



Lesson 25 / October 22, 2017

# THE ABUNDANT MERCY OF GOD

Jonah 1-4

## Key Verse

“And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

Jonah 4:11

## Discussion Questions

1. Why does Jonah flee from the LORD?
2. Have you ever fled from the LORD? Did it work?
3. How does the LORD show mercy to Jonah in chapters 1-2?
4. Why do you suppose Nineveh responds with such sincere repentance (Jonah 3)? Was it because of Jonah’s passionate preaching?
5. Why is Jonah so angry with the LORD in chapter 4? Can you sympathize with his anger?
6. Describe the LORD’s mercy in the book of Jonah, and especially Jonah 4:10-11.
7. How is Jesus greater than Jonah? (See Matthew 12:38-41)
8. Have you received mercy from the LORD?
9. Does the LORD’s mercy ever anger you? How can we be more merciful?

## Question 49: What is the mercy of God?

Short Answer: *The mercy of God is his goodness toward us when we are helpless.*

Full Answer: *The mercy of God is his goodness toward us when we are helpless and in distress; and in his mercy he sympathizes with our weakness, forgives our sins, and saves us from calamity.*

## Question 50: How abundant is the mercy of God?

Short Answer: *God’s mercy is so abundant that it extends to the most wicked of all people.*

Full Answer: *God’s mercy is so abundant that it extends to the most wicked of all people and nations, even to his worst enemies, such that absolutely everyone who repents and turns to him their distress will receive fullness of mercy from him.*

## Summary

Most people either love fishing or hate fishing, but few are in between. Fishing relaxes some people, but the bait, the smells, and the fish guts trigger gag reflexes in others. In the book of Jonah, we find a sensational reversal to ordinary fishing: instead of a human fishing for fish, a fish is humaning for humans. Fortunately for Jonah, the fish catches *and* releases.

The book divides into two halves of two chapters each (Jonah 1-2 and 3-4). Each half begins with the LORD commissioning the prophet Jonah to deliver a warning to the city of Nineveh that in forty days the LORD will judge and destroy the city for its wickedness (Jonah 1:1-2; 3:1-4).

The first half of the book tells of Jonah running away from the Lord's presence instead by setting sail across the Mediterranean in the opposite direction of Nineveh (Jonah 1). Why does Jonah respond like this? In Jonah's day (about 750BC, before the exile), Nineveh was the capital city of the surging Assyrian Empire, an enemy and increasing threat to Israel. The Assyrians were notorious in the ancient world for their barbaric treatment of their foes. Jonah and the Israelites naturally feared the Assyrians and longed for God to eliminate them, no warning necessary. Indeed, the entire book of Nahum declares the message Jonah would have gladly delivered – an oracle of woe against Nineveh.

But onboard the ship and far out to sea, Jonah cannot escape his God. The LORD sends a storm so violent that the sailors hope to appease the LORD by throwing Jonah into the raging sea. The storm calms, but Jonah is left to drown until the LORD sends a large fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah spends the next three days and nights in the fish's belly. We may have difficulty believing such a tall tale to be true, but cannot the God who commands storms and calms seas also sustain human life inside the belly of a fish?

Jonah prays from inside the fish, but rather than lamenting his foul-smelling fate, Jonah thanks the LORD for saving him in his distress (Jonah 2). Jonah reasons it is better to live inside a fish than to drown in the open sea. The fish then deposits Jonah on shore and Jonah begrudgingly heads to Nineveh.

The second half of the book begins with Jonah's remarkable success in Nineveh (Jonah 3). The entire city, led by their king,

repents of their wickedness and the Lord responds by relenting from sending disaster upon them. Most preachers would rejoice to see such a response, but Jonah becomes exceedingly angry (Jonah 4). He would rather die than see Nineveh spared! Jonah is mad because the Lord used him as a means of saving Nineveh, and above all else, Jonah resents the Lord for being so merciful. Thus, when Nineveh repents, God relents, but Jonah resents.

Take note: Jonah is angry not because he misunderstands God but because he understands God all too well. Jonah knows that the Lord's mercy is so abundant that the Lord will forgive anyone – even the enemies of his own covenant people – if they repent and turn to him. This is why Jonah fled in the first place, because he knew that if he warned Nineveh, Nineveh might repent and then the LORD would relent. But Jonah does not want to see Nineveh spared; he wants to see Nineveh wiped off the map. Jonah's selfish agenda is not compatible with the LORD's agenda of mercy.

In the closing scene of Jonah 4, Jonah throws a pity party for himself over a small tree that dries up and leaves him without shade. The LORD confronts Jonah for being so self-absorbed. If Jonah can show such pity to a transient tree, why should the LORD not show mercy to a city full of humans created in his own image? Has Jonah so quickly forgotten the mercy he himself received when he was in distress at sea? When we are self-absorbed, we grow to resent the mercy of God, for God in his mercy does good for others in their distress, even when they don't deserve it. But when we see ourselves as beneficiaries of God's abundant mercy to us, then we can celebrate God's mercy toward others, even toward those who have hurt us.

Through Jonah, we learn not only of the abundance of God's mercy but also of the need for a prophet greater than Jonah, one who would spend three days and nights swallowed in an earthen grave, one who would preach a better message, and one who would extend God's mercy to all people through the sacrifice of himself. Jesus is the prophet greater than Jonah, and through Jesus, God now extends his full mercy to all people. If Nineveh could repent and be saved through the reluctant and even pathetic preaching of Jonah, how much more ought we repent and be saved through the marvelous work of Jesus Christ (see Matt 12:39-41)? Thanks be to God for his abundant mercy extended to us in Christ.