

Christian Expectation of Grace

Devotional Reading: Revelation 5:1–5

Background Scripture: Jonah 1–4; Galatians 3:1–13

Jonah 3:1–5

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Jonah 4:6–11

⁶ Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸ When 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.”

⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

¹⁰ But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

Key Text

The LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”—Jonah 4:10–11a

Social Teachings of the Church

Unit 3: Fulfilling Our Obligations to God and Society

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the reason for Jonah’s anger.
2. Describe how God’s desire to extend grace to Nineveh expresses impartiality.
3. List ideas for extending God’s grace to neighbors from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. I’m the Judge!
- B. Lesson Context: Historical
- C. Lesson Context: Literary

I. The Prophet’s Message (Jonah 3:1–5)

- A. Directive from the Lord (vv. 1–2)
- B. Proclamation of Jonah (vv. 3–4)
- C. Response of the Ninevites (v. 5)

Powerful Motivator

II. The Prophet’s Anger (Jonah 4:6–11)

- A. Divine Provision (vv. 6–7)
- B. Divine Questioning (vv. 8–9)
- C. Divine Corrective (vv. 10–11)

Flying Off the Handle

Conclusion

- A. Our Graciously Patient God
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Assyria Uh-sear-ee-uh.

Assyrians Uh-sear-e-unz.

Gath Hopher Gath He-fer.

Jeroboam Jair-uh-boe-um.

Jonah Jo-nuh.

Joppa Jop-uh.

Nineveh *Nin-uh-vuh*.
Ninevites *Nin-uh-vites*.
Sennacherib *Sen-nack-er-ib*.
Tarshish *Tar-shish*.

Introduction

A. I'm the Judge!

His drug of choice was adrenaline. He recklessly and repeatedly drove his motorcycle at high speeds—a decision that resulted in numerous wrecks and serious bodily harm. He squandered his money on expensive vehicles, alcohol, and drugs. He jeopardized his family's financial stability and threatened to leave them without a father and husband. Although I considered him a friend, I grew angry at his irresponsible decisionmaking and selfish desires.

One day, my anger bubbled to the surface. He had lost weight and felt good about it. He approached me, saying, "I'm looking good, don't you think?"

"Well, it's generally good to put on some muscle, too, don't you think?" I retorted.

In that moment, I felt justified. *This man is a jerk*, I thought. *He doesn't care about anyone else, so why should I be kind to him?* Now, I realize I angrily judged him and concluded he did not deserve kindness and respect.

The question, "Who's the just judge?" is central in today's study of the prophet Jonah. The prophet angrily judges God and the people of Nineveh. But are his conclusions accurate?

B. Lesson Context: Historical

Jonah's ministry is difficult to date. The closest approximation we may make is that he prophesied about events that occurred during the reign of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel from 793 to 753 BC ([2 Kings 14:23–29](#)). The designation "Israel" in this context refers to the northern kingdom that formed following the division of the original nation of Israel. This division occurred after King Solomon's death, around 930 BC ([1 Kings 12:20](#)).

In the eighth century BC, before the reign of Jeroboam, military conflicts existed between Israel and Assyria. The Assyrians were known for their brutal violence. Assyrian kings boasted about their power and commissioned visual displays of their cruelty as propaganda, reminding enemies of the futility of resistance.

Nineveh was a major city in the Assyrian Empire. It became the empire's capital in about 700 BC during the reign of Sennacherib. Jonah prophesied more than 50 years before Nineveh became the seat of government. The city is first mentioned in the Bible when a descendant of Noah's son Ham built it ([Genesis 10:11](#)).

During Jeroboam's reign, Israel experienced prosperity, though it was short-lived. Their fortune was due in part to internal turmoil in Assyria. However, people remembered past conflicts, and sol-

diers involved in those wars may have been alive during Jonah’s lifetime. Jonah’s hometown of Gath Hopher was in northern Israel (2 Kings 14:25), and this region likely experienced direct conflict with the Assyrians. Eventually, the Assyrian Empire regained strength and, in 722 BC, attacked the northern kingdom of Israel.

C. Lesson Context: Literary

The book of Jonah opens with the Lord commanding Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against it (Jonah 1:1–2). The Lord observed the city’s wickedness. Jonah, however, disobeyed the Lord’s command. He traveled to Joppa and boarded a west-bound ship to Tarshish (1:3).

