

# **SOVEREIGN & MERCIFUL GOD**

Sermons from Jonah

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## **Scott K. — God Is Sovereign When Opposed (Jonah 1) — 10/26/14**

The book of Jonah is very unique among the minor prophets. Most literature in the minor prophets contains one verse describing the prophet and the rest of the literature is devoted to the message he spoke. Jonah devotes one verse to Jonah's message and the rest of the four chapters to the prophet's story. But the purpose of this book is not to tell us about Jonah. This compact narrative only focuses on Jonah as much as it serves the purpose of teaching us about Jonah's God. This too is our purpose in studying this prophet's story. Our goal is to learn about a God whose will is sovereign, whose hand is powerful to save, and whose heart has deep compassion for sinners.

The first three verses of Jonah tell us the two important details we need to know to dive into the rest of the story. First, the Lord's will is declared clearly to Jonah in verse 2. The Lord wants to warn and save Nineveh from their wickedness by Jonah's mouth. Second, Jonah rejects the Lord's will. We will see in chapter 4 that this is because Jonah does not want God to be merciful to Nineveh. So Jonah flees the "presence of the Lord" by hopping on a boat headed to a city far away - Tarshish. The Lord's will is "Go," and Jonah's will is, "Nope. Not doing it." What happens when the Lord tells a man to warn people of their sins and he has the audacity to flee? If you know who God is, but nothing of this book except those two details, you know this will not end well for Jonah. The account that follows carries an implicit warning to us. When we are tempted to ignore and oppose the Lord's will, Jonah teaches us how the Lord responds to such prideful actions.

### **The Lord Proves Idols Powerless and Us Hopeless (1:4-6)**

When Jonah opposes the Lord's will, the first thing we learn is that the Lord proves idols to be powerless and us to be hopeless without him. Though the Lord could have stopped Jonah in his tracks, the Lord had a greater plan and allowed Jonah to go all the way to Joppa, get on a ship, and find himself in the middle of the sea before he took action. Jonah was on a ship when the Lord caused a mighty storm to brew and explode with power. The wind howled and the waves crashed so strong against the ship that the ship was on the verge of splintering into pieces. The men on the ship became fearful, so each one of them called out to the different gods they worshipped. This accomplished nothing and the storm still raged. The men began throwing their cargo overboard - hoping that a lighter load would slow sinking of the ship. But nothing worked. They were panicked.

Meanwhile, Jonah was in a deep sleep below deck. The captain went to rouse him in frustration. "What do you mean by this sleep you sleeper? Get up and call out to your god - maybe he will give thought to us so that we won't perish." The captain's words had to ring with irony in Jonah's ears. He told Jonah to call to his god for salvation, but the only reason Jonah was on this ship was because he was running from this very God. Jonah's deep sleep is meant to tell us Jonah was already hopelessly aware of this irony. Around 800 years later Jesus would sleep through a similar storm in Matthew 8. Jesus slept because no storm can take down the ship carrying the Creator. But Jonah's deep sleep was full of apathy. Jonah knew they were hopeless. They could call out to their gods all they wanted, but when Jonah ran from the Lord's will, he ran from the only one with power to save.

This ironic scene presents a powerful warning to us. If you are like me, there are some days when you read God's word and you know exactly what God is telling you to do and you don't want to do it. We don't like his will. We disagree that his will is best. We don't see why it is so important. We are tired. We would rather give up. This happened to a preacher some time back. He committed adultery, came back and began to repent, and then one day decided to give up on his wife, give up on his church family, give up on God, and he moved away to continue the affair.

Instead of acting like this could never be us, it is better to recognize that, though the specifics may be different, there may very well be times in our lives when we are simply tired of the responsibilities God gives us. And then the thought will hit us, “Why not just run?” When that thought hits, pause for a moment and think deeply about the storms that have yet to come. Consider all the troubles, pain, stress, sicknesses, danger, and even death that still await us in life. If we run now, we will have no one to turn to then. No other god will be there to answer us. Smarts, strength, money, nor counselors will be able to help. We will be alone and without the one who controls the storms. Lesson number one - let us not be alone and make the Lord prove we are hopeless without him.

### **The Lord Causes Pagans to Fear Him Through Judgment (1:7-16)**

When Jonah opposes the Lord’s will, the second thing we learn is that the Lord causes pagans to fear him by bringing judgment upon Jonah. When the fearful sailors saw that crying to their gods was futile, they cast lots to find out who was causing this divine outpouring of anger. The lot fell on Jonah and Jonah was immediately peppered with questions. “What is your occupation? What land and people are you from?” Jonah answered with the only information that mattered. *“I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”* When the sailors heard the name of Jonah’s god and that YHWH is the creator of everything, the men became *exceedingly* afraid. Jonah had already told these sailors that he was on their ship to flee from this creator of everything, so they cried out at Jonah, *“What is this that you have done?!”* What a contrast! Stubborn Jonah refused to acknowledge his foolishness that was quite apparent to these pagan men.

