

Jonah 3:10-4:11

¹⁰When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

^{4:1}But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

⁴But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?”

⁵Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. ⁷But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

⁹But God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”

“I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.”

¹⁰But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”

Not Fair

I.

5:30 a.m. You are standing in the marketplace hoping to get hired for a day’s work. The typical work day starts at 6 a.m., so you want to make sure you are available before the day begins. A man comes to hire people to work in a vineyard. Hot work, to be sure, but he offers the going rate: 1 denarius for the day. You shake the man’s hand to agree to the terms, and off you go to the vineyard.

You’re there all day, in the heat. You pull weeds and haul baskets. From time to time other workers enter the vineyard. With no ear buds to listen to, human interaction has to do. Small-talk between laborers passes the time. Listening to the discussions you learn that those who entered the day’s work force after you were just told the owner would pay what was fair. They had been satisfied—anything was better than nothing—so they entered the vineyard, too.

At quitting time *all* the workers are lined up. The first ones hired will be the last to get paid in this lineup. As they watch the late hires get a denarius, they think they understand. The owner doesn’t want the latecomers to see what he’s going to pay *them*. Then, the early birds get to the front of the line. They get the same denarius the latecomers received!

“That’s not fair!” they insist. No thank you for upholding the contract. “That’s not fair,” even though they received what they were promised.

That’s the scene Jesus painted in Matthew 20.

Jonah would be able to understand. How much do you remember about the book of Jonah? It could be said that Jonah was the worst prophet of God.

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to the people there; God wanted them to

repent. Jonah wanted absolutely nothing to do with that. Nineveh was an enemy of Israel; Jonah didn't want them to repent and turn to the One true and only God.

Jonah refused to go to Nineveh. He boarded a ship going the opposite direction. When an incredible storm came up in the sea, Jonah recognized it as a sign from God telling him to do what he had been commanded to do. Rather than obeying, he convinced the sailors to throw him overboard; he would rather die than preach God's Word to the "wrong" people.

God sent a fish to swallow Jonah. For three days he was in the fish. There he repented of ignoring God's command. God directed the fish to vomit Jonah up onto dry land. Then God told him yet again to go to Nineveh.

He went. He preached, just as God wanted him to.

The people of Nineveh believed what Jonah preached to them. The worst prophet of God was perhaps the most successful prophet of God. Over 120,000 people believed Jonah's message and repented. "When God saw their actions, that they had turned from their evil way, God relented from the disaster which he said he would bring on them, and he did not carry it out" (Jonah 3:10, EHV). God was not fair to the people of Nineveh. They got mercy they never earned, grace that they didn't deserve. That is a happy ending, isn't it?

II.

Of course, you know this isn't the ending of the book of Jonah. It certainly wasn't the ending *Jonah* had been looking for. "To Jonah all this seemed very bad, and he became very angry" (Jonah 4:1, EHV). "Not fair!" Jonah insisted.

Why did this bother Jonah so much? To Jonah it wasn't about Nineveh's sin, but about what Nineveh deserved—and what he thought *Israel* deserved in comparison. Israel was God's covenant nation. Nineveh was the enemy. Mercy should flow only one direction. When God shows kindness outside the boundaries Jonah had determined, it didn't feel like grace—it was more of an insult. True "fairness" to Jonah meant that 120,000 people who were part of an enemy nation die, not that they would repent and come to believe in the true God.

Is that the way things work for us, too? We're fine with unfairness when it runs in our favor. We're only bothered when we think someone else got the wages we think *we* have earned—and they didn't.

Paul said it in today's Second Reading. He spoke about Jacob and Esau. God chose Jacob, even before he was born—certainly before he had done anything that would have *earned* God's favor. Paul asks: "Does this mean that God is unjust?" (Romans 9:14, EHV). Paul answers: "It does not depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Romans 9:16, EHV).

When you get right down to it, "fairness" was never the promise. It never has been. It wasn't for Nineveh; it wasn't for Israel, either.

