

Christian Expectation of Grace

Devotional Reading: Revelation 5:1–5

Background Scripture: Jonah 1–4; Galatians 3:1–13

Jonah 3:1–5

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Jonah 4:6–11

⁶ Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

¹⁰ But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

Key Text

The LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?” —Jonah 4:10–11a

Social Teachings of the Church

Unit 3: Fulfilling Our Obligations to God and Society

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the reason for Jonah's anger.
2. Describe how God's desire to extend grace to Nineveh expresses impartiality.
3. List ideas for extending God's grace to neighbors from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. I'm the Judge!
- B. Lesson Context: Historical
- C. Lesson Context: Literary

I. The Prophet's Message (Jonah 3:1–5)

- A. Directive from the Lord (vv. 1–2)
- B. Proclamation of Jonah (vv. 3–4)
- C. Response of the Ninevites (v. 5)

Powerful Motivator

II. The Prophet's Anger (Jonah 4:6–11)

- A. Divine Provision (vv. 6–7)
- B. Divine Questioning (vv. 8–9)

Flying Off the Handle

- C. Divine Corrective (vv. 10–11)

Conclusion

- A. Our Graciously Patient God
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. I'm the Judge!

His drug of choice was adrenaline. He recklessly and repeatedly drove his motorcycle at high speeds—a decision that resulted in numerous wrecks and serious bodily harm. He squandered his money on expensive vehicles, alcohol, and drugs. He jeopardized his family's financial stability and threatened to leave them without a father and husband. Although I considered him a friend, I grew angry at his irresponsible decision-making and selfish desires.

One day, my anger bubbled to the surface. He had lost weight and felt good about it. He approached me, saying, "I'm looking good, don't you think?"

"Well, it's generally good to put on some muscle, too, don't you think?" I retorted.

In that moment, I felt justified. *This man is a jerk*, I thought. *He doesn't care about anyone else, so why should I be kind to him?* Now, I realize I angrily judged him and concluded he did not deserve kindness and respect.

The question, "Who's the just judge?" is central in today's study of the prophet Jonah. The prophet angrily judges God and the people of Nineveh. But are his conclusions accurate?

B. Lesson Context: Historical

Jonah's ministry is difficult to date. The closest approximation we may make is that he prophesied about events that occurred during the reign of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel from 793 to 753 BC (2 Kings 14:23–29). The designation "Israel" in this context refers to the northern kingdom that formed following the division of the original nation of Israel. This division occurred after King Solomon's death, around 930 BC (1 Kings 12:20).

In the eighth century BC, before the reign of Jeroboam, military conflicts existed between Israel and Assyria. The Assyrians were known for their brutal violence. Assyrian kings boasted about their power and commissioned visual displays of their cruelty as propaganda, reminding enemies of the futility of resistance.

Nineveh was a major city in the Assyrian

Empire. It became the empire's capital in about 700 BC during the reign of Sennacherib. Jonah prophesied more than 50 years before Nineveh became the seat of government. The city is first mentioned in the Bible when a descendant of Noah's son Ham built it (Genesis 10:11).

During Jeroboam's reign, Israel experienced prosperity, though it was short-lived. Their fortune was due in part to internal turmoil in Assyria. However, people remembered past conflicts, and soldiers involved in those wars may have been alive during Jonah's lifetime. Jonah's hometown of Gath Hepher was in northern Israel (2 Kings 14:25), and this region likely experienced direct conflict with the Assyrians. Eventually, the Assyrian Empire regained strength and, in 722 BC, attacked the northern kingdom of Israel.

C. Lesson Context: Literary

The book of Jonah opens with the Lord commanding Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against it (Jonah 1:1–2). The Lord observed the city's wickedness. Jonah, however, disobeyed the Lord's command. He traveled to Joppa and boarded a west-bound ship to Tarshish (1:3).