The sea raged harder and harder against the ship and these men were quickly running out of time. So they turn back to Jonah, “What can we do to you so the sea will calm down?” Jonah’s baffling answer reveals his hard-hearted attitude towards God. “Pick me up and throw me in the sea and it will quiet down for you.” Jonah would rather die than repent and go to Nineveh. These men are not killers. They do not want Jonah’s God to be angry at them too, so they tried everything they could to get back to dry land. But the more they fought, the stronger the Lord’s storm grew against them. They were cornered into doing the only thing they knew to do. They cried out to the Lord for salvation and *“they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.”*

What are we to learn from all these details given about these men? Place yourselves in the sailors’ shoes. Sailors do not scare easily in storms - it comes with the job description. But something was different about this storm. You cry to every high power you know. You throw out your precious cargo. Your ship is on the verge of breaking apart. You are helpless. Then you learn the name of this storm’s creator - YHWH. YHWH dwells in heaven, he created the sea and the land, and he is angry with this prophet who decided run from this creator of everything by getting on your ship. The only way to save your lives is to throw him into the sea to drown. I’m looking for the hidden cameras because I am not going to be the fool who got pranked and killed some guy. But the more you row, the more the storm rages. Imagine what it would be like to pick up this man and throw him off your ship into the middle of the stormy seas. You would probably wonder if you had lost your mind.

Why did these ordinary men throw God’s prophet off their ship? Look up back up to **Jonah 1:14**, *“O LORD, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.”* We should not underestimate these words. When these men saw how Jonah was chased down by a divinely prepared storm for fleeing the Lord’s will, they learned something very critical. Unlike the manmade idols they cried to, YHWH dwells beyond human eyes in heaven

and is a God who truly can do as he pleases. YHWH's will cannot be thwarted and they are not going to stand in his way like Jonah did. If YHWH wants Jonah, they will give him Jonah.

**Psalms 115:3–8** contains words similar to what these men spoke. *“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.”* When these men came to a similar realization they submitted to what they believed to be the Lord's will and threw this man in the sea and the storm calmed before their eyes. Their response to this in verse 16 is perfect. *“Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.”*

Consider the irony of what the Lord has just done through Jonah's opposition. The Lord told Jonah to go correct a city of pagans and Jonah rejected the Lord's will because he didn't want the Lord to save a city of wicked men. So instead Jonah boarded a ship of pagan men. The Lord responds by bringing a judgment upon Jonah that causes these pagans to fear, worship, offer sacrifice, and make vows to the Lord. Brothers and sisters, it did not matter what Jonah did - God was going to use Jonah to glorify his name in the nations. If Jonah did not want the pagan men in Nineveh to know the Lord through his lips, the Lord would bring an insane storm upon Jonah that would cause the pagan men on the ship to know the Lord, and then he would make Jonah return to Nineveh anyway. Jonah could not run from the Lord's presence or his will. YHWH is sovereign. He will be glorified.

I hope the message about our God is clear to us, because it was not clear to Israel. The LORD God is sovereign over everything and every person. His will will be done and he will be glorified through everyone here. He can do it with or without our cooperation. If we resist his will, let us recognize that God repeatedly shows in Scripture how he causes all to fear him by judging those who reject him. This is why Israel and Judah were judged. This is why this nation may too one day be judged.

This happens clearly in people's lives today. Lives become messed up due to sin. Many of those who placed their hope in money when the stock market crashed 1929 ended up depressed or even killing themselves. Those who engage in promiscuous lifestyles very often end up with diseases, abortions, divorces, and unstable lives. Those who are captured by addictions are never the same again. Those who do not prioritize God and his word eventually realize that their life has little meaning, order, or stability. I'm not saying these things to be prideful or depressing. These things have described many of us. The point is this: those who choose to oppose the Lord's will often end up with messed up, empty lives that the Lord uses to prove to the world the wisdom of submitting our will to his will. If we aren't going to show the world how awesome it is to fully submit to God's will, then God will use us to show the world how foolish it is to not fully submit to his sovereign will. Let us not be the fools who force God to glorify himself in us by allowing to wreck our lives.

## **Conclusion**

It doesn't matter how unlikeable God's will may seem to us in a moment, it is not worth turning against the Sovereign Creator. I hope those men never forgot the picture of the Lord's prophet falling into the sea and I hope the same will be true for us. This picture can propel us to fear the Lord and remain faithful. When we come to a point in our lives when we don't like or see the importance of God's commands, just remember Jonah. If we flee, the Lord will show us how helpless we are without him. If we flee, the Lord will cause others to fear him through the mess our lives will become. Do not be Jonah. Submit to the sovereign God and allow him to use your life to show others the reward for those who submit to him.

## **Jonah 2: God Hears the Cry of Distress**

When God told Jonah to call out against Nineveh, Jonah fled on a boat in the opposite direction. But the Lord in his sovereignty sent a storm that showed Jonah his helplessness without the Lord and caused the men on the ship to fear and make sacrifice to the Lord. Though the men on the ship had been delivered by casting Jonah overboard, Jonah began drowning in the sea.

