

God's Pervasive Love

Bible Background • [JONAH 4](#)
Printed Text • [PSALM 86:8-13](#)
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Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLAIN God's larger perspective and plan for the salvation of all people; FEEL God's compassion for those who do not know Him; and SHOW compassion to those who are far from God.



As Derek watched the screen, his face began to cringe. The story on the news was about terrorists killing and persecuting believers in another country. There on the television he saw images of children with sad faces as they watched their homes being burned down. He saw the dead bodies of people laid out in the streets. Derek couldn't understand why any normal human being would do or approve of this. He exclaimed out loud, "People like that don't deserve to live. I just wish we would just go and bomb them all!" His wife overheard him, walked over to the couch, and put her arms around him. "Sweetheart, you seem to be really worked up about this." "I am," said Derek. "There's no reason why people like that should be allowed to do what they do." "Well," Kelly sighed, "I think you have to look at it with a God's eye view." "What do you mean?" Derek responded, as he reached out to touch her arm. "Well, God is a God of justice, but he is also a God of compassion," she said. "Maybe He wants them to be touched by the love and the Holy Spirit they witness in the believers that they encounter." "I never thought about it like that," Derek said. "Instead of wanting people to be assassinated, I should be praying that they would be converted."

What makes it hard to love those who are not like us? In this lesson, we learn about the pervasive, all-inclusive love of God.

Keep in Mind

"And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?" ([Jonah 4:11](#)).

KJV

Jonah 4:1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

2 And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.

3 Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.

4 Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry?

5 So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.

6 And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd.

7 But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.

8 And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.

9 And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.

10 Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:

11 And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

NLT

Jonah 4:1 This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry.

2 So he complained to the LORD about it: "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, LORD? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people.

3 Just kill me now, LORD! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen."

4 The LORD replied, "Is it right for you to be angry about this?"

5 Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city.

6 And the LORD God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah's head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

7 But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away.

8 And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. "Death is certainly better than living like this!" he exclaimed.

9 Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?" "Yes," Jonah retorted, "even angry enough to die!"

10 Then the LORD said, "You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly.

11 But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?"

The People, Places, and Times

Nineveh. Nineveh was located along the eastern bank of the Tigris River. [Genesis 10:11](#) identifies Nimrod, great-grandson of Noah, as the founder of both Nineveh and Babylon. It was the capitol of the Assyrian empire for many years. The inhabitants were described as wealthy, warlike, highly civilized merchants who worshiped Ishtar (Astarte) the fertility goddess. The city was eventually attacked by the Medes and fell around 606 BC.

Assyrians. Assyrians were known for their fierce cruelty. By today's borders, their empire would span the countries of Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. Isaiah 36 tells us that when the Assyrians were about to attack Jerusalem, they began with a campaign of fear. For example, they sometimes captured their enemies and skinned them alive or cut off their heads and piled them in a pyramid to terrify those still alive in the city.

Background

The king of Israel during Jonah's ministry was Jeroboam II ([2 Kings 14:23–29](#)). He followed the sins of Jeroboam, the first king of Israel, who introduced the worship of golden calves at Bethel and Dan. Jeroboam II conquered Hamath, Damascus, and all of the region east of the Jordan down to the Dead Sea. Jonah prophesied this extension of Israel's territory ([2 Kings 14:25](#)). Jeroboam II's long reign allowed him to increase his luxury through oppression and vice. Israel prospered while iniquity flourished ([Amos 2:6–8](#); [Hosea 4:12–14](#)). Jonah's contemporaries include Hosea (1:1) and Amos (1:1).

After the people of Nineveh repented, Jonah had opportunity to establish a relationship with the Ninevites. Instead, he positioned himself alone, outside the city, under a bush. Jonah's rebellion may have been sparked by self-will or fear. Knowing that God is merciful, he may have been afraid of being labeled a false prophet—someone whose prophecy did not come true.

