

Should I Not Love that Great City?

The story of Jonah may be one of the best known and least understood stories in the Bible. Everyone knows about Jonah and the fish, but that's only a small part of this brilliant narrative. After Jonah preached a message of judgment and the city repented, Jonah was not happy when God held back His judgment:

Jonah 4:1-11

¹ But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ² And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. ³ Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

⁵ Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. ⁶ Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." ⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." ¹⁰ And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ 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?"

God gently taught Jonah important lessons in our passage, and has some things to teach us as well.

I. This story teaches us something about cities

The book of Jonah seems to have two different views of cities. First we see that they are places of violence, greed, and injustice. God calls out that Ninevah needs to be judged. Yet, God also is willing to have compassion on cities. They are showcases of human nature both at its best and at its worst. This is why cities are great places for Christians to be.

II. This story teaches us something about our own hearts

When God shows grace to Ninevah, Jonah is angry enough to die. When our real meaning in life is threatened we are willing to give up on life. Jonah knew that if God didn't "blast" the mighty Ninevah, Israel's economic prosperity would be at risk. Jonah's self-interest in his own country was more important to him than God showing His grace to many. In the end, Jonah cared more about a plant that gave him comfort, than a city of 120,000 made in the image of God.

III. This story teaches us something about the Gospel

In Matthew 12:41, and in Luke 11:32, Jesus said about Himself that something “greater than Jonah is here.” Jesus is like Jonah, but Jesus is greater than Jonah. In some ways they are similar:

- Jonah was thrown into the sea, to take God’s wrath, so that the sailors could be saved. Jesus took God’s wrath on the cross so that we could have peace with God.
- Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, as Jesus was raised from death after three days.

But there is one key way they were different — Jonah was a prophet willing to die so that a city could be destroyed. Jesus was a prophet willing to die, so that the cities of the world could be saved.

Discussion Questions:

1. Does the book of Jonah give us a positive or a negative view of the city?
2. Why were cities so important to the spread of the early Christian church?
3. What sources of comfort in your life do you care about more than unreached people?
4. As a citizen of a city, how does understanding the Gospel help you share your faith?
5. Are you more like Jonah or Jesus in your attitude toward the city? ...toward people from different cultures?