We are common people like Jonah and we find ourselves in not-so-extreme, but similar situations. There are times when we harden our will and flee God's will. The consequences of sin catch up to us and bury us. We know God's anger is hot against us. Jonah was buried in water because of his own sinful rebellion. But in 2:2 Jonah tells his readers that he cried to the Lord in his distress. When Jonah cried to the Lord, 1:17 says the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah to miraculously allow him to survive for three days and nights. In chapter 4 the Lord will appoint a plant that will both rescue Jonah from discomfort, and serve as a tool to teach Jonah about the Lord's character. God appoints this fish for the same reason. Chapter 2 is Jonah's prayer from the fish's belly that declares what he has learned about the Lord because of this experience.

As people who become distressed by God's hot anger in our sin, Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 is a great comfort because after we learn that the Lord is sovereign in our opposition, we learn that the Lord still answers his children when they cry out to him in distress. This evening we will consider 4 ways God answered Jonah's cry of distress and 2 purposes God had in answering Jonah's cry of distress and how these apply to us today. The result will give us confidence in our prayers for deliverance.

### **How God Answered Jonah's Cry of Distress**

#### **1. God answers our cries of distress in spite of our guilt (2:2).**

Jonah was distressed because he was drowning in the water. Jonah was in the water because he was guilty. He was guilty just as so many of us are today. Whether we relate to this in the past, present, or future, there are times when we look at our problems and if we are honest we recognize that our problems are because of our own guilt. We wonder in that day: is there any point in calling out to the Lord for deliverance from my pain? Yes! God answers when his children cry out to him in distress in spite of their own guilt.

Not only do we know this from Jonah's clear example, this truth can be seen many places in Scripture. Consider Psalm 107:10-15, "Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons, for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High. So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor; they fell down, with none to help. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man!" If your guilt has caused your present affliction, call out to the Lord and he will do as he has done for many. He will answer your cry in spite of your guilt.

#### **2. God answers our cries of distress in spite of his judgment upon us (2:3-4).**

Jonah 1:15 says the men on the ship hurled Jonah into the sea, but Jonah fully recognized God caused this. God cast Jonah into the deep and caused his waves to cover him. God drove Jonah away from his sight. There is nothing more distressing than knowing God is angry with us. Joy is the fruit

of our relationship with God; there is no joy in these times. Despite God casting him into the sea, Jonah called out to God in his perils and God saved him.

This teaches us something significant. Unlike man's anger and punishment, God's punishments and allowance of consequences to harm us is never merely punitive. God does not allow pain to merely punish us; rather, his punishment is always meant to summon us back. God's goals for our pain are always redemptive. Parents are the same. Righteous parents do not spank because they desire their children to feel pain, they spank to cause their children to not rebel.

But this is hard to believe because Satan uses the knowledge of God's anger to tempt us to believe God does not want us. Brothers and sisters, it is right for us to feel the pain of sin, but it is a lie that God's anger is meant to send you away permanently. Consider Job 36:13-16, "The godless in heart cherish anger; they do not cry for help when he binds them. They die in youth, and their life ends among the cult prostitutes. He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity. He also allured you out of distress into a broad place where there was no cramping, and what was set on your table was full of fatness." When God binds the wicked, they respond with anger, they do not cry for his help, and this leads them to their death. This is not God's intention in wrath! Notice carefully in verses 15-16 how God actually seeks to deliver us, open our ears, and allure us back to his blessings through affliction. Satan's lies are the opposite of the truth revealed here. Call out to God for rescue in your distress and he will answer you in spite of his own judgment against you.

### **3. God answers our cries of distress and delivers from impossible circumstances in the nick of time (2:5-7).**

The scene Jonah paints in these verses - whether literal or not - is terrifying. The waves crashed against him. Then the waters closed over him. Seaweed wrapped around his head. He sunk to the sand on the floor of the sea. Not only was the situation impossible, but in verse 7 Jonah says he was still praying when his life was fainting away. He was out of reach and out of time. Yet, the Lord still brought him up from the pit.

It is not uncommon for our own sins and troubles to come all at once and seem insurmountable. Nothing seems to go our way. One preacher said it like this, "Just as soon as you have a problem, you can be sure on your way to solve it you'll have a flat tire." This statement can be so true. Then we call to the Lord for help, yet the burdens continue to accumulate. It seems we are out of time. Many of God's children can relate to the helplessness of Jonah's prayer with his last breath in verse 7 and Habakkuk's cry in 1:2. "O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?"

But just as Jonah sunk to the bottom of the sea and was milliseconds from death before God saved him, the same is true for many others. Abraham waited 25 years after God's promise and was a hundred years old before he had the child of promise. Joseph was alone and in misery for 13 years before God delivered him out of prison. Jesus was dead in the tomb for three days before he raised. But time and again God showed that no circumstances are too great. It doesn't matter if we look at our watches and believe we are out of time. When you feel weighed down and out of time, remember to ask, "Is it any worse than Joseph's, Jonah's, or Jesus' situations?" Then cry out to the Lord in distress knowing he delivers from impossible circumstances in the nick of time.

### **4. God answers our cries of distress in stages, some of which are not comfortable (2:9).**

Before noticing God's three purposes here in hearing Jonah's cry of distress, let's zoom out for a moment and notice that Jonah being swallowed into the belly of a great fish for three days and nights

and subsequently being vomited onto dry land was salvation for Jonah. Let's understand, this was not a fun salvation and it was not the salvation Jonah expected.