The Lord sent a storm to intercept Jonah and the ship. To save the vessel, the sailors lightened its load (Jonah 1:5; compare Acts 27:18). Their efforts failed, leading the crew to cast lots to determine the responsible party for the sudden storm (Jonah 1:6–7). Their process pointed to Jonah (1:7). Jonah revealed that he fled the presence of “the Lord, the God of heaven” (1:9–10). He directed the ship’s crew to throw him overboard as a last-ditch effort to calm the storm. They agreed to do so only after requesting that Jonah’s God not hold them guilty of murder (1:14).

Rather than let Jonah drown in the sea, the Lord prepared “a huge fish” to swallow him (Jonah 1:17). For three days and three nights, Jonah remained in the fish. He acknowledged his situation and prayed to the Lord (2:1). Jonah promised to make good on his vow to preach the Lord’s salvation to Nineveh (2:2–9). After three days, God directed the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land (2:10). The prophet followed the Lord’s command to go to Nineveh.

I. The Prophet’s Message (Jonah 3:1–5)

A. Directive from the Lord (vv. 1–2)

1–2. Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

The expression *the word of the Lord came* appears throughout the Old Testament to introduce a message from God (Genesis 15:4; 2 Samuel 7:4; Ezekiel 7:1; etc.). This verse is the *second time* in this book that Jonah receives a word from the Lord. Jonah 1:1–2 contains the first (see Lesson Context).

While the verse before us does not specify the exact message that Jonah is to *proclaim*, its content is likely still related to the “wickedness” of *Nineveh* (Jonah 1:2). The point is clear: Jonah does not control the *message* of his proclamation; it comes directly from the Lord.

B. Proclamation of Jonah (vv. 3–4)

3. Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.

The book of Jonah identifies *Nineveh* as a “great city” (Jonah 1:2; 3:2). The verse before us elabo-

rates on the description. The Hebrew phrase translated as *very large* may be understood literally as “great to God.” Most commentators interpret this to mean Nineveh was so large and influential that it held significant importance, even to God.

The claim that Nineveh’s size requires *three days to go through it* faces criticism. The supposition is that no ancient city could be so vast. This skepticism draws various responses. One response is that the three days include the time needed for Jonah to stop and preach. The book of Jonah describes the city’s population as more than 120,000 people ([Jonah 4:11](#), below). For Jonah to preach in every neighborhood, it could easily require three days.

Additionally, the reference to *three days* invites comparisons to Jonah’s painful three-day ordeal in the “huge fish” ([Jonah 1:17](#)). Sadly, his prophetic mission to Nineveh will feel even more painful (see [4:1–4](#), below).

4. Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

Though *Nineveh* is a city of three days’ journey (see [Jonah 3:3](#), above), Jonah only travels *a day’s journey* before delivering his message. The proclamation is very brief—just five words in Hebrew. Notably, there is no mention of Nineveh’s sins or any reference to the true God behind the message.

In ancient Near Eastern cultures, many nations and cities worshipped patron deities believed to oversee the territories. In this instance, Jonah does not reference the Lord’s authority. He proclaims the message of judgment and offers no hope, only a declaration of doom.

The Hebrew word translated *overthrown* suggests a change in direction or status (examples: [Joshua 7:8](#); [8:20](#); [Job 19:19](#); [Hosea 11:8](#); [Joel 2:31](#)). This can include the significant alteration a city might experience through destruction (examples: [Genesis 19:29](#); [Jeremiah 20:16](#); [Amos 4:11](#)). Jonah’s message indicates imminent judgment without providing any explanation. The city will undoubtedly change, but not in the way Jonah expects.

What Do You Think?

How do we respond to the charge of “being judgmental” when we communicate the message of God’s judgment?

Digging Deeper

How should we balance communicating God’s love and mercy with his justice and holiness?

C. Response of the Ninevites (v. 5)

5. The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

A proclamation from the people of *Nineveh* follows Jonah’s message. A *fast* can signify deep sorrow and lament (examples: [Judges 20:26](#); [Esther 4:3](#); [Joel 1:14](#)). Wearing *sackcloth*, a coarse and rough fabric, is an expression of grief (examples: [Genesis 37:34](#); [2 Kings 19:1](#); [Job 16:15](#)). Together, fasting and sackcloth represent turning toward God (example: [Daniel 9:3](#); compare [Psalm 35:13](#)).

Ninevites of every social class, *from the greatest to the least*, express their grief and repentance.

There is no guarantee that their actions will prevent the predicted disaster. However, they willingly do what is required to save themselves. They believe Jonah’s message and hope for a different outcome because of their penitent response. This is not the first time in the book of Jonah that non-Israelites (Gentiles) respond faithfully to the *God* of Israel (compare [Jonah 1:16](#)).

Jesus highlights the skepticism of