The Lord sent a storm to intercept Jonah and the ship. To save the vessel, the sailors lightened its load (Jonah 1:5; compare Acts 27:18). Their efforts failed, leading the crew to cast lots to determine the responsible party for the sudden storm (Jonah 1:6–7). Their process pointed to Jonah (1:7). Jonah revealed that he fled the presence of “the Lord, the God of heaven” (1:9–10). He directed the ship's crew to throw him overboard as a last-ditch effort to calm the storm. They agreed to do so only after requesting that Jonah's God not hold them guilty of murder (1:14).

Rather than let Jonah drown in the sea, the Lord prepared “a huge fish” to swallow him (Jonah 1:17). For three days and three nights, Jonah remained in the fish. He acknowledged his situation and prayed to the Lord (2:1). Jonah promised to make good on his vow to preach the Lord's salvation to Nineveh (2:2–9). After three days, God directed the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land (2:10). The prophet followed the Lord's command to go to Nineveh.

I. The Prophet's Message

(Jonah 3:1–5)

A. Directive from the Lord (vv. 1–2)

1–2. Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

The expression *the word of the Lord came* appears throughout the Old Testament to introduce a message from God (Genesis 15:4; 2 Samuel 7:4; Ezekiel 7:1; etc.). This verse is the *second time* in this book that Jonah receives a word from the Lord. Jonah 1:1–2 contains the first (see Lesson Context).

While the verse before us does not specify the exact message that Jonah is to *proclaim*, its content is likely still related to the “wickedness” of *Nineveh* (Jonah 1:2). The point is clear: Jonah does not control the *message* of his proclamation; it comes directly from the Lord.

B. Proclamation of Jonah (vv. 3–4)

3. Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.

The book of Jonah identifies *Nineveh* as a “great city” (Jonah 1:2; 3:2). The verse before us elaborates on the description. The Hebrew phrase translated as *very large* may be understood literally as “great to God.” Most commentators interpret this to mean Nineveh was so large and influential that it held significant importance, even to God.

The claim that Nineveh's size requires *three days to go through it* faces criticism. The supposition is that no ancient city could be so vast. This skepticism draws various responses. One response is that the three days include the time needed for Jonah to stop and preach. The book of Jonah describes the city's population as more than 120,000 people (Jonah 4:11, below). For Jonah to preach in every neighborhood, it could easily require three days.

Additionally, the reference to *three days* invites comparisons to Jonah's painful three-day ordeal in the “huge fish” (Jonah 1:17). Sadly, his prophetic mission to Nineveh will feel even more painful (see 4:1–4, below).

4. Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

Though *Nineveh* is a city of three days’ journey (see Jonah 3:3, above), Jonah only travels *a day’s journey* before delivering his message. The proclamation is very brief—just five words in Hebrew. Notably, there is no mention of Nineveh’s sins or any reference to the true God behind the message.

In ancient Near Eastern cultures, many nations and cities worshipped patron deities believed to oversee the territories. In this instance, Jonah does not reference the Lord’s authority. He proclaims the message of judgment and offers no hope, only a declaration of doom.

The Hebrew word translated *overthrown* suggests a change in direction or status (examples: Joshua 7:8; 8:20; Job 19:19; Hosea 11:8; Joel 2:31). This can include the significant alteration a city might experience through destruction (examples: Genesis 19:29; Jeremiah 20:16; Amos 4:11). Jonah’s message indicates imminent judgment without providing any explanation. The city will undoubtedly change, but not in the way Jonah expects.

What Do You Think?

How do we respond to the charge of “being judgmental” when we communicate the message of God’s judgment?

Digging Deeper

How should we balance communicating God’s love and mercy with his justice and holiness?

C. Response of the Ninevites (v. 5)

5. The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

A proclamation from the people of *Nineveh* follows Jonah’s message. A *fast* can signify deep sorrow and lament (examples: Judges 20:26; Esther 4:3; Joel 1:14). Wearing *sackcloth*, a coarse and rough fabric, is an expression of grief (examples: Genesis 37:34; 2 Kings 19:1; Job 16:15). Together, fasting and sackcloth represent turning toward God (example: Daniel 9:3; compare Psalm 35:13).

