

## "Pitying the Pitiless"

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*Fifth in a series on the Book of Jonah*

Jonah 3:10-4:11

August 2, 2020

God saw the Ninevites' actions, that they turned back from their bad way, and God repented of the evil thing that he had spoken about doing to them. He didn't do it.

But it seemed evil to Yonah, a huge evil. He burned with anger.

He prayed to the LORD, *"Oh please, LORD! Isn't this what I said when I was in my country? That's why I acted before by fleeing to Tarshish, because I know that you're a God gracious, compassionate, long-tempered, vast in commitment and repenting about something evil. So now, LORD, please take my life from me, because my dying will be good, better than my living."*

The LORD said, *"Was your rage good?"*

Yonah went out from the city and sat east of the city. He made a shelter for himself there and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.

The LORD God provided a plant and it grew over Yonah so as to be a shade over his head to rescue him from what was evil for him. Yonah rejoiced hugely about the plant.

But, when dawn came up the next day, God provided a worm and it attacked the plant and it withered; and when the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun attacked Yonah's head.

He grew faint and asked his soul to die. He said, *"My dying will be good, better than my living."*

God said to Yonah, *"Was your rage good about the plant?"*

He said, *"It was good, my rage, to the point of death."*

The LORD said, *"You pitied the plant, for which you didn't labour and which you didn't grow, which came into existence overnight and perished overnight. Shouldn't I pity the huge city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 human beings who don't know their right hand from their left, and many animals?"*

Adapted from a translation by John Goldingay.

We've been with Jonah. You might also say Jonah has been with us.

We sailed with him for Tarshish, opposite to where GOD was sending us. But get this! Even when we're running *from* GOD, we're actually running *for* GOD. Even in our disobedience, GOD continues to unfold GOD's good and wonderful purposes. Through us!

Then, with Jonah we plunged to the bottom, entombed in a fish's stomach. But get this! Even dead and buried, it's never too late to remember, remember GOD's mighty acts of mercy and love. And celebrate, celebrate GOD's generous deeds of rescue. And hope, hope in GOD's saving and sending call to you.

Then, we trudged with Jonah through the city. A slurry of evil sludged through the gutters. Sneers of hatred gawked and glared. "God-Forsaken" seemed to be scrawled on every street sign. But get this! GOD was there too. Always had been. So despite our worst efforts, GOD saved that place and its people.

Now, Jonah is in a huge snit! Enraged! At GOD, and GOD's pity.

We might be tempted, now, to step back from Jonah. Act like we've never met him. Shake our heads at his intolerance, judgmentalism, hatred.

Let's not kid ourselves. GOD's not fooled. Unless we stay with Jonah here too, we will miss the good news GOD wants to work in us.

## II

"Whatever happened to Jonah?" someone asked me. No one really knows. Many places claim to have his tomb.<sup>1</sup> The most famous was in Nineveh itself.<sup>2</sup> It was the Mosque of the Prophet Jonah; Jonah is revered in Islam.

Around the ruins of ancient Nineveh grew Mosul, a major city in northern Iraq. In 2014, ISIS (or Daesh) conquered it. For 3 years its Muslim, Christian and Yazidi people lived in terror. This is a picture of the Jonah mosque after Daesh blew it up.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonah#Other\\_Muslim\\_tombs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonah#Other_Muslim_tombs)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic\\_sites\\_of\\_Mosul#Mosque\\_of\\_the\\_Prophet\\_Jonah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_sites_of_Mosul#Mosque_of_the_Prophet_Jonah)

My backdrop for today's service is a church sanctuary near Mosul. Daesh trashed it.<sup>3</sup> But this is another photo from a couple Christmases ago. After the city was freed, the congregation began again.<sup>4</sup>

Daesh is pitiless to its countless victims. Should pity be given to Daesh?

### III

This weekend we mark Emancipation Day. We've got to celebrate the end of slavery. But that means slavery existed in Canada, and it did for a long time.<sup>5</sup>

This is William Jarvis. He was a "somebody." Jarvis Street in Toronto is named for his family. He was a senior government official.

This is a letter Jarvis received from Henry Lewis. Jarvis had "owned" Lewis, one of his many slaves. Lewis had escaped some years earlier. He was living freely in the United States. He wrote Jarvis, asking if he could make it legal by purchasing his own freedom.

People were imprisoned, their labour stolen, their bodies tortured and raped, and their lives deemed "owned." The slaveholders were government officials, like Jarvis, clergymen, and ordinary farmers and merchants. Governor Simcoe tried to end slavery here, and they strongly and successfully fought him all the way.<sup>6</sup>

These enslavers were pitiless to their victims. Should they receive pity?

### IV

Nineveh was beautiful. It was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Its empire was brutal.

