

Jonah's Misplaced Pity

Key Verses: *“Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city?”*
—Jonah 4:10,11

Selected Scriptures: *Jonah 3:1-5; 4:1-11*

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, one of Israel's enemies. (II Kings 19:36) God had instructed the prophet Jonah to announce to the Ninevites that because of their wickedness he would destroy them in forty days. After hearing Jonah's declaration, the king made a decree, that “neither man nor beast” should “feed, nor drink water” and that they should all “cry mightily unto God.” Then “they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil ... that he would do unto them.”—Jonah 1:2; 3:1-10

However, this “displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.” Jonah said to God, “I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. Therefore now, O LORD, take ... my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live. Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry?”—Jonah 4:1-4

Perhaps Jonah had in mind the savagery with which the Assyrians had treated his own people for several generations. He might have been anxious to see judgment executed and this nation exterminated. (Isa. 36)

Greatly disappointed, the prophet left the city. He sat down on a nearby hillside, under the shade of a booth which he had made, to “see what would become of the city.”—Jonah 4:5

Then “God prepared a gourd ... that it might be a shadow” over Jonah, and the prophet “was exceeding glad.” However, the next morning a worm, which God also had prepared, destroyed the gourd. When the sun rose, it “beat upon the head of Jonah, that he ... wished in himself to die.”—vss. 6-8

God said to Jonah, “Is doing good displeasing to thee, because of the gourd?” “Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for which thou didst not labour, neither didst thou nourish it, which a son of a night was, and a son of a night perished, and I—have not I pity on Nineveh?” (vss. 9-11, *Young’s Literal Translation*) The expression “son of a night” was used when referring to something having a “transient” nature. The Lord was pointing out the great contrast between Jonah’s concern and pity for a plant, versus for the people of Nineveh.

Jonah’s desire for vengeance upon the Assyrians, for wrongs they had committed in the past, had blinded him to the fact they now repented before God. God saw the works of the Ninevites, that “they turned from their evil way,” changing their life and conduct. It was that which caused the Lord to relent.

Jesus confirmed the truthfulness of this account in the book of Jonah and how the Ninevites truly repented. (Luke 11:29-32) Verses 31 and 32 of this passage prove that all the dead, including the Ninevites, will be resurrected during the future kingdom on earth. At that time, the judgment of those who had criticized and persecuted Jesus during his First Advent, will be less favorable than the judgment to be shown towards those who never saw or heard Jesus’ preaching and miracles. A lesson for us: there is responsibility for knowledge we have received.—Luke 12:48 ■