In Depth

1. Jonah's Complaint ([Jonah 4:1–4](#))

Jonah had just preached to the Ninevites, and the Ninevites were spared the judgment of God. Instead of being happy about God's grace toward the Ninevites, Jonah had his heart in the wrong place as he states his motive for not going to Nineveh the first time. His theological knowledge is right, but it doesn't lead to right practice. He knows God is compassionate and merciful. He just doesn't want God to be compassionate and merciful to the Ninevites.

The extreme hate that Jonah has toward the Assyrian people can be seen in his request for God to kill him. Jonah would rather be dead than for the Ninevites to experience God's grace. God prods Jonah with a question. He asks Jonah if it is right for him to be angry about His grace.

2. Jonah's Gourd (vv. 5–7)

Jonah, fuming in anger, walks outside the city. As he sits in his makeshift shelter, God causes a large, leafy plant to provide shade for Jonah. At this act of kindness, Jonah is thankful to God. The plant provides shade to ease his discomfort. Then God causes the leafy plant to dry up and wither.

Jonah is outraged. He expresses the same kind of anger and frustration as he did when he realized the grace the people of Nineveh experienced. God spared the people of Nineveh, but He wouldn't spare this plant. Jonah actually wants to die after he experiences the heat without the plant's shade.

3. Jonah's Rebuke (vv. 9–10)

God drives the point home with Jonah. First, He questions Jonah's right to be angry. He provokes Jonah to express his emotions over a small thing such as having shade. Jonah retorts that he is right to be angry about this plant. After all, it provided him with shade and allowed him to be comfortable in the heat.

Next, the Lord rebukes Jonah. Jonah feels sorry about the plant but he did nothing to cause it to grow. This plant had a short life span, and Jonah is upset about it. God allows Jonah to see a larger picture when he declares that there are 120,000 in Nineveh who don't know their left from their right and also animals. God wants to show mercy to His creation. He has compassion, and His love ranges wide over humanity.

Search the Scriptures

1. Is Jonah justified in his anger at God ([Jonah 4:2](#))? Explain why.

2. Why do you believe God spared the city (v. 11)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Jonah did the right actions for the wrong reason. God confronted him about his motives. What does the verbal exchange in this chapter teach us about speaking the truth in love?

2. The book of Jonah concludes with God giving mercy to both Jonah and the inhabitants of Nineveh. What outcomes can Christians expect when extending mercy instead of callousness?

Lesson in Our Society

Opportunities to confront wrong beliefs, in ourselves and in others, present themselves to us daily. Jonah's callous heart prevented him from caring for others. Like Jonah, we may need a fresh love for God's truth to genuinely care for others too. When offended, we can challenge others in love. God's loving challenge is often in the form of blunt questions. For instance, God challenged Jonah to repent by providing for him while pressing him to examine his motives.

Make It Happen

When offended, Christians may respond in anger or frustration. Like Jonah, we may fail to remember God's mercy to us. Our shortsightedness limits our ability to extend mercy to others. This week commit to doing one act of kindness for someone with whom you are having conflict or for a stranger. Pray to see the needs of others as God sees them.

More Light on the Text

Jonah 4

1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

Rather than being excited over the success of his mission to Nineveh, Jonah is exceedingly displeased with God's action. He is "very angry" that God forgave the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh and spared them the punishment, which He had declared early against them. Here, Jonah explicitly confesses the reason, previously unexplained, for his attempt to escape from the command of God. He does not think that the Ninevites deserved mercy from Yahweh. Consequently, he is extremely angry when the city is spared rather than destroyed. The Hebrew construction and wordplay describing the emotional state of Jonah at this point does not carry over to the English translation. The verb "displeased" is the Hebrew word *ra'a'* (**rah-AH**), immediately linked with its noun *ra'* and modified by the adverb "exceedingly" or "greatly" (Heb. *gadol*, **gah-DOLE**). The word *ra'a'* with the noun *ra'* carries the idea of being evil or wicked, or of being injurious or hurt. Jonah was extremely and greatly hurt, to the extent that he became furious, probably with God: "He was very angry" (Heb. *kharah*, **khah-RAH**). *Kharah* means "to glow, to be hot, or to blaze up." The literal translation of the verse would read something like, "Jonah was greatly displeased with displeasure and he became furious." He was more than upset. He burned with anger. He was enraged and dejected that God's mercy had been extended to the people of Nineveh, the enemy of his people Israel.