That fact should have terrified Jonah...and Nineveh...and Israel...and *us*. If mercy flows only to those who have earned it, none of us has any claim on God's mercy at all.

As for Jonah, he was too deep in his own pity party of resentment to see the truth. He said: "It is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:3, EHV). He would rather die than watch grace win.

III.

God doesn't argue with Jonah.

"Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city. He made a shelter for himself there and sat in the shade under it, waiting to see what would happen in the city" (Jonah

4:5, EHV). The sulking Jonah sat down in a convenient place, still hoping and praying that God would destroy 120,000 people.

“Then the LORD God provided a plant and made it grow up over Jonah to provide shade over his head, to relieve him from his discomfort. So Jonah was very happy about the plant” (Jonah 4:6, EHV). Jonah didn’t plant the vine, or water it, or pull weeds to give it a better chance for growth. He simply received it. He was very happy about the extra shade the vine provided him.

“But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, and it attacked the plant so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, so he said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live’” (Jonah 4:7-8, EHV). Jonah repeats his refrain: he just wants to die.

Then God’s question that is at the heart of the book, even though it’s almost at the end. “But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?’ Jonah said, ‘I do have a right to be angry—angry enough to die!’” (Jonah 4:9, EHV). The refrain continues: Jonah just wants to die.

“So the LORD said, ‘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. ¹¹So 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?’” (Jonah 4:10-11, EHV).

Jonah had been living on God’s mercy—God’s undeserved kindness—the whole time. The shade wasn’t a wage he had earned. It was a gift, exactly like Nineveh’s second chance was a gift.

God’s grace is amazing. God is not fair. Thank God for that. If he were fair, Jonah wouldn’t have had a vine, Nineveh wouldn’t have had a second chance, and neither would we.

IV.

The ultimate unfairness in all human history happened on a hill outside Jerusalem. Jesus had done nothing but good—his whole life. But he was treated as if he had done nothing but evil. He was mocked, beaten, mocked some more, nailed to a cross, and left to die. Most horrific of all, as he hung on that cross the whole weight of God’s judgment against sin was squarely on Jesus.

And we, who have done nothing but evil—sinning every day from even before we were born—are treated as if we had done nothing but good. We are forgiven, adopted in baptism, clothed with Jesus’ own righteousness.

Jesus got the wage *we* earned. *We* got the wage *he* earned.

That’s not fair. That God’s pure grace.

That’s what happened in the vineyard in today’s Gospel. Those who had worked hard all day got the same wage as those who had worked for only an hour. When the full-day workers complained, the landowner answered: “Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:15, EHV).

I have been a Christian for 64 years. Do those who have been Christians more than 90 years get more grace than I? Do those who have only been Christians for 3 years get less? What about the people of Nineveh? Or the thief on the cross? Or the disciples who walked this earth with Jesus for 3 years?

God’s grace isn’t dispensed by the hour, or by effort, or by how long you have carried the

burden. God gives the full wage of salvation to the deathbed convert and the lifelong believer alike. His death is enough for all of us—and *none* of it was purchased by any of us.

IV.

Not fair! “I do have a right to be angry!” (Jonah 4:9, EHV), Jonah said. He was angry about people repenting. That’s not just a trivial anger, that’s sacrilegious, isn’t it? He had no right to be angry when God was being gracious.

Some of your cries of “Not fair!” might be over more trivial things. The coworker who got a promotion you think *you* earned. The sibling whose life seems to have turned out better than yours. The person who continually cuts corners but still lands on their feet every time.

Let it go. Not because fairness doesn’t matter, but because you were never going to win that game, anyway.

God is not fair. He gave Nineveh forgiveness they hadn’t earned. He gave Jonah a vine he hadn’t earned, and chance after chance he hadn’t earned. He gave you and me a cross we never could have earned.

God is not fair. He is far better than fair. God is gracious, for the sake of his Son, Jesus, who carried what we deserved so that we could receive what we could never deserve. Amen.