Ninevites of every social class, *from the greatest to the least*, express their grief and repentance. There is no guarantee that their actions will prevent the predicted disaster. However, they willingly do what is required to save themselves. They believe Jonah’s message and hope for a different outcome because of their penitent response. This is not the first time in the book of Jonah that non-Israelites (Gentiles) respond faithfully to the *God* of Israel (compare Jonah 1:16).

Jesus highlights the skepticism of the religious leaders of his time by referring to the Ninevites’ belief and repentance (Matthew 12:41). While Jesus’ ministry primarily focused on Israel, their response led to his condemnation (11:20–24). In contrast, Gentiles positively received Jonah’s preaching despite no record of him performing any miracles.

What Do You Think?

Why are sorrow and lament appropriate responses when we are confronted with our sin (see Psalms 51:17; 119:136; 2 Corinthians 7:10; James 4:7–9)?

Digging Deeper

How do Psalm 30:11–12; Romans 8:1, 34; Hebrews 7:25; and 1 John 3:20 offer encouragement in this state?

Powerful Motivator

As a high school English teacher, I observed particular habits in my students. One notable pattern emerged around the six-week mark of a nine-week quarter. When faced with the possibility of failing, students would ask about their grades. Their question was always the same: “What can I do to avoid failing?” Students who were once indifferent to their grades suddenly became very concerned. The threat of a failing grade was a powerful motivator.

Similarly, the warning of judgment prompted Nineveh to heed Jonah’s prophetic message. When imminent destruction was on the table, they repented for their sins and believed in God.

God gave us the Holy Spirit and Scripture to motivate and empower us to live as his children.

Are you attentive to God's guidance in convicting your heart of sin and leading you toward greater holiness? —B. R.

II. The Prophet's Anger

(Jonah 4:6–11)

When Jonah's message reaches the king of Nineveh, he responds by clothing himself in sackcloth and sitting in ashes (Jonah 3:6). He issues a decree that all Ninevites should abandon their wicked ways and turn to God (3:7–9). The people obey his directives, and God promises not to destroy the city (3:10). God's decision infuriates Jonah, and he asks the Lord to take his life (4:1–3). The Lord responds, "Is it right for you to be angry?" (4:4). Angry and sulking, Jonah goes outside the city, builds a small shelter (4:5), and waits to see whether the Lord will change his mind.

A. Divine Provision (vv. 6–7)

6. Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant.

This verse contains the first and only appearance of the title *LORD God* in the book of Jonah. *LORD* (with small caps) translates God's proper name, often transliterated "Yahweh." This name is first recorded in Exodus 3:13–14 when Moses asks how to refer to the deity he encounters. The name means "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be." It conveys God's reliability to be himself, not fickle or changing like people or pagan gods. The Hebrew word translated *God* is "Elohim." While Elohim is one of the primary names for the true God of the Old Testament, the same word refers to "gods" in a general sense (examples: Exodus 12:12; 20:3). Thus, the composite name *LORD God* unites a generic word meaning "god" with the unique personal name of Israel's one true God.

According to the book of Jonah, God *provided* four objects to interact with Jonah: a "huge fish" (1:17), a "plant" (4:6), a "worm" (4:7), and a "scorching east wind" (4:8). This verse introduces the second of these four items. The Lord God temporarily supplements the shelter Jonah built for

protection from the sun with a rapidly growing *leafy plant*. The exact type of plant this Hebrew word represents is unknown. One possibility is that it refers to a castor oil plant, which can grow to about eight feet and features large leaves.

Jonah feels *very happy* for the shade. The Hebrew word translated *discomfort* refers elsewhere to Nineveh's "wickedness" and "evil ways" (Jonah 1:2; 3:8, 10), the troublesome storm at sea (1:7), and Jonah's own negative feelings (4:1). God's love for Jonah's perceived enemies continues to displease Jonah. While Jonah enjoys the shade, he mourns the Lord's merciful response to Nineveh.

7. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered.

This verse identifies the third of four objects *provided* by *God* to teach Jonah (see commentary on Jonah 3:6, above). God directs *a worm* to consume the same plant he established to shade Jonah. This action illustrates God's sovereign control over the world; he possesses the power to give life and bring about destruction. Ironically, it is not the destruction of Nineveh that Jonah witnesses; instead, the natural protection from the sun God provided is destroyed.

B. Divine Questioning (vv. 8–9)

8. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

By the time *the sun rose*, the plant no longer

How to Say It

Assyria	Uh-sear-ee-uh.
Assyrians	Uh-sear-e-unz.
Gath Hopher	Gath He-fer.
Jeroboam	Jair-uh-boe-um.
Jonah	Jo-nuh.
Joppa	Jop-uh.
Nineveh	Nin-uh-vuh.
Ninevites	Nin-uh-vites.
Sennacherib	Sen-nack-er-ib.
Tarshish	Tar-shish.

who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

The text indicates the population of Nineveh as *a hundred and twenty thousand people*. Some commentators propose that it reflects the total population of the city. A city of this size could easily accommodate twice that number. Under this view, the declaration that they *cannot tell their right hand from their left* has a spiritual dimension. Spiritually, the Ninevites are deficient in distinguishing good from evil.

An alternate interpretation holds that 120,000 refers specifically to children who are not yet old enough to know right from wrong. If this interpretation is accurate, then the total population is significantly greater. However, the Hebrew word translated *people* does not explicitly indicate children. Therefore, the number likely refers to the total population of Nineveh—a people who, until Jonah’s visit, were spiritually ignorant. They were, in essence, spiritual infants.

The mention of *many animals* serves as a reminder that God also cares for animal life (see Psalm 36:6).

The Lord’s question abruptly concludes the book. The Lord presses Jonah to consider the *people* of Nineveh and whether they should have the chance to repent. The Lord’s words indicate mercy toward the undiscerning and a desire to spare the ignorant. The book of Jonah wraps up with a timely question: Is God not free to show mercy and compassion to whomever he desires (Psalm 145:8–9)?

What Do You Think?

What ministries can your church offer to those of the nearest “great city”?

Digging Deeper

How does ministry in a “great city” differ from ministry in a rural context? In what ways are they similar?

Conclusion

A. Our Graciously Patient God

The story of Jonah reveals God’s expansive grace and mercy without partiality. God does not ignore Nineveh’s wickedness; he is, of course,

the just judge. However, when the people of Nineveh received the warning of destruction, they responded appropriately. In an act of compassion, God extended mercy and grace, relenting from the promised punishment.

Such manifestations of grace and mercy can surprise us. Like Jonah, we may quickly question God’s willingness to extend forgiveness to our enemies—people we feel do not deserve salvation. However, God is the ultimate judge. His treatment of Nineveh exemplifies that his grace and forgiveness are available to all who will accept them. God’s grace is massive, and his patience endures.

Jonah’s example reveals how God pursues his people and wants to conform our desires to his. God did not immediately punish Jonah for his disobedience and rebellion. Instead, God remained in conversation with Jonah and taught him the comprehensive nature of divine grace. The Lord God is “slow to anger and abounding in love” (Jonah 4:2) to all people who respond to his grace and mercy. How do you remain in conversation with God? Are you leaning into the divine questions Scripture and the Holy Spirit continually ask? Are you willing to let your perception and understanding shift, change, and grow as you mature in faith?

What Do You Think?

What new insights have you discovered from this study of Jonah?

Digging Deeper

How will this insight strengthen your faith in God or reveal opportunities for spiritual growth?

B. Prayer

Lord God, you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. We repent of the times we have not reflected your grace and mercy. Shape our hearts and desires to faithfully imitate your compassion and kindness toward the world. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God’s grace is expansive, and his patience is persistent.