2 And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. 3 Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.

With anger and frustration, Jonah complains to God, accusing Him of “injustice” for being merciful to the city of Nineveh. He knows who God is and knows His character. He knows that God is gracious, merciful, kind, and compassionate, and that He forgives those who repent of their sin and come to Him. Jonah is aware of the possible outcome of the message that he is called to preach in Nineveh: they would repent and God would forgive them.

Now, that Nineveh has repented, the anger of God against the city is averted and they are spared. Jonah cannot handle this; it was for this very reason he had tried to flee to Tarshish. In his “selfish” prayer, he rhetorically questions God’s character by asking, “Was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country?” Is he expecting a positive answer from the Lord? Of course not. His attempt to flee to Tarshish is because of his knowledge of God’s unchanging character: “For I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.” He cannot reconcile himself with this knowledge.

He therefore begs the Lord to take away his life. The conjunction “therefore now,” from the Hebrew word *‘attah* (**at-TAH**), reflects the reason Jonah seeks to die. The use of this conjunction here also implies that the time for discussion of the matter is over. There is nothing else to do but to fulfill the request. Jonah seems to say, “Since I know you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil, and I know you cannot change, let me die. It is better for me that way than to see these people forgiven.” This statement clearly indicates the extent and degree of his anger and displeasure at what God has done (v. 1). He is so furious that for the second time he would prefer to die (see 1:12).

Here, we see a man who is so patriotic that he puts his love for his people above the will of God and the salvation of 120,000 people of Nineveh. Jonah becomes so angry and enraged at the saving of 120,000 people from destruction—people he converted to God through his preaching—and so angry at the goodness of God that he prefers to die. “It is better for me to die than to live,” he says. Is he justified in being so angry?

4 Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry? 5 So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.

The Lord confronts Jonah in verse 4 and poses the same question to him: “Doest thou well to be angry?” This question can be framed in a variety of ways: “What right have you to be angry?” “Are you right to be angry?” “What justifies your anger?” and so on. In other words, the Lord is, on one hand, asking what gives Jonah authority to question Him or to meddle with His own authority and plan. By questioning Jonah, the Lord implicitly establishes His sovereignty and authority. God alone is the Lord and Creator of all things, and Jonah has no right to question His sovereignty and authority. What God does with His creation is within His control and power. Jonah seems to have forgotten that the Lord says, “I will... be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy” ([Exodus 33:19](#)). Through this

question to Jonah, the Lord implicitly makes it clear that no person merits His grace or His acts of mercy, but that His will is the basis for bestowing His blessings.

God's blessings, grace, and mercy come not because humanity wills them, but because God is essentially good, gracious, and merciful and does all things for humanity of His own free will and for His own pleasure. The question here reminds one of God's encounter with Job, although the encounter with Jonah is not as explicit as that with Job (Job 38).

Of course, just as Job could not answer the Lord's questions, so likewise Jonah cannot answer Him. Rather, still indignant and expecting God to do something (i.e., carry out His threat against Nineveh), Jonah goes out to a solitary place on the east side of the city. There he builds a booth to protect himself from the sun as he awaits God's anger and punishment to come upon the city. He is still hoping that God will destroy the city. He is still so clouded with fury that he finds it difficult to see and understand that God's ways are not humankind's ways, and that God's thoughts differ from the thoughts of humankind.

6 And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd.

The Lord caused a plant to grow up over Jonah and give him shade. The word "gourd" is *qiqayon* (Heb. **ki-kah-YONE**), and most commentators believe this to be the castor oil plant. This plant has an abundance of large leaves as well as small gourds on the branches. It is more than able to give shade to the traveler in the Near East.

Jonah's reaction to the plant is one of joy. Not only is he glad (Heb. *samach*, **sa-MOK**), which means to rejoice and sometimes religiously, but he is exceedingly (Heb. *gadol*) glad, which describes Jonah's strong intensity. This is an unusual amount of emotion for a plant that gives shade.

