

Subject: Do You Really Want God to be Fair?

From: runawayprophet@bible.net

Jonah 4:5-11

Dear Christian,

All I wanted was for God to be fair. Was that too much to ask for? Wouldn't you want God to be fair to those who seem to deserve what is coming to them? I lived at a time when the Assyrian Empire with its capital city of Nineveh terrorized nations. The Assyrians were an unbelieving, pagan nation known for their cruelty towards their enemies. They were wicked, bloodthirsty, and feared. At that time after many years of conquest and prosperity, their empire had started to decline. Wouldn't it be fair after causing so much grief and anguish that God would wipe Nineveh off the face of the earth? Wouldn't it be fair so that they couldn't make life miserable for the people of my country, Israel? At least that's what I thought when God called me to go preach there and call its people to repent.

My name is Jonah. I was one of God's prophets. You probably know the beginning of my story better than the end of the story. When God called me to go east to Nineveh I decided to go the opposite direction. I didn't want to go there because I was afraid they might listen and repent. I knew what that would mean: God would have compassion on them and forgive them. That just would not have been fair! So I ran away like a whining child who was not getting his way. I found a boat heading to Tarshish in the area of the world you call Spain. While I ran, God came after me. God sent a great storm on the sea. Nobody else knew why, but I did. It was because I ran away. To save the rest of the people on the ship they threw me overboard, but I didn't drown in the sea. God provided a large fish to swallow me up. For three days I sat in that fish's belly until it vomited me onto dry land.

Once again God commanded me to go to Nineveh. This time I went, albeit reluctantly, proclaiming God's message, "Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown." Immediately, wonder of all wonders, the people of Nineveh believed God. They fasted and put on sackcloth, a cultural sign of sorrow. Even the king put on sackcloth and sat in ashes. When God saw their actions and how they had turned from their evil ways, he relented from the disaster which he said he would bring on them. You would think that I, of all people, would be happy. They listened! They repented! I was not happy. I was angry. All I wanted was for God to be fair and give those wicked people what they deserved.

After seeing what happened in Nineveh, I went outside the city, built a crude hut and watched. The forty days weren't up yet. I sat and waited, hoping and expecting God to act in fairness by smiting the city in judgment. It would only be fair. All I wanted was for God to be fair. Was that too much to ask for? I was angry, wouldn't you? As I sat there east of the city, I was a wayward and misguided prophet who needed to be corrected. That is what God did as he taught me a lesson I would never forget about his compassion and grace. As much as I wanted God to be fair, the question I was forced to ponder was this: Do I really want God to be fair? Do I really want God to be fair with me?

Sitting there in my crude hut which didn't offer a lot of protection from that hot desert sun, God caused a plant to grow providing some shade and relief from that hot sun. Much like God sending the large fish to save me from the sea, this plant was an act of God's love and compassion. God was being gracious. For once I was happy. Then the next day, God sent a worm which caused that plant to wither. If that wasn't enough, God sent a scorching east wind. This was a hot, dusty wind that when it blew across the desert, it could raise the

temperatures by twenty degrees and drop any humidity in the air in a matter of minutes. Its effect is exhausting.

Sitting in my makeshift hut with no plant for protection, I felt that scorching wind and the blazing sun. Before long I grew faint and wanted to die. Waiting for God's firestorm to destroy Nineveh, I was risking sunstroke. Even more dangerous than that was the spiritual battle being waged in my heart. My bitter disappointment now became despair. "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" God asked. I had an answer for him. "I do have a right to be angry - angry enough to die!"

Yet God was right. I didn't have a right to be angry. That plant was not provided by God to be fair to me. Just as the winds changed direction, so God changed direction with me. Because of my attitude and behavior, I didn't deserve anything from God. I wanted God to be fair with Nineveh, a sinful, wicked people, but God was now, you might say, being fair with me to teach me that I need him to be gracious to me.

Without God be inconceivably gracious, you and I are nothing and we have nothing. Our sins wither our life away from us like that worm to that plant and scorch us with the winds of guilt. As Isaiah, one of my fellow prophets, wrote, "**All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy cloth. All of us have withered like a leaf, and our guilt carries us away like the wind.**" (Isaiah 64:6) I wanted God to be fair with Nineveh, but did I really want him to be fair with me? Do you really want God to be fair with you? Wouldn't you rather he be gracious to you?

God had already been gracious to me. From the belly of that fish I had acknowledged that as I prayed. "**You brought my life up from the pit, O Lord, my God. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord. My prayer came to you, to your holy temple...Salvation belongs to the Lord!**" (Jonah 2:6b-7, 9b) Now using this plant as an object lesson, God was reminding me that in his compassion he acts on our behalf in grace and not in what is fairly deserved. God has been equally gracious to you. As he saved me from the sea through the fish and sent that plant to give relief from the sun, he has brought you up from the depths of your sins and given relief from their scorching guilt. He has done that through Jesus. In the cross of Jesus we see God's justice carried out "unfairly" on the one nailed there for our forgiveness and salvation. Salvation indeed belongs to the Lord because he is inconceivably gracious with you, grace shown because he cares for the people he has made.

I had experienced God's grace, but I still was an angry, bitter prophet all because God dared to show mercy to those wicked Ninevites. They were clearly undeserving of mercy! Have you ever looked at someone and thought the same? But are they any more undeserving of grace than you or I? Doesn't God care about them just as much as he cares for you? That same plant which was a gift of grace to me also served to teach me a lesson about just how far God's inconceivable grace and mercy extends. God is far more gracious than I could have ever imagined.

God asked me that question, "Is it right for you to be angry about that plant?" I thought I had a right, but I was wrong. I did nothing for that plant and yet I was emotionally attached to it. So the main point of God's lesson on grace came out as God responded to my anger. "**You have been concerned about this plant. You did not work for it or make it grow. It grew up in one night and perished after one night. So should I not be concerned for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know the difference between their right hand and their left - and also many animals?**" (vs. 10-11)

Do you understand the lesson? I had no part in the creation, growth, or life of that plant and yet I was so attached to it. God wanted me to think about how he feels. Those people, those children, he made them. He took care of them. He loved them. He wanted them to be his forever. Shouldn't he be concerned about them too and show them the same grace he showed to me? God was not going to be fair to them. He was inconceivably gracious to them. That may not seem fair. Yet it is this inconceivable grace that leads us to rejoice. All who come to him and trust him receive the same forgiveness, the same salvation, the same life in heaven no matter who they are.

Whenever I think back and reflect on all that happened with Nineveh, I marvel at how God works. Was all that for my benefit or Nineveh's? Was it for you? It's all of the above. I and the people of Nineveh needed God to be exactly what he tells us about himself throughout his Word. Dear Christian, God is "a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in mercy." How gracious and compassionate God was to me, to Nineveh, and has been to you! He has been inconceivably gracious. That is what he is and that is what he will continue to be!

Blessings as you live in his grace!

Jonah



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