We need to get out of our minds that God always answers prayer in all or nothing ways. It is rare. I have struggled in the past giving glory to God for answered prayer when I don't receive full deliverance. This is foolish. Just because we pray for complete healing of a sickness doesn't mean God isn't answering our prayer if we are blessed with treatments that help us cope. Though Jonah is a poor example, he was right to cry out from a fish's stomach in verse 9, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

Let us then not be angry at God when he takes the first step in delivering us and answering prayers in ways that seem small in comparison to our requests. Instead, let us give God the glory due him because he doesn't have to answer us at all. The fish's belly wasn't comfortable, and it wasn't Jonah's home in Israel, but it was far better than drowning in the seas! Cry out to God in your distress understanding he may answer you in stages. Now consider 2 reasons God answered Jonah's cry.

## **Why God Answered Jonah's Cry of Distress**

### **1. God answers our cries of distress to win loyalty and fill us with thanksgiving (2:8-9).**

As Jonah considers how God has begun to answer his cry of distress, he is in awe that anyone would put their trust and confidence in the vain idols of the world when there is a God like YHWH who who actually hears and answers. Therefore, Jonah promises he will offer sacrifice with thanksgiving to God and to God alone. Salvation through the fish has had it's intended effect on Jonah.

John Piper made an interesting conclusion about this that I believe warrants consideration. Since God's aim in answered prayer is to create loyal, thankful hearts, Piper says "thankful people are better candidates for answered prayer than grumbling people." Whether this particular conclusion is correct or not, we can be sure God intends for his answers to produce thanksgiving. 2 Corinthians 1:11, "You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many." Psalms 50:15, "... call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." Philippians 4:6, "... in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Therefore, in your day of distress, cry out to the Lord with thanksgiving in your heart. When he takes the first step in salvation, give him the glory.

### **2. God answered Jonah's cry for physical salvation as a precursor to Christ who would raise to signal spiritual salvation (Jonah 1:17, 2:10; Matthew 12:38-40).**

Up to this point we have only seen that our God is one who can rescue us from the physical consequences of sin. In spite of our guilt, his anger, the greatness of our troubles, and in sometimes uncomfortable stages, we can clearly see God can save us from physical circumstances caused by spiritual rebellion. But when there is a spiritual chasm between us and God, who cares? In reality, I believe the entirety of the Law and Prophets beg this question. God's law is perfect and his repeated physical deliverance is great, but we are imperfect and our real problem is that we have made ourselves enemies of God - not that we are drowning in water.

How then is a message from the book of Jonah - or any Old Testament passage - even relevant today? Consider Matthew 12:38-40 with me. "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.' But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For

just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” This passage and every Old Testament passage is relevant today because all our questions about man’s corruption are solved in Christ.

Though God’s deliverance of Jonah gives us hope, Matthew shows that Jonah was just a type of the greater one to come - Jesus - who provides a greater sign, message, and hope. Jonah was cast into the sea for his own sins, swallowed by a fish, and did not remain in the fish but was vomited out after three days and nights because God delivered him to call Nineveh to repentance under threat of divine disaster. But Jesus voluntarily submitted to death to atone for sins he did not commit, was placed in a tomb, and did not remain in the tomb but raised from death after three days and nights to signal to the whole world that if they repent, they will be forgiven their sins and saved from eternal destruction. Someone far greater than Jonah is appealing to us today. We have been given a far greater sign and a message with far more hope.

Therefore, as we consider how God listened to Jonah’s cry in physical peril and will hear us too, realize God can also hear our pleas for salvation from spiritual destruction. He sees that we have run from his will. He sees us drowning in sin. He is angry because sin is our fault. But just because we have separated ourselves from God, just because we should have known better, and just because he promises to send the evil into eternal judgment, does not mean he wants us to attempt fixing our own problems. That does not mean he hopes we will go to eternal punishment. His promise to judge the wicked has a redemptive purpose. Under the weight of our sins and the threat of judgment, he wants us to see the truth at the end of verse 9. “Salvation belongs to the Lord!” Jonah would have died if he had tried to tread stormy seas on his own. We too will perish if we do not have the humility and faith to see Jesus’ as our only hope. Salvation belongs to him. We have to trust that.

## **Conclusion**

Whether today’s perils physical or spiritual for you, call out to the Lord for salvation. God answers his children’s cry of distress in spite of their guilt, in spite of his anger, even in impossible circumstances, and in sometimes uncomfortable stages to win your undivided allegiance and replace your fear with undivided loyalty and thankfulness to God.