7 But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. 8 And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.

Next, God prepares a worm to eat the plant. This worm is the coccus ilicis. The Hebrew word for this worm (Heb. *tola'*, **toe-LAH**) is also used for the scarlet dye, which was taken from the decayed shell of the female of the species. Throughout the night, the worm smote (Heb. *nakah*, **na-KAH**) the plant. The literal meaning of the word is to kill or wound. The sense here is to blight with disease.

After this, God sends a vehement (Heb. *kharishi*, **kha-ree-SHE**) or hot east wind to blow on Jonah. It was intolerable enough for Jonah to become tired and wish that he was dead. It is this same phrase he used in verse 3. This exposes Jonah's twisted emotions as he wrestles with life. He is upset about the plants withering as much as he is upset about the Lord sparing Nineveh.

9 And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. 10 Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for

the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:

Next, the Lord questions Jonah's priorities. Jonah responds with justification for his anger. The Lord says that Jonah had pity (Heb. *khus*, **KHOOS**) on the gourd. The word means "to spare and to have compassion on someone or something." Jonah had not invested any effort in causing the plant to grow. The Lord also points out that the plant had a short life span and shows that Jonah's angry fits are petty.

11 And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

The Lord's question stemmed from Jonah's reaction to the withering of the plant (vv. 6–10). How could Jonah be concerned about the death of the gourd but remain unconcerned, and indeed angry, about the well-being of the people of Nineveh? Here again is another rhetorical question. The author emphasizes the contrast between Jonah's relation to the plant and God's relation to the people of Nineveh. The Lord questions Jonah, saying, "If you are so concerned about the well-being of one ordinary plant, do you have any reason I should not have mercy on 120,000 "persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand" and their animals? Why do you wish that they should perish?"

The expression, "persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand" is an idiomatic expression that tends to refer to the ignorance of the people of Nineveh regarding the Law as compared with the Israelites. The expression can also refer to innocent children; in that case, the 120,000 persons do not refer to the entire population of Nineveh at the time, but to the number of children in the city. In either case, the expression directly corresponds in meaning with its Igbo (Nigerian) equivalent. In Igbo, the idiom runs "innocent children who cannot differentiate their left hand from their right," and for children, it has a positive connotation. If used for adults, though, the connotation is negative and expresses ignorance or stupidity. In either case, it also denotes the helplessness of the people in question.

The addition of the phrase "much cattle" signifies the extent of destruction that would have been meted out to the city of Nineveh had they not repented—total destruction of both people and property. However, the ignorance of the people and the helplessness of the animals do not constitute the basis for the exercise of God's mercy; they are mentioned to reveal Jonah's lack of sympathy, his blindness, and his selfishness, which result from his religious exclusiveness, patriotic spirit, and hypocrisy. The book gives no conclusion and leaves us wondering whether or not Jonah's anger is abated and whether he changed his attitude toward Nineveh or not.

However, the story of Jonah does give us an understanding of the Lord's salvation plan and the revelation that in His sovereign mercy and grace, God does not discriminate between peoples—Jews and Gentiles. Quoting the Old Testament passage, Paul writes, "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" ([Romans 9:14–15](#)).

Say It Correctly

Vehement. **VEE**-hi-mint.

Beseech. **bi**-**SEECH**.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

The Lord's Proclamation

([Exodus 34:4-9](#))

TUESDAY

The Lord Forgives Iniquity

([Numbers 14:10b-11, 17-20](#))

WEDNESDAY

The Lord Did Not Forsake

([Nehemiah 9:16-21](#))

THURSDAY

Bless the Lord, O My Soul

([Psalm 103:1-14](#))

FRIDAY

A Prayer to the Lord for Help

([Psalm 86:1-7](#))

SATURDAY

Nations Will Bow Before the Lord

([Psalm 86:8-13](#))

SUNDAY

God's Compassion Endures

([Jonah 4](#))