

Our Forgiving God.

Text: Jonah 4:1-11

Suggested Hymns:

529, 363, 406, 304, 530

1) Forgave the Ninevites

2) Forgave Jonah

3) Forgives us

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Jonah 4:1-11, ¹ *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.* ² *So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.* ³ *"Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"* ⁴ *Then the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"*

⁵ *So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city.* ⁶ *And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant.* ⁷ *But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered.* ⁸ *And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."*

⁹ *Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!"* ¹⁰ *But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night.* ¹¹ *"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?" (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today God is teaching us about compassion and mercy. In the Gospel for this Sunday (Matt. 9:1-8) tells us of a helpless and unhappy man, a very sick man, who was brought to Jesus so that he might be healed.

But instead of granting him a cure at once, as He had done in many other cases, the Saviour first said to the afflicted man, *“Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.”* Christ, the Searcher of hearts, knew that the distress of this man’s soul on account of his sins was causing him more trouble than the bodily pain due to his sickness. Therefore Jesus first forgave him his sins, and then removed the bodily ailment.

This incident from the life and ministry of our Saviour shows that forgiveness of sins is the greatest and most precious blessing in the world. What does it profit a man if he has health of body but not health of soul? What good is it if a bodily sickness has been removed but not the sickness of sin? Of what benefit is it if a person be physically strong but is at the same time tormented by an accusing conscience? In short, what good will it do us, to have a robust constitution plus everything that this world can offer us, if we do not have forgiveness of sins?

Thank God! we have a Father in heaven who loves us and who daily pardons our transgressions for Jesus’ sake. That is the way in which God is pictured to us in the text which we will consider today. God is our forgiving God. May the Spirit of God make this meditation effective in the soul of each and every one who is present here today!

1. Our Forgiving God Forgave The Ninevites

Miraculously Jonah had been delivered from his three days’ confinement in the great fish. And the stern discipline had done its work. On the high sea Jonah had learned his lesson. He is now ready to go and to preach to the people of Nineveh, in obedience to the command given to him by God.

No longer does he consult with flesh and blood. No longer does he try to run away from God. On the contrary, Jonah now yields a prompt obedience to the heavenly call and in effect says, *“Here am I, O Lord; send me!”* Jonah is ready for the great task. At once he sets out for Nineveh.

Nineveh was a great city, the Assyrian capital and metropolis, great in wealth and industry, with a population of more than half a million people. But it was a wicked city, a city full of ungodliness, idolatry, and immorality. Having arrived in this city, Jonah at once lifted up his voice like a trumpet and proclaimed the startling message, ***“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”***¹

That was a call to repentance — a powerful call. But Jonah’s message was not only about the impending doom, he also spoke of the mercy of God. He himself had just experienced that God is ***“a gracious and merciful God.”*** This he declared to the Ninevites together with his announcement of the judgment that was to overtake them. And Jonah’s preaching was crowned with quick success.

We are told that the Ninevites ***“believed.”*** They believed that God would have mercy on them if they repented. And so they ***“proclaimed a fast”*** and mourned ***“and put on sackcloth”*** as evidence of their sorrow. Oh, how powerful is the Word of God! Even the king repents.

A universal cry for help goes up to heaven. All classes of people in Nineveh hasten to put away their greed and evil ways. They give up their favourite sins and turn to God in sincere prayer. Repentance leads logically to prayer.

The hymnist expresses it this way,²

*Prayer is the contrite sinner’s voice,
Returning from his ways,
While angels in their songs rejoice,
And cry, ‘Behold, he prays!’*

Yes, the Ninevites prayed. They did not despair. They hoped for mercy. They believed, despite the threat which Jonah had brought them, that God would forgive them and would spare their city if they repented.

And they were right. God accepted their repentance. He changed His mind and did not destroy Nineveh. Not that God is inconsistent. The objection that God’s attitude here implies fickleness on His part cannot stand. When God threatened to overthrow that city, He had referred to the Nineveh black with guilt and impenitent; He had not referred to the Nineveh fasting and mourning and praying.

Had the people not repented, the destruction would surely have come. But when the Ninevites turned from their evil ways, God turned from the fierceness of His anger. That is the way God always acts. He lets His mercy guide His actions instead of a stern and immutable justice. God hates sin, but He pities and loves the sinner. He loved the Ninevites. That is why He sent the Prophet Jonah to warn them. That is why He forgave them when they repented.

Then the fortieth day came. It dawned. It passed. But Nineveh remained. Oh, how young and old must have rejoiced! Life appeared before them with a new brightness. How merciful is God! How forgiving!

Scripture says in Micah 7:18, ¹⁸ *Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy.* And in 2 Peter 3:9, ⁹ *The Lord is not ... willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance* [and be saved.]

Yes, God forgave the Ninevites. And the lesson which we should learn here is this, God wants the heathen to be saved (because Nineveh was a heathen city). God has divine compassion upon all the heathen and is anxious to save them.

