

## Jonah 4:4-10

One of the reasons I love Kwik Trip is because when you get gasoline, they have the “word of the day,” and the other day, the word was *schadenfreude*. It’s a German word that literally means “harm-joy.” Schadenfreude is when we experience happiness or joy at someone else’s misfortune, which is deeply sadistic, but if we’re honest, we’ve likely all had it.

The prophet Jonah had schadenfreude to the extreme. Nothing would have given him more joy or satisfaction than seeing thousands of people melt alive under God’s fire and wrath and hearing their cries of terror and suffering. And when it didn’t happen, it tore his soul apart and he wanted to curl up and die. How could God have mercy on *them*?

Jonah doesn’t get it. He doesn’t understand God’s mercy, and until we rediscover it, neither can we. God has to teach Jonah, and the question that ends this book is meant to penetrate the hearts of all who read it:

### **Should I not be concerned?**

1. God’s Mercy to Nineveh
2. God’s Mercy to Jonah

#### **1. God’s Mercy to Nineveh**

Jonah was a prophet in Israel during a time of relative peace and prosperity, around 750 BC. At this time, however, an international threat loomed over Israel and every nation nearby: The Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were the terror of their time. Every city, nation, and kingdom dreaded the day that the Assyrians knocked on their gates. You couldn’t beat them- their armies were too big and well-trained. You couldn’t pay them enough taxes and tribute to keep them away. If you upset them, they slaughtered your men, enslaved your women and children, and ravaged your entire land, leaving behind destruction and ruin. How do we know all this? Because they bragged about it. The Assyrian people were highly intelligent and artistically gifted, and some of their artwork and writings survive to today, and much of it consists of pictures of piles of heads and bodies impaled on pikes, and their literature is filled with bragging about all the ways that they tortured their enemies. That was their culture- they were cruel and proud of it, and they had their scopes on Israel, Jonah’s people, who were probably already being terrorized by them, and God wants Jonah to go to their capital city, Nineveh, and preach to *them*...

And if you know anything about Jonah, you know that he attempted to go the opposite way on a ship, but God sent the storm, he jumped out, and God sent a fish to swallow him and Jonah was spat out and finally, after understanding that you can’t run from God, he preaches to these cruel, sadistic, monsters, “40 days, and Nineveh will be destroyed.” And it worked. The entire city repents. And God sees their repentance and has mercy on them and doesn’t destroy them. Why? Doesn’t care about all their atrocities? Isn’t he a good God who punishes evil? Yes. But God loved them. God cared about them. God sent a prophet to call them back. He relented from destroying them when they repented, even though he said that he was going to, he didn’t! He

had mercy on them. After all, didn't he create the Ninevites. Didn't he form each one in the womb with his hands and breathe life into their nostrils. These disgusting people are just as human as Jonah, the people of Israel, and all of us.

How do I know? Because when God loves people, he sends his servants to them and calls them to repentance. And friends, God calls us to repent as well. Our sins may not be the same as the Ninevites, but we are just as human, just as inclined toward evil and cruelty- we just hide it better. As your pastor, I beg you to not trick yourself into thinking that because God hasn't punished you yet, that he is somehow okay with your lust, your hatred, your arrogance, your jealousy, your gossip. We need to repent and cry out to the Lord for forgiveness along with the Ninevites. And then we must rejoice. Because 700 years after Jonah died, a different prophet came, and he declared himself to be someone greater than Jonah- Jesus Christ. And he solved the greatest mystery: How can God be truly just and punish all evil, and yet love and cherish and accept and have mercy on sinners? Because Jesus, the perfect Son of God, was punished instead.

That is the essence of the Christian message- and every part of Scripture point ultimately to Christ's saving work on the Cross. We see that God doesn't just have mercy on Nineveh, but on the entire world, and- in this specific text- we see God's endless, boundless, mercy to Jonah.

## **2. God's Mercy to Jonah**

When it comes to numbers, Jonah is probably the most successful prophet to ever live. Through Jonah's message, God brought one of the biggest cities in the world at the time to its knees in repentance, but Jonah's not happy. He's disgusted with God. He sees that God has mercy on these people and he says, "this is wrong. How dare you." And we see the twist of the entire story. We often think that Jonah fled in the boat because he was scared of Nineveh, but that's not it. Jonah knew that through his preaching, God would work in the hearts of the Ninevites and they would repent, and because God is a gracious God, filled with compassion and slow to anger but abounding in love, he would have mercy on them. Jonah wasn't afraid his preaching wouldn't work, he was afraid it WOULD work. And now he wants to die. He'd rather die than live in a world where God has mercy on people who don't deserve it. And God simply asks, "Do you have any right to be angry?"

