

“God’s Immense Mercy”

Jonah 4:1-11, Matthew 27:11-26

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02/19/2023

## **Opening Prayer**

If I were to ask you to list the traits of the Lord, what would be the things that come to mind? His almighty power? His lovingkindness? His graciousness? His righteous judgement? The fact that He knows all? Perhaps you might say, amidst all of these other wonderful traits that our Creator fully embodies, that He is merciful. In fact we often will hear in church the phrase “He is merciful and mighty.” Beloved, the Lord is as merciful as He is righteous and powerful. He is as merciful as He is loving. Jonah chapter four, and far more importantly Matthew 27, shows just how merciful He really is. The whole account of Jonah has this theme of God’s mercy running through it, culminating in the Lord being merciful to a repentant Nineveh. In our Lenten series this year, that mercy that God shows is going to be our focus in Jesus’s story in Mark. But before we dive into this further, I do want to note one important thing about mercy. Being merciful often costs something to the one who is showing mercy. I will say it again. Mercy often costs something to the one who is showing it.

An example or two will probably help us flesh this out a bit more. Think about those areas of life where mercy is sometimes shown. We have used the examples before of a parent or teacher or police officer who catches someone in an act that is uncouth, and they show mercy in not punishing that individual. Probably the best example I ever heard was from a former leader in Campus Crusade who in his younger years went to college in Mankato. In Mankato, near the university, he described a large hill that was very easy to speed down. Twice before he had been caught by the same police officer at the base of that hill as he sped. Twice he had been given verbal warnings, and let go without any sort of ticket or other punishment. As he was leaving for Christmas break, he again chose to do wrong and speed in the same place. The same officer caught him a third time speeding. The conversation he described is telling. The officer explained that he had every right to tow the car, to give a hefty fine, and to severely dampen the man’s Christmas break... yet he had chosen to extend him mercy. The officer, Beloved, had no reason to not bring the hammer down on my former Cru leader. He had

every reason in the world to throw the book as much as he could at the rule breaker. It might even be argued that the officer was taking a risk in not punishing him, for what if he was to continue to speed and get into an accident? What if another were to suffer? Being merciful, at least in theory, for the officer cost him something. Another better example might be in the workplace. I have heard about different situation where, if an employee causes some kind of significant damage through negligence, they can avoid being fired or written up if they instead choose to pay for those damages. Without getting into the legality (that may have changed) or morality of such policies, I would have you consider the position of management in such a situation. If the company, or boss, decides to not hold the guilty employee responsible, then they are going to bear the financial burden of that employee's failure. Their mercy costs them something. Mercy often costs something Beloved. In the case of Nineveh, being merciful meant relenting from righteous judgement that Jonah and other Israelites had rightfully called for. In the case of Christ's mercy towards us, the punishment for our sins fell upon Him instead. Indeed, mercy can cost a lot.

Jonah four is the final chapter in the book, and it shows what happens in the wake of God's merciful relenting towards the great city of Nineveh. Although this city had been condemned, they had repented at Jonah's message, and the Lord in His infinite mercy had relented. Jonah, though, is not pleased with what the Lord has done. He even goes so far as to be angry with the Lord for showing mercy, accusing the Lord that this was His plan all along. "Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." Jonah is so angry that the Lord did not destroy the Assyrian capital that he wishes to die. Jonah maybe had more insight than we give him credit for concerning the future, but he definitely missed the mark about the Lord's ultimate will.

Historical perspective helps here. In a short time the Lord would bring the Assyrian nation down upon the northern kingdom of Israel from which Jonah hailed. Whether by special revelation or because he could read the tea leaves so to speak, it is speculated that Jonah knew that the Hebrew's enemies were going to come and destroy his country. As anyone who is proud of their country would

understand, the last thing Jonah wants is for his homeland to be under the Assyrian thumb. If God only were to destroy the 120,000-person city, it would make such a calamity nigh impossible. But Jonah, unfortunately again, is missing the whole point even of this. The northern kingdom's destruction doesn't come about just because, it is a direct response to ongoing and evil adultery and idolatry. Much more to them than the Assyrians, the Lord has sent and will send even more prophets to try and turn their hearts and minds back to Him. Sadly, God's own people listen poorly to the Lord, and the Assyrian empire is the chosen instrument for their judgement. It is very similar to the judgement the Lord will pronounce later on the southern kingdom (including Jerusalem) using Babylon, and that brings about the exile we read about in Daniel. That same judgement, some 150 or so years later, will actually also include the Assyrian kingdom that has returned to its evil ways, as Babylon destroys them as well. The amazing irony in Jonah's words is that if Israel would only do what the Assyrians did, with much more Godly guidance by the way, then they would have been completely spared. The Lord desires to show mercy to all of His creations. He is not a God of vengeance and destruction, but mercy and peace. That being said, destruction is warranted and judgment does come... which is also an act of mercy in and of itself.