## **Jonah 3: God Relents in Repentance**

When God told Jonah to warn Nineveh of their sins, he fled the will of a sovereign God on a ship. Though Jonah refused to preach to the pagan Gentiles in Nineveh, God's powerful storm caused Jonah to be cast into the sea and which taught the pagans on the ship to fear and worship the Lord. Jonah began drowning in the sea, but when Jonah cried out to the Lord in his distress, the Lord answered by appointing a great fish to swallow him. When Jonah realized God's salvation, he praised the Lord from the fish's belly for hearing his cry of distress in spite of his great guilt and great danger. Jonah 2:10 tells us God spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Though Jonah is back on dry land and God will again command Jonah to preach against Nineveh, we will not fully see if Jonah has learned his lesson until Jonah 4. This is because after we learn of God's sovereignty over Jonah in chapter 1 and his response to Jonah's cry of distress in chapter 2, our text today shifts to focus on how we can learn about the Lord in his interactions with Nineveh. We will learn about how the Lord promises to destroy the wicked, but relents from disaster in repentance. This will help us today both appreciate God's heart in punishment and the heart he desires to see in us when he does promise punishment against us. Notice Jonah 3:1-4.

### **God Graciously Warns of Destruction (3:1-4)**

When you compare these first three verses in chapter 3 to the first three verses of chapter 1, there is not only great parallelism, it is really quite humorous to see the differences. The word of the Lord comes to Jonah *a second time*. Go to Nineveh. Fortunately, this time Jonah arose - not to flee to Tarshish away from the Lord - but to go to Nineveh in obedience to the Lord. Though this is certainly humorous to see God having to be so persistent and patient in getting Jonah to go warn Nineveh of the divine destruction coming their way, this really gives us an opportunity to see the graciousness of God towards Nineveh. It is truly an act of God's grace for God to warn Nineveh that he is about to overthrow them for their sins. God does not have to do this at all. Nineveh's sins are Nineveh's fault. He could have simply destroyed them. Yet, he graciously warns them to give them the opportunity to repent. And even though God had to deal with a lot of stubbornness to get Jonah to go warn them, he was persistent. Nineveh is not warned unless Jonah goes. So God really shows great grace towards Nineveh in forcing Jonah to warn them of the destruction coming their way.

But God is not just gracious in his persistence with Jonah to have him warn Nineveh of punishment, God is also gracious in how he confirmed Jonah's message of destruction through a sign. We don't see how this explicitly plays out here in Jonah, but we get a glimpse into how Jonah's message was confirmed in Luke 11:29-30. "*When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, 'This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.'*" Though we don't see how this plays out in Jonah, Jesus tells us Jonah's story was a sign to Nineveh that confirmed Jonah's message. Imagine how impacting it would be to be told about coming punishment from a guy like Jonah. God commanded Jonah go preach and when Jonah disobeyed, it did not work out so well for him. He experienced miraculous punishment and miraculous salvation in the in the form of a divinely appointed fish. Jonah's story and God's miracles would have both confirmed Jonah's message and been very instructive to them. Just as punishment hit Jonah, it would come upon them. But just as Jonah was miraculously saved, maybe they could be as well.

Just as God was gracious to both persistently warn Nineveh of their impending punishment and confirm Jonah's message through his miraculous destruction and salvation, God has graciously done

the same things for us today. Destruction for the wicked is coming. Contrary to popular belief, not only did Jesus warn about Hell more than anyone else in the Bible, he said that relatively few would actually walk the narrow path to escape that punishment. What is interesting is that we do not commonly see Jesus' warning of eternal punishment as an act of grace. Most people say, "Hey, that is meant to say that I have sin and that I will be punished!" As is typical, Satan is talented at tempting us to think the opposite of how we should think about God's warning of punishment. Jesus did not have to warn us about spiritual death and Hell as much as he did. He did not have to warn us that few would escape it. But because he loves us, desires for us to have life, and wants to have fellowship with us, he does warn us!

And just as Jonah was a sign to Nineveh of their need for repentance, Christ has displayed his great power to save us from death in resurrection from his own physical death and three-day burial. Matthew 12:39–40, "*But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'*" Jesus raised from three days and nights in the heart of the earth just as Jonah did so his message would be confirmed and so his power to save from the coming punishment would be signified to all. Let us praise God that he has not left us in the dark about what our future will be if we remain in wickedness. He has shown us great grace in warning us. Now let's consider both Nineveh's response to this warning and how God mercifully relents in 3:5-10.

### **God Mercifully Relents from Destruction (3:5-10)**

Two things happen for us to marvel at in this passage. First, I don't know about you, but the fact that Nineveh actually listens and repents at Jonah's preaching completely blows me away. It is completely shocking to see how stubborn Jonah has been this whole time as someone who is intimately familiar with God's will, yet these pagan Gentiles actually listen to God's message. The second thing to marvel at in this passage is that when God sees this reaction from Nineveh, verse 10 says he relented from the disaster he had said he would do to them. It is my belief that Jonah was originally written to be instructive to the wayward nations of Israel and Judah about how the Lord interacts with sinful nations. The fact that God relented from the disaster he promised against these repenting Gentiles should have been extremely instructive to Israel and Judah.

In fact, when verse 10 describes how God relented from his promised disaster, it sounds extremely similar to how God would later speak to and warn Judah in Jeremiah 18:7–11. "*If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.'*" Though this principle is simple and seen throughout Scripture, it apparently did not register with Israel and Judah. When God promises destruction upon a nation and they repent, he relents of the destruction he promised. When God promises to bless a nation and they rebel against him, he relents of the good he had promised.