No answer. Jonah goes outside the city and waits. What's he waiting for? It seems like he's hoping that God changes his mind and destroys the city anyway, and Jonah wants a front row seat. Jonah is not only rebellious, he's drunk with schadenfreude, he's a sociopath, in fact, he's no better than the Assyrians, the Ninevites who were cruel and sadistic- so is he! But God has mercy on him, he gives him a plant- plant that would give him shade so he wouldn't get scorched by the Sun. And for the first time in the entire book, Jonah is happy. He couldn't care less about thousands of people being saved, but this plant, and the shade? That's what makes him happy. He loves the plant. But God takes it away. And as Jonah is wasting away in the sun and the scorching wind that God sent is making him feel like he's wasting away, he again wants

to die. God kindly asks, “Jonah, do you have any right to be angry?” Jonah shouts back, “Yes, I have every right to be angry, even angry enough to die.”

And now, God teaches Jonah. “Jonah. Don’t you get it? You think you loved that plant? It was a plant, Jonah. You didn’t create it. You didn’t water it. It was here for a day! Don’t you get it, Jonah? You look at these people and think they don’t matter, but I love them Jonah. I created them. I know each and every one of those people. You had compassion on a plant. Shouldn’t I have compassion on 120,000 people who don’t know their right hand from their left and all those animals? Shouldn’t you?”

### **Shouldn’t we? Application**

What exactly was Jonah’s problem? It’s not that he didn’t know his Bible well enough. Anyone that would have seen him would have assumed that Jonah was a devout, morally upstanding believer in the true God. But when God showed Jonah the full extent of his mercy, he was disgusted. Why? Jonah’s hatred toward Nineveh was racial, ethnic, political, nationalistic, and religious all wrapped up into one. Jonah was an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, God’s chosen people, they were evil Assyrians! Israel was God’s people, a people dedicated to justice, Assyria was corrupt and oppressive and deadly. Jonah and his people were devout believers in the true God and were dedicated to his Law. The Ninevites were pagans, worshiping their false gods and idols. From Jonah’s point of view, *those* people didn’t deserve God’s grace.

What I want you to think about is this: Who are *those* people in your life? Who are *those* people who you can’t stand? We’re human beings, and we are all prone to this, so it’s better to just accept it than pretend like we don’t struggle with it. Sometimes it’s racial or ethnic where we look at people who don’t look or talk like us and hate them. Sometimes it’s income, we hate people who are richer than us because they are greedy, or people who are poor because they are “lazy.” Many times it’s religious- we look at people who don’t believe what we do and think, “ugh, how could they be so foolish, so intolerant, so unfaithful to Scripture?”

This isn’t simply unkind, it’s spiritually dangerous. When we refuse to feel mercy for those whom God feels mercy, it means, like Jonah, we don’t understand God’s mercy to us.

Jonah is proof that it is absolutely possible to know your Bible backward and forward and still, in the deepest corner of your heart, believe that God loves me because of me. Jonah believed that God loved him because of his superior bloodline, his superior way of life, his superior theology, his superior culture, and this caused him to despise people who weren’t like him, to the point that not seeing them burn alive made him wish he were dead. If, in your heart, you believe that God loves you because you are a morally good person, then, no matter how moral you claim to be, you will despise those who aren’t as moral as you. If you believe that God loves you because your culture is the best one, then you will despise those who don’t look or speak like you. If you believe that God loves you because you are so hardworking, or theologically faithful to the word, or generous, or charitable, then you will utterly despise those who are not– and don’t be fooled. If it’s possible for Jonah, a prophet whom God directly spoke to, to be so spiritually lost, then it’s possible for us too. But if God loves you outside of what you have to

offer, simply because Jesus has earned perfection and righteousness and given it to you as a free, undeserved gift, then that frees you to show God's mercy freely and fully to those who look and act differently from you. The Gospel empowers you truly be God's light in this dark, pharisaical, violent, sociopathic world. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that God would save a wretch like me"- this is the cure for hatred and bigotry- realizing how great is God's mercy to you.

That's what happened to Jonah. You may have noticed that the scripture reading ended with God's penetrating question- that's how the book of Jonah ends- "Shouldn't I have mercy?" And we have to think, throughout the book, a great deal of private information, conversations between Jonah and God is told, and I take the book of Jonah to be legitimate history, and so should you, because Jesus did, and so the only way this could ever be written down is if Jonah wrote it down, or at least told someone. Look at this text- who would admit this about themselves? Who would let this come to life? Who would openly admit their deepest, most sociopathic, most evil, most selfish moments? Someone who knows that they are accepted by God only because of his mercy and nothing else. Jonah's saying, "Yes! I'm a sinner! And I didn't get it. I was lost. I was foolish. I was evil. But God had mercy on me. And if he can have mercy on me, he can have mercy on you." That's the point of Jonah, and the whole Bible. God has mercy on the worst of sinners- on Nineveh, on Jonah, on us. Amen.