A prophet after Jonah called it a city of bloodshed, lies, and plunder. "*Who has not suffered from your continual cruelty?*" he accused it.<sup>7</sup> Nineveh would lay waste to Jonah's own land, and pretty much wipe out his own people. GOD saw this. GOD sent

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-06-15/iraqi-christians-are-slowly-returning-their-homes-wary-their-neighbors> The Syriac Catholic Church of Mar Behnam and Mart Sarah is in Qaraqosh, Iraq.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.aina.org/news/20200708130236.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <https://humanrights.ca/story/the-story-of-slavery-in-canadian-history>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/06/17/slavery-canada-history\\_n\\_16806804.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/06/17/slavery-canada-history_n_16806804.html)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/slavery/henry\\_lewis.aspx](http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/slavery/henry_lewis.aspx)

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Jarvis\\_\(Upper\\_Canada\\_official\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Jarvis_(Upper_Canada_official))

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/jarvis-street-slavery-1.3564667>

<sup>7</sup> Nahum 3:1, 19.

Jonah to Nineveh because, GOD said, "*their evil has come before me.*"

What does Jonah want? Wipe it out. So it can never crush his people, nor drench their land with children's blood. Jonah hates Nineveh. Are we going to be hard on him for that?<sup>8</sup>

Nineveh was pitiless toward its countless victims. Should pity be shown for Nineveh?

V

GOD sides with victims: the victims of Daesh, the victims of slaveholders, the victims of Nineveh. A constant call of the Bible is that GOD *vindicates* those trampled-down, GOD *rescues* those brutalized, GOD *redeems* those enslaved.

But what about the trampers? The brutalizers? The enslavers? These enemies of GOD?

GOD judges them. GOD inflicts consequences on them. GOD urges them to repentance.

But so they repent? Can they possibly undo or make up for what they've done? Of course not.

So shall GOD pity them?

VI

GOD does. GOD acts with pity to the pitiless, those bloody, damnable Ninevites!

Are you with Jonah?

I've said before, this book of Jonah is a comedy. Laugh at loud at this ridiculous excuse for a prophet and his outlandish adventures. While we're going along with the joke, though, GOD sneaks in the punch line. It hits hard.

"*Shouldn't I pity the huge city of Nineveh?*" Shouldn't I pity those whom you fear, whom you rightfully loath, whom you got good reason to hate? Shouldn't I pity those who have no business being pitied?

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<sup>8</sup> Philip Cary, writes: "*Unless we do not care for our own children and do not desire to protect them from enemies coming to slaughter or enslave them, we are in no position to think our mentality so superior to Jonah's.*" Jonah. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 39.

It's a brutal question for Jonah. It's hard for us.

## VII

Because GOD does not give up on them, Jonah is quite ready to give up on GOD, and on life itself.

But GOD isn't ready to give up on Jonah.

GOD writes a parable for him, in the branches and leaves of this plant.

GOD gives it to Jonah, to shelter him. Jonah's happy (for the first time in the whole story). He loves the plant.

Then, GOD attacks the plant, destroys it. Then GOD attacks Jonah with burning sun and scorching wind. Jonah grieves for the plant. Yes, he pities it, withered and dead.

Now, GOD can work with Jonah. His burning anger (for Nineveh) is now accompanied by love, grief and pity (for the plant). GOD stirs these affections in Jonah, teaching Jonah how to feel about things. This seed gives him a feel for how GOD feels about things. Pity.

Pity is the desire that someone (or something) not perish, but live, thrive and flourish.<sup>9</sup>

GOD creates all things, and *every single someone*. GOD delights when each lives, thrives and flourishes. Even those who are morally dim-witted ("not knowing their right from their left"), who inflict cruel harm on others, or simply take part in our cultures and communities that do.

GOD's pity is "the love that desires evil people to live, not die."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cary, 154.

<sup>10</sup> Cary, 164.

VIII

*Shouldn't I pity the pitiless? Shouldn't I love my enemies?*

GOD has already answered. From the beginning of time, GOD has answered.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus compared himself to Jonah. GOD gave the pitiless people of Nineveh a sign — Jonah. Yes, Jonah! That miserable mess-up Jonah! And by GOD's grace, it was enough to overturn them from their evil ways.

GOD gives us the sign. Jesus. So much more than Jonah. GOD's pity in person!

Overlooking another city, GOD's Pity hung on a branch, attacked by a world that does not pity, withered, and died, For the pitiful. And the pitiless. For pity's sake.

Should I pity the pitiless? Should I love my enemies?

Jesus has answered for me. It's not about letting evildoers off the hook, or excusing them. We must stand against them.

But with Jesus. Who pities them. And pities us too.

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<sup>11</sup> "Of course, God is not really asking our permission or Jonah's. He has already made up his mind from eternity." Cary, 158.