Since we see God's grace in warning us about Hell and since he relents from his promised destruction towards those who repent, let's spend the rest of our time considering Nineveh's

exemplary repentance. I want to consider four ways Nineveh's repentance exemplifies the heart God desires to see in us when we see we have acted rebelliously and are repenting.

**First**, verse 5 says when Jonah said Nineveh had forty days until they would be overthrown, *the people of Nineveh believed God*. Nineveh believed punishment was coming. Certainly, we need to realize that there is no condemnation for all who are in Christ Jesus. But if we see that we have been ignoring God's will and are not resting in Christ, we need to believe God when he tells us punishment coming and it needs to be as real to us as it was for Nineveh. Nineveh knew they were toast. They aren't even told the Lord would relent from punishment if they repented. As far as they know, they will be overthrown and maybe if they turn God will relent. Punishment was real for Nineveh and it needs to be real for us if we are going to be motivated the way punishment is meant to motivate us. When we see that we have rebelled against God's word, let's really feel the weight of condemnation. We are bound for an eternity of regret in Hell away from God's presence. Believe it.

**Second**, as you read the entirety of this passage it is clear that Nineveh had great urgency in their repentance. The narrative moves very quickly. When they hear about the destruction, they didn't waffle around trying to act like their sin wasn't so bad. They don't wait until the end of the 40 days when destruction begins to come. Jonah's message hits them right in the heart and they do not delay in their reaction. An evangelical mega-church based in Seattle has been recently dissolving because sins of the leadership have made it out into the public. The shepherds recently issued a public apology for their sins and actions. Certainly this is the right thing to do, but the shame is that the people they sinned against had been approaching them for the past 7 years about their sins and they refused to repent all that time. Now that it's all public, they apologize. Sadly, this is far from the repentance of Nineveh and really looks very similar to a King Saul repentance. When we see our guilt and our response and repentance is delayed, let's be sure to recognize that we aren't seeing our sin for what it really is. Furthermore, we are giving Satan an renewed opportunity to pull us back down into sin. Repent with urgency.

**Third**, Nineveh displayed humble sorrow as they repented. Nineveh showed they understood how bad their sins were. Of all people, the king got out of his throne, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he decrees that every person and every animal in the city must follow suit. All put on sackcloth, all fast from both food and water, and all are told to call out to God for salvation. I don't hesitate to say that we can easily struggle do show this type of attitude when turning from sin, especially when we feel like our sins are small and insignificant. But we simply do not have the right heart when we want to just throw up a 2-second prayer to God and not really pause to think about what we have done. If we want to just go about our business, eat our lunch, sleep in our comfortable bed, and find comfort in our riches when we have rebelled against God, we are not showing humility. The good thing is that if we will humble ourselves before God in sorrow, we will find far greater comfort than passing over and ignoring our sin. Repent with humble sorrow.

**Fourth**, Nineveh turned from the evil ways and violence they had been committing. This touches on what we talked about in 2 Corinthians 6. So often we can do so good at believing God punishes the wicked and confessing our sin quickly to God and showing great humility, but fall short in the most important thing to God: turning from wickedness. The text says there in verse 10 that *when God saw how they turned from their evil way*, that is when God decided to relent of the disaster he had said he would do. It sounds silly, but repentance isn't repentance without a rededicated effort to change how we have been living. But I submit to you that if we will believe God punishes and confess quickly and with sorrow, we will be much more motivated to change than if we do not do these things at all. So, repent as we spoke of this morning: with a game plan to cut out the causes of sin in our life.

## **Conclusion**

God showed wonderful grace to Nineveh in sending them a prophet and a sign to warn them of coming destruction. God showed great mercy to Nineveh in relenting from the disaster he had planned against them. But as we learn about God's grace and mercy from this narrative, let's also learn from Nineveh. That's what Jesus teaches us to do in Luke. Though these pagan sinners had lived very wickedly and violently, their hearts were soft enough to turn with humility and sorrow and real life-change when a stubborn prophet came their way. Yet, when the Son of God came to earth preaching a message of repentance and of eternal salvation, God's own people rejected him.

I'm going to make our conclusion simple. Sometimes us religious people are the worst at repenting. Jesus said Nineveh would rise up on the Judgment Day to condemn his own people. We have someone far greater than Jonah appealing to us today to repent of our sins. We have been given a far greater sign of God's ability to save. Don't let pride get in the way. Let's see how gracious God has been to issue the warning to us today and let's humble ourselves before his face.

## **Jonah 4: God Is Merciful, Are You?**

Though Jonah fled for Tarshish when the Lord told him to warn Nineveh of punishment, God sent a storm against Jonah's ship that resulted in him being cast into the depths of the sea to drown. But Jonah cried out to the Lord in his distress and God saved him with a great fish despite his rebellion. When God told Jonah to go preach against Nineveh a second time, he did just that. Amazingly enough, wicked Nineveh repented in a way no city ever had before. God relented from disaster.

