

jonah : God's outrageous grace

jonah 4

the story so far...

Jonah initially disobeyed God's instructions to preach against Ninevah. He tried to escape in the opposite direction, but he was thrown overboard when the sailors realised they were in danger because of him.

God rescued Jonah by providing a huge fish to swallow him. This brings Jonah to his senses as he is reminded of God's goodness and faithfulness. And so when God asks him a second time, he goes to Ninevah. After a brief journey into the city, the entire population, even the king, responds by humbling themselves before God. And so God relents and withholds his punishment from the people of Ninevah.

In chapter 4, there are two conversations between Jonah and God, with an object lesson for Jonah (and us) in between.

v1-4 conversation #1

Jonah is outraged by God's grace. He is livid that God should be so gracious to these pagan enemies of Israel. We find out in v2 that he expected this all along, and which is why he attempted to escape in the first place - he wanted no part in this.

Jonah expected God to be merciful because he had a good grasp of God's character. In v2 he says, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." This is a pretty accurate picture of how the Bible portrays God (e.g. Exodus 34v6, Numbers 14v18, Nehemiah 9v17, Psalm 86v15 & 103v8...). But Jonah's good theology does not lead him to good conclusions. Rather than seeing people as God sees them, Jonah would rather just ignore these aspects of God's character. He would prefer to keep God's grace for the Jews alone. He is so angry that God has shown compassion to these pagans that he wishes he was dead.

In verse 4, God responds with the question, "Is it right for you to be angry?" The question goes unanswered until later...

v5-8 a lesson for Jonah

Jonah goes to a place where he can keep an eye on the city, and he makes himself a shelter and sits down. Maybe he is hoping that God will destroy it after all?

God provides a plant to keep the sun off Jonah's head. (The plant is usually called a vine or a gourd – the idea is that it has leaves which give Jonah shade). Jonah was understandably happy at the comfort the plant brought him.

The next day, God provides a worm to kill the vine, and a scorching wind and blazing sun which make Jonah faint. Again, Jonah says he wishes he was dead.

v9-11 conversation #2

In response to Jonah's death-wish, God asks again if it is right for Jonah to be angry – this time about the plant. There is a deliberate link between v4 and v9. And there is a deliberate link between Jonah's answer here and his attitude toward God's compassion to Ninevah. He was sure he was right in his anger about how God had treated him, and about how God has treated Ninevah. Again, Jonah is so angry, he wishes he was dead!

But God responds and explains the point of the lesson he has been teaching Jonah with the plant and the worm. Jonah did nothing to make the plant grow, and yet he is so concerned about it that its demise makes him so angry he would rather die! God is trying to give Jonah insight into how He feels. If Jonah can be so concerned for a plant, then how must God feel when he sees thousands of people going astray in Ninevah? Shouldn't God be far more concerned for them?

The final question is unanswered, by Jonah or by God. We are supposed to supply the answer ourselves. We are supposed to see that Jonah's attitude is completely wrong, even if his theology is right. We are supposed to see, as we have through the whole book, that while God is just and hates sin, he is also good and gracious. His grace goes beyond boundaries of race or nationality. And we should ask ourselves whether our main concerns line up with God's. Or are we more like Jonah, putting other concerns before people who are perishing.

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questions

Remember, these are **suggestions** – feel free to add, remove or change them!

v1&4 conversation #1

discover What is Jonah angry about?

understand How does Jonah's theology (his understanding of who God is) affect his attitude?

respond Does our understanding of God change the way we think and act?

v5-8 a lesson for jonah

discover What does God do to teach Jonah how He feels?

understand How does Jonah respond?

respond How would you feel in Jonah's position? Can you think of any comparable situations in your own life?

v9-11 conversation #2

discover What questions does God ask Jonah in these verses?

understand What was the point of the lesson God taught Jonah in v5-8?

respond Do your priorities match up with God's

where does Jesus fit in?

God has been infinitely gracious to all through the death and resurrection of Jesus. His death is not just for Jews, but for everyone. God is gracious to all who will come to Him. And that is outrageous. The gospel blew apart the ideas that were going around about who was in and who was out. And it should expand our understanding too. In this chapter we get an idea of how outrageous God's grace is. But we see it fully and spectacularly at the cross.