil and the good.

And he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. So, you know, God, you could say those who are saved see the fullest, the fullness of God's mercy.

But God, in one sense, pours his mercy and his pity down on the whole world in allowing us to live long enough to accept his mercy. And, you know, that's the grounds of churches talk about mercy ministries, a ministry of mercy, where as a church, we help those in need, whether they're in our congregation or somewhere else financially or by providing clothing or any kind of church.

They have all kinds of mercy ministries. But we don't just do that to be good citizens. The reason you should ever have a mercy ministry is only to reflect the heart of God, to reflect the mercy that we've been shown.

And meeting someone's physical needs is just one way to do that. But if you want to get to the heart of mercy, you've got to say, you know, what we want, the mercy that we want to bring to the world more than anything else is to simply tell people about Jesus.

[20 : 28] Paul, in 2 Corinthians, when he was talking about his job, one of the ways that he described his job was he says, We are ambassadors for Christ.

As though God were making his appeal through us, we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. So Paul saw himself as a modern day Jonah, someone who was coming to the world and saying, be reconciled to God.

There is judgment, but you can find peace. Just be reconciled to God. Let me close with this briefly, because if I don't stop by 12, I know our own church bells are going to start ringing and I'm done.

Of course, we need to be merciful. But obviously, it's one thing to have pity. It's one thing to want to be pitiful and full of pity. It's another thing to be full of pity.

And how do you do that? And let me just give you two thoughts briefly. Number one, if you want to have pity, you've got to sit at the feet of a good teacher. And that's what Jonah does here. Probably against his will, but God comes down to a man who struggles to have pity.

[21 : 39] And he guides him along by the hand and shows him what it means to have pity through a picture that Jonah can understand. And one of the reasons that we set Jesus before our eyes and think about him is because he is the picture for us of pity.

And the more we follow him, the more we see him, the more full of pity we will become. You know, we are changed by what we look at, by what we pay attention to, by the people we're around.

And the more you're around Jesus in the scriptures and talking about him, the more pitiful you have to become. But then lastly, we reflect on the mercy that we've been shown.

You know, I think Jonah's weakness. You know, Jonah is this character who just fails. This book is Jonah's failure, basically. Even the thing he does right, he's dragged into.

But what he can't understand, it seems like, is how much mercy he's been shown. And if we can get it down into our hearts, the depth of the mercy that we've been shown, that has to make us merciful.

[22 : 46] And if we can do that as a body of believers, that has to make us a church that people will look at and say, Oh, that is a church that is full of mercy and full of pity for the world around it. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we see ourselves in Jonah. We so often see our unthankfulness. But help us to see how you condescend to us and you come down to us and you show us true mercy.

Even in the fact that you help us as we struggle with mercy. Help us this morning. In your son's name we pray. Amen.