But as the narrative returns to using Jonah to highlight the Lord's character, the big question is whether Jonah learned all God wanted him to learn in the fish's belly. Unfortunately, if you look at 4:1 you can clearly see that Jonah's previous disposition of thankfulness over his deliverance has soured upon Nineveh's deliverance. What follows in chapter 4 is a powerful conclusion to this Biblical narrative that tears our focus off of Jonah and onto the depths of God's mercy and the state of our own hearts. God is merciful, but are we? Let's first consider Jonah's anger over God's mercy.

### **Jonah's Anger Over God's Mercy (4:1-4)**

When Jonah saw Nineveh repent and how God relented from punishment, Jonah was angry. This is mind-blowing. The preaching of God's word has just resulted in potentially the greatest repentance and deliverance a city has ever seen, and God's prophet can't stand it. So, in Jonah's anger, he prayed to the Lord. "O Lord, isn't this exactly what I said would happen when I was back in Israel? This is exactly why I fled from you to Tarshish in the first place!" Jonah is not just angry. He wishes he wouldn't have repented in the first place. He was right in rebelling against God's command all along.

But the reasoning behind Jonah's anger is the most astonishing. Notice verse 2. *"That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."* Few things in the Bible are as shocking as this statement. You may recognize this description of the Lord's character. These words are repeated 8 times in the Old Testament. But the reason these words are so significant is because their origin is in Exodus 34:6-7. After Israel sinned by worshipping a golden calf at Sinai, Moses asked God to show him his glory as proof that God would still go with them into Canaan. So in Exodus 34:6-7 the Lord passed before Moses and declared those same words that reveal the essence of the Lord's character. This proved for Moses that the Lord would forget Israel's iniquity and go with them into Canaan.

Jonah's words are shocking because he now takes the words that gave his beloved nation of Israel life and hope for the past few hundred years and uses them to indict God. Jonah's problem is not that he does not know God's character. Jonah knows exactly who God is and he hates it. He does not want God to be true to himself. He despises God's mercy so much that he concludes his prayer in verse 3 by asking God to take his life. It would be better to die than to see God show mercy to Nineveh.

Sadly, Jonah's hatred of God's mercy in this moment is completely contradictory. Two chapters ago Jonah was praising God for this same merciful character when he was saved in a fish despite his sinful rebellion. I like how one person put it. "Jonah typifies those who see the divine attributes of justice and mercy as functioning for their own convenience; mercy for themselves, but justice for their enemies." This is right. When God shows mercy to Jonah, it is reasonable. When God relents from destroying people Jonah does not like, his mercy is ridiculous. God is such a softy.

But is Jonah's contradiction really dissimilar to our own failures to love God's mercy towards others? How easy is it to doubt God's mercy can truly transform those who are repenting of addictions,

laziness, sexual immorality, or divorce? It is easy to be sickened by someone's repentance from violence and criminal activities and doubt they can make it. We can think in our hearts, "They had their chance. If they really wanted to do they right thing they could have done that years ago." It is easy to have Jonah's heart. We only have to recount others' sins in our thoughts and conversations after they have been forgiven by God. They got out too easily. They deserve the pain they got.

But the only reason we would ever think or talk like this is because we aren't appreciating how much mercy God has had upon us and how undeserving we still are of his mercy. We have been spared and we know the right thing to do and we still act like knuckleheads at times. When God spares us it isn't more reasonable than this same kindness toward others. Our sins are no less damning.

What is fantastic to me though is the Lord's response to Jonah's mercy-hating death wish in verse 4. "*Do you do well to be angry?*" This is important for me because I struggle comprehending how God could possibly want to have anything to do people with prideful people like Jonah who scoff at mercy. But God does not take Jonah's life as I believe he should have. He attempts to show him his error and bring him to repentance. This teaches me God can even mercifully transform those who are merciless. This teaches me I ought not fall into Jonah's trap by despising God's mercy towards those who repent of pride. Sin is sin. God's mercy transforms them too. In fact, as the narrative continues, God shows his mercy can even transform the prideful when Jonah gets angry over a plant.

### **Jonah's Anger Over God's Plant (4:5-11)**

When God does not fulfill Jonah's request to die and instead asks him if his anger is right, the text tells us Jonah left and sat down east of the city. He made a booth (i.e. tent) for himself and sat in the shade so he could see what would happen to the city. Jonah is sulking. He is just waiting for the city to return to their sins and for God to zap them. When that day comes, he has a front row ticket.

But just as God appointed a fish to swallow Jonah so he could learn some lessons in the fish's belly, verse 6 says God appointed a plant to come up. I love the sarcasm here. Poor Jonah is uncomfortable, so God appointed a plant to grow over Jonah's head to give him shade so he could save him from his terrible discomfort. You may have a footnote that points out the *potential* wordplay with this word for "discomfort" - it can also mean "evil." Maybe, Jonah thinks this plant is saving him from discomfort, but God is using it to save him from his evil heart. Regardless, Jonah is exceedingly glad!