You might ask how judgement can be merciful. Well, in the case of the northern kingdom of Israel, in the case of Jonah's homeland, God's judgement stopped all sorts of forms of evil from being engaged in. Idolatry, adultery, incest, mercilessness, licentiousness, drunken carousing, and every other evil thing you can think of had overtaken the northern kingdom. They were in a period of peace when Jonah was sent to preach in Nineveh. At the same time, several other prophets (most notably Amos) were sent to the northern kingdom to condemn God's people for abandoning His calling. The destruction of Israel was a wake-up call, and it mercifully ended so much sin and brought so many back from the eternal destruction they were engaged in. God was merciful in enacting judgement... if not to those guilty, than to their children who came back to Him in repentance. Out of all the evil they were engaged in, there was a particular form of idolatry that should make all of our stomachs churn that the northern kingdom of Israel had been warned against, yet continued to practice. They were well engaged in child sacrifice Beloved, being noted as having sacrificed their children in the fire to Moloch and Ashtaroth in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 16:6-7. The Lord proclaims through His prophets that the blood of the innocent cries out to Him, and so in time the Lord mercifully puts an end to the murder of their children and innocents by

the hand of the Assyrians. Beloved, even God's judgement can be merciful if not to those being judged, than to those who are afflicted by the ones to be judged. With all of that in mind, we can see, at least a bit perhaps, why Jonah was so furious that the Lord would relent. Even in his anger, the Lord proves to Jonah just how misled he really was. To prove his point to Jonah and to us, the Lord sends a small plant.

“Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen to the city. So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.” Likely a castor plant, God makes it grow quickly for Jonah. Jonah, lying in the sun, is happy to have rest in the shade as he waits and hopes that God would smite Assyria. Yet, God then sends a worm and the plant dies. Jonah, in the heat of the sun and wind, again wishes with all of this soul to die. God again asks him a similar question that he did in verse four. “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?” Jonah, who shows his stubbornness, answers “I have good reason to be angry, even to death.” The final two verses, spoken by the Lord, show a totally different motivation from humankind. The Lord desires to show compassion to His creations, even the lost and dangerous ones, if only they will listen. “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?” Beloved, the message is clear. God desires to show mercy from the mightiest of kings down to the lowliest of farm animals, because they are all His creations. Now, as we have mentioned throughout, it often costs the giver of mercy to give up something in order to show it. The Lord's mercy towards us didn't come without cost. It cost our Lord's death upon a cross.

Matthew 27:11-26 is good for us to read here today, before we enter into Lent. The entire Lenten season leads up to this climactic moment, where Jesus is falsely accused, put on trial, found innocent, and yet is traded for you and me. Jesus before Pontius Pilate ends with Pilate bringing before the mob an evil man in chains named Barabbas. Barabbas means “son of the father,” with the implication being (since he was a Jew) that his father was a high official... or perhaps it was in

reference to the Lord Himself. Barabbas's story is much like you and me. Jesus, who is found innocent of any and all wrongdoing, is traded for him. Barabbas is a murderer, one who is deserving of death. The cross Jesus bears and is nailed to, almost certainly was meant for him. You and I, as children of the Most High, have found ourselves in the exact same situation. Sinners through and through, the Lord has shown us His mercy by having Jesus take our place. The cross He is crucified on would have been ours in eternity. The scourging and the humiliation and the pain that is heaped upon Jesus, rightfully belonged to us before He showed us His abounding mercy and stripped that from our backs. Beloved, the mercy shown to the person of Barabbas is shown to us as well. The mercy shown to Nineveh is shown to us as well. Heaven forbid if we ever forget that and find ourselves in Jonah's shoes, lamenting that God is merciful towards others. Heaven forbid if we ever forget what His mercy towards us cost Him for our sakes.

To that end Beloved, I leave you with two charges this morning. The first is to be merciful. Do not be like Jonah, lamenting that God has relented from destroying our enemies in this world. Instead, rejoice when any of them come to know Him... and do your part to be the one sharing the glorious news of salvation and mercy and repentance. Secondly, let us not leave here ungrateful in any way. Let us leave here this morning rejoicing that the Lord God Almighty, the King of kings, chose to show us mercy. Praising Him, thanking Him, being rested and encouraged in Him, rejoice this morning Beloved. For the mercy shown to Nineveh, to Barabbas, to many others... is ours as well. Let us pray.

**Closing Prayer**