

May 3, 2026

“Christian Expectation of Grace”
Lesson 1

Jonah 3:1-5, 4:6-11

Intro

The story of Jonah is one that most know, even those who don't go to church. They know the story of Jonah being swallowed by a “huge fish” and being inside it for three days and nights. What some may not know is that Jonah was in that fish because he was trying to avoid a task God had appointed for him to do. God wanted him to go to Ninevah, the capital city of Assyria, and preach repentance to them. Assyria was known for their brutal violence, and they had been a tormentor of Israel. Jonah didn't want to preach to them, didn't want to see them repent. He wanted them punished. But after the three days in the fish, Jonah himself repented and promised he would preach repentance to Ninevah. The fish vomited Jonah onto dry land in Assyria, and Jonah headed to the capital.

Read Jonah 3:1-5

1. vs. 1-2: Jonah is told a second time by God (also 1:2) to preach to Nineveh.
The message is surely the same as before: Nineveh is wicked and must repent
If it does not repent, God will destroy them
The point here is that Jonah is the messenger—he doesn't control what it
2. vs. 3: Jonah obeys, and goes into the city to preach God's message to them
The city is large, more than 120,000 people according to vs. 11
The idea that it took 3 days to go through the city needs examination
Even today, it wouldn't take 3 days to walk through New York or London
Those cities have over 8 million people
So the more likely idea is that Jonah took 3 days to go through the city
His job was to preach God's message, so he went to all areas of the city
The three days also connects to the three days he was inside the fish
3. vs. 4: Jonah goes part-way into the city, “a day's journey”
The recorded message here is brief: 40 days and then Nineveh gets overthrown
Nineveh's sins and the God who judges them are both not mentioned here
Jonah just gives them the message
4. vs. 5: The message is heard and responded to by the Ninevites
A fast is announced, and all the people put on sackcloth
Both of these actions are expressions of grief and remorse in the ancient world
Both indicate the people turning toward God, believing what his prophet said
Note that ALL the people, “greatest to the least”, put on sackcloth
These people are not Jews; they are Gentiles who act on God's pronouncement
Jesus refers to this in Matt. 12:41, showing the Pharisees what true obedience looks like

Read Jonah 4:6-11

When Jonah's message reaches the king in chapter 3, he responds by putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes. He tells his people to stop their wicked ways and turn to God. The people obey, and God promises not to destroy the city, a decision which infuriates Jonah. He asks God to take his life if that is going to be God's decision. God asks Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry?" But Jonah is angry, and he leaves the city, and builds a small shelter where he waits to see if God will change His mind.

5. vs. 6: The title "The LORD God" occurs only this one time in the book of Jonah
Any time the word LORD is in capitals, it refers to Yahweh, God's proper name
Here, God provides Jonah with a plant that is big enough to give him shade
Jonah "was very happy" about the plant
God provided something Jonah needed, even while he was angry at God for His decision
Jonah is enjoying the shade even while he mourns God's mercy to Nineveh
6. vs. 7: The next day, God causes a worm to eat the plant that gave the shade
This shows God's sovereign control over the world
He has the power to give life, and to bring about destruction
God gives Jonah this lesson by destroying something small, rather than the city itself
7. vs. 8: The next day, the plant is gone, and God sends a "scorching east wind" on Jonah
These winds blow in sand, and intensify the heat
Jonah becomes faint under these conditions
Jonah is physically and spiritually miserable at this point
He is far from home, it is hot, he has not shade, and he has done a lot of preaching
He is possibly in danger of suffering heatstroke
He tells God that he would prefer dying to suffering these conditions
Jonah here experiences a small taste of God's judgment
8. vs. 9: God now repeats his earlier question to Jonah, with an addition
"Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"
God is trying to teach Jonah something about Himself
He is being merciful and kind, even while Jonah's views are contrary to God's
Jonah responds in a way that we might see as defensive and defiant, almost like a child
"It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."
He feels God is being inconsistent to not punish Nineveh when they were sinners
A big irony show up at this point if we think about the whole story
Jonah, a prophet of Yahweh, is angry at God's mercy to Nineveh
The pagan king of Nineveh acts righteously by repenting of his sin
Jonah's anger here shows his lack of compassion for the people of Nineveh
9. vs. 10: God here teaches Jonah how he should look at this situation
Jonah is upset the plant was taken, even though he didn't make it or grow it
It was a gift from God, yet Jonah was angry when it died
God wants Jonah to see how He thinks and acts, and to understand His ways

10. vs. 11: God asks a rhetorical question to Jonah here

“Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?”

In other words, isn't it a good and righteous thing to care what happens to people?

There are 120,000 people in this city, and Jonah wants them all destroyed

God shows compassion in giving these people a chance to repent and live

These people are apparently spiritually ignorant (don't know their right hand from left)

God also shows that He cares for animal life in his question to Jonah

This is the last verse in the book of Jonah

The question isn't answered by God or by Jonah—it doesn't need to be

God has compassion on all who will turn to Him, who will repent

God gives people opportunity to do so, even those who currently don't know Him

The question and the book show a significant aspect of God's nature and character

God is free to show mercy and compassion to whomever He desires to

Application: Today's passage is as much about God's people as it is about those far from Him. Certainly, God here shows His mercy and grace to those who are willing to repent. This is an important aspect to who God is. We would all be lost if God did not show His mercy and grace to us. But equally important is that God is showing Jonah, and by extension His church today, what kind of character He wants His people to have. He corrects us when our view of situations is not the same as His view; it is His desire that we share in His character, and therefore, in the way He views all situations. When we, like the Ninevites, go astray, God remains in conversation with us, teaching us what we currently are missing so that we can be like Him in our attitudes and actions towards all people. He asks us to be willing to allow our perceptions and understandings to shift, change, and grow so that we will grow in maturity in our faith.

Prayer: Father 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, Amen.