But Jonah's gladness did not last long. At dawn the next day God appointed a worm to attack the plant so that it immediately withered. Jonah's shade via the plant was taken away. When the sun rose, God upped the heat by appointing a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The worm attacked the plant and now the sun attacked Jonah and beat down on his head. These scorching east winds are infamous residents in this location and are used as an image throughout the Bible (cf. Genesis 41:6, 23; Psalm 48:7; Ezekiel 17:10). The hot Santa Ana winds that are infamous for fanning wildfires in Southern California are comparable. Regardless, Jonah was so hot he became faint. So, once again, Jonah's attitude turned from gladness to a desire to die. He says at the end of verse 8, "*It is better for me to die than to live.*" God would rather show Jonah his error than kill him, so again he asks, "*Do you do well to be angry for the plant?*" But Jonah still does not get it. "*Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.*" As a kid I remember I did not understand this story. "Why is God picking on Jonah? Why is he doing all this just to make Jonah angry? Isn't that mean of God?"

But if we notice God's response to Jonah's anger over the plant in verses 10-11, we will see how God is trying to win Jonah's heart. God uses a common form of Jewish argumentation we know today as

“from lesser to the greater” - and it fits perfectly. The argument works like this. The lifeless plant was a gift Jonah did not work for that lived for a day; yet, Jonah pities the plant so much that he wants to die himself. Nineveh is a great city with 120,000 people and also much cattle that God created and has cared for and built up for years. These people do not know their right hand from their left - they are entrapped in sinful lifestyles and have no way out - should not God pity the city? Let's put it another way. If Jonah truly believes he does well to have anger and pity over a plant, how much more does God do well to have pity for that great city filled with 120,000 lost souls and also much cattle?

This is truly the greatest and saddest contrast between man and God that we see in this little story. Up to this point, Jonah thought he was right to pity a plant and right to not want to warn Nineveh of their sins, but God was wrong to pity the lost people and cattle of Nineveh. What is so scary is we don't have to dig far to see the same contrast today. Think about the last time some physical thing wasn't going right for you. You were hungry, your phone stopped working, the A/C went out, or you had a long list of chores. How did you react? We can so easily lose our heads when these physical things break down. We may even say something like, “Oh kill me now.” We will do anything and spend anything to fix the problem immediately. In God's words: we pity our cellphone or the A/C.

Do we have this much urgency and pity for the lost souls in this great city, Houston, whom God has instructed us to teach? Do we have this much pity over a brother or sister who has needs? When we meet someone outside of Christ we ought to teach and serve them with the same pity and urgency we apply to our physical problems and to do lists. We ought to do the same when we see a brother or sister who needs us. Wherever we are in this, I don't hesitate to say there is room for growth.

## **Two Experiences to Give Us God's Heart of Mercy (Jonah 1-4)**

As we consider how to overcome this sin, consider how God attempted to help Jonah overcome. I believe Edmund Clowney phrased it perfectly. “It is an error that cannot be eradicated from his [Jonah's] heart by additional information, but only by personal experience that will open his eyes to a clearer perception of himself, other human beings, and his God.” Clowney is spot on. The same is true for us. We won't be transformed to accept God's mercy and be more merciful by being told to do so. Only our personal experiences can show us the weight of our error to motivate a change. For Jonah, God gave two experiences to expose his error.

First, Jonah needed to experience God's mercy in his life to be merciful. Consider the parallel between Jonah and Nineveh. God commanded Jonah, Jonah disobeyed, God threatened Jonah with divine destruction, Jonah cried out for deliverance, and God gave him a new lease on life. God commanded Nineveh, Nineveh disobeyed, God threatened Nineveh with divine destruction, Nineveh cried out for deliverance, and God gave them a new lease on life. God answered Jonah's cry of distress and answers ours as well to make us all merciful like he is merciful. Jonah was supposed to see his helplessness in the sea so he could have compassion on helpless Nineveh. God does the same for us. Next time we sin, let's see how helpless we are. We cannot undo what we have done no matter how much regret we have. Only because Jesus died for us can we breath and move forward. It is the same for others. They cannot undo what they have done no matter how much they regret it. Each time we see the lost, struggling, and hurting, let's see ourselves and be reminded of our experiences of God's mercy that have restored us. Let's show the same mercy we have experienced.

But God offers a second experience to change us. Second, Jonah needed to see he was actually capable of showing the same pity and mercy he was angry at God for, but that the direction of his pity and mercy was simply disgusting. Next time we get worked up about our chores, our hunger,

the temperature, or something that doesn't go right for us, let's just be disgusted with how easily we can get emotionally worked up about something so small and how much we will do to fix something so small, yet at times how little we feel and do when we see lost souls and hurting people who need us. If anything has showed this to me, it was Black Friday. We can scour through ads and stores for hours through hunger and exhaustion to save \$50 on stuff. It all comes down to what we love more. Let's love people more than we love stuff.

## **Conclusion**

Most ask if Jonah repented. But the text is silent regarding Jonah because the question was never about Jonah. Jonah has been presented as a contrast to help us see the Lord's character more clearly. When the contrast is revealed, the question is not whether Jonah or our neighbor will repent. It is about you and it is about me. Will we change?

Let's conclude with three scriptures. 1 John 3:18, *"Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."* 1 John 4:7–8, *"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."* Romans 10:13–15, *"Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.' But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, 'How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!'"*

I've realized in the past week that I have a long way to go to have God's heart for this city, let alone God's apparent heart for the cattle. Let us fervently pray regarding these things.