

Jonah 4: God Is Patient With Those Who Spit In His Face...Are We?

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I. Introduction

How do you see people who sin against you and cause you pain, do you want to see them dead, do you want them to see them hurt the way you hurt? How does God see us when we're wicked, does He wish our death or does He desire our salvation?

II. How Can We Get Over the Rage We Feel Towards Those Who Have Hurt Us?

Jonah reverts all the way back to Tarshish and the anger he held then, Jonah 4:1-4, having perhaps preached the shortest sermon in history and brought over 120,000 people to repentance, Jonah is furious?! So furious that he reverts to his previous attitude when he ran away from God to Tarshish. To add insult to injury he accuses God of being "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm," as if it's a character flaw in God. He's so filled with rage that he becomes suicidal and asks God to kill him. God asks him a simple question, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Why does God ask him this? Is it right for Jonah to be angry with God for showing pity to the rebellious Assyrians after God showed him pity?

Some think that Jonah is anti-Gentile here, that's why he wants the Assyrians dead. But that's not true. The reason why Jonah wants them dead is because if they survive, then Amos' prophecy will come true (Amos 3:11-15; 5:27), i.e., God said that He would use the Assyrians to destroy the northern kingdom of Israel, Jonah's country (this prophecy came true in 721 B.C., 2 Kings 17:5-6).

God pries the anger out of Jonah's hand with a plant and a little worm, Jonah 4:5-11, Jonah doesn't answer God's question directly. Instead, he leaves Nineveh, goes outside the city and sits in the shade of a makeshift shelter, waiting, hoping that the Assyrians will return to their evil so that God will destroy them. The heat is too much for the shelter that Jonah built and it makes him miserable. God then makes a plant grow overnight large enough to provide Jonah plenty of shade and relief from the heat. And Jonah is extremely glad about the plant.

But then God does something seemingly cruel: He kills the plant with a worm and then causes a scorching hot wind to blow Jonah's shelter down leaving him completely exposed to the sun and the hot wind and he almost passes out from heat exhaustion.¹ Jonah's had enough so he wishes to die once again. God again asks him about his anger, this time related to the plant, "*Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?*" Jonah doubles down, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!" God then shows him the folly of his misplaced mercy. That is, Jonah felt pity for a plant, which he didn't plant nor do anything to cause its growth. It came up in a day and died in a day. Yet, He's furious with God because He took pity and mercy on more than 120,000 people who cannot discern their right hand from their left spiritually!

Was God being cruel to Jonah with a worm or was He trying to save him once again from his rage as He did with the great fish? God was trying to show him that he had no right to be angry after the pity God showed him when he rebelled against Him.

¹ This is modern-day N. Iraq, which reaches temperatures of 113° and higher. And Jonah's condition is made worse because his skin is likely very sensitive after being in the belly of the great fish for three days.

Did Jonah ever repent and get right with God? Why did Jonah end his book this way; it's like missing the last five minutes of a movie before the killer's revealed. Did Jonah repent and realize that he was wrong? Yes! How do we know? Notice how the book ends, who's the last one to speak and what does He say? God is and He asks a question, "...should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than 120,000 persons who can't discern between their right hand and their left?" How does Jonah (and God) expect the audience to answer? "Of course!!" But it's not just the ending which tells us this. It's the entire book. In essence Jonah says to all of us, "Look at me in chapter 1, I was a mess, totally rebellious, so rebellious that I almost killed a bunch of innocent people. But look at me in chapter 2, I finally came to my senses and begged God for a second chance and He gave it to me! I finally realized that the Assyrians needed God's salvation. But then I reverted in chapter 3, I let my love for country take me backwards again, so backwards that in chapter 4, I'm in full fury accusing God of being merciful!! and asking Him to kill me! I was so twisted that I took pity on a plant instead of lost and hopeless people!! God was absolutely right to show the Assyrians mercy, after all, He showed me mercy and I didn't deserve it at all!"

How do you see people who've caused you pain? How did God see the Assyrians, did He want them dead? From the beginning of the book, it looks like He does, Jonah 1:2. But He actually doesn't. His words regarding the Assyrians throughout the book are the voice of a Loving God who's crying out to an errant people wanting to see them saved. At every turn, God's actions towards the Assyrians are grounded in mercy, that's why He sent Jonah, not to accuse them but to save them. The last verse in the book tells you exactly how God sees them, "...persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left." God knows that the Assyrians have not had any direct light from God as Jonah and Israel have. "But wait, didn't they have plenty of indirect light from all of creation as Romans 1 says?" Yes, they did. But what do we do in our ignorance with all that light that God gives us through creation? Instead of acknowledging God and bowing down and worshipping Him, we reject Him and make everything else a god, leaving ourselves fools, Romans 1:19-23. This is exactly where the Assyrians were, fools who couldn't discern their right from their left. God understands that we're blinded by the enemy (2 Corinthians 4:4) who seeks to steal, kill, and destroy us, John 10:10. By the way, it wasn't just the Assyrians that God saw this way, it was Jonah too, but instead of killing him, He was patient, loving, and merciful.

Look at the Cross, what do you see? You want to inflict pain on your accuser, your offender, the one responsible for your pain, look at the Cross, what do you see? Jesus is showing you how to deal with those who've inflicted you pain. How does He deal with them? What does He do (not to them, but) for them? He turns to His Father as He's dying for them, as He's taking their abuse and says, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," Luke 23:34. Jesus didn't seek their death, He sought and paid for their salvation with His blood.

How do you see yourself when you sin? It's not just others we see as deserving of God's wrath. We do this with ourselves too. When we think of our sin, we tend to feel like God is after us for what we did. We feel like He wants nothing to do with us because we're so filthy. Is that the way you see God and yourself, as a horrible creature that deserves God's wrath? But is that the truth, is that the way God sees you? How did God see the Assyrians? God knows that you've been blinded by the enemy, not just about yourself, but Him. He's not your judge and jury who seeks your destruction, He's your Loving Father who wants to save you, Romans 8:31-39.

III. Conclusion

"And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left -- and much livestock?"