Jonah the Jew was sent to heathen Nineveh. In the New Testament, Jewish Apostles were sent to preach to the heathen. Today missionaries in foreign countries are preaching the Gospel to heathen people. Let us cheerfully and vigorously support this work, so that many souls may repent at the preaching of modern day Jonahs, believe in Jesus as their Redeemer, and be saved.

2. Our Forgiving God Forgave Jonah

Now what was Jonah's reaction when the Lord God failed to carry out His threat of punishment upon the Ninevites? Jonah should have been happy, but he was not.

Instead, we can scarcely imagine it to be true, but it is, he was vexed and irritated. He sulked and complained of God's clemency. He felt that, since His prediction had not come true, he would be liable to the accusation of being a false prophet, and that his reputation would suffer.

That is why he was so provoked and confounded. That is why he gave way to such violent excitement. He began to argue with God, he considered God's mercy to be excessive, and he charged God with weakness.

Naturally it was a sin for Jonah to act that way. His insolent spirit was offensive to God. And so the Lord rebuked Jonah and gave him a much-needed lesson. How?

This is what happened. Discouraged, Jonah spent the night under cover of a few branches outside the city limits. When the next day's burning sun made him faint, the Lord, we are told, "*prepared a plant.*" With its large leaves this plant cast a pleasant coolness over the prophet, relieving the condition of his mind, and the vexation under which he was suffering.

However, things changed quickly. God now "*prepared a worm*" which *damaged the plant* [so] *that it withered.* That lovely plant, being injured, withered rapidly and died. Jonah's joy was of short duration. And so it is with all earthly joys.

Let us not forget that the loss of earthly comforts is intended to lead us to seek our highest good in God.

Then after the plant had withered, a scorching, burning wind arose, *and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint.* He was overcome with the heat. The perpendicular rays of that Assyrian sun were too much for him. And dejectedly Jonah cries out, "*It is better for me to die than to live.*"

The Lord now takes this opportunity to drive home the lesson and asks Jonah, "*Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?*" If Jonah missed that plant which had cost him no toil to rear, which was only of a night's duration, should not God have pity on the myriads of people in Nineveh?

Jonah, you see, is met on his own ground. Jonah had compassion on a plant; should not God have compassion and mercy on human beings? Jonah would have spared that plant had he been able to; should not God spare repentant Nineveh? That plant had but the life of a day, whereas the Ninevites were heirs of immortality, passing on to an eternal destiny.

God reproves, but also pardons. Jonah is silenced. He can make no reply. He can only confess that he has been entirely wrong and that God is righteous.

And behold!, like the Ninevites, Jonah is forgiven. Oh, the greatness of God's goodness and mercy! What a forgiving God! How dearly He loves Jonah! How patiently He instructs and corrects His servant and leads him to see his folly and to ask for forgiveness.

What a masterful object lesson from the Master Teacher! Jonah's anger all along was centred in self-interest. Nine times in this chapter alone he had used the words *I, me* or *my*. The Lord had to make him aware of this sinful self-pity as well as its companion in crime, prejudice.

There is an interesting parallel in the New Testament. At one time the Apostle Peter had felt it wrong to share the gospel with Gentiles or even to associate with them. In a vision God let Peter see a sheet coming down from heaven filled with food unclean for Jews.

By this the Lord taught Peter the object lesson *“that God shows no partiality.* ³⁵ *“But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.* ³⁶ *“The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ -- He is Lord of all.”³ It is an interesting coincidence that Peter saw the sheet in Joppa, the same city from which Jonah had attempted to flee centuries earlier.*

How about us? Our mission, too, as Christians is that of preaching the Gospel, the good news that God sent His Son into the world to save all people. And yet our loves are as contradictory as was Jonah's. We spend our time with, and irritate ourselves over, trifling things, while precious, immortal souls are perishing for want of our message. May God open our eyes to see the value of immortal souls! May He pardon us for our past sluggishness and inactivity!

3. Our Forgiving God Forgives Us

The purpose of the Lord's lesson was to teach Jonah to love those whom God loves and willingly to extend to them the same grace and compassion Jonah had received. We would hope that a chastened but grateful Jonah returned to Israel to report on his experiences and to teach his own people the lesson he had learned: God's grace is universal and Israel was to be instrumental in extending it to all. That lesson applies also to us. May we, who have come to know God's grace, eagerly share it with as many others as we can.

Remember, our God is still a forgiving God, a loving God. As He forgave the Ninevites, as He forgave Jonah, so He is also anxious to forgive us. Our offences are innumerable. We have violated all His precepts. We have rebelled against His authority. We have refused Him obedience. We are just as bad as the Ninevites were.

We are just as critical and unjust as Jonah was. We deserve to be punished. We deserve to be banished from His sight forever. But God is merciful to us.

In Christ Jesus He has pity and compassion upon us. Our Saviour atoned for our sins. He suffered the execution which we rebels deserved. And for Christ's sake God now pardons our iniquity and passes by our transgression (Micah 7:18). His anger against us has been appeased.

Through Christ God has become our Friend and has received us into His favour. Believe this, receive His forgiveness, and you are saved. Do it today! Tomorrow may be too late. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Jonah 3:4

² Hymn 424

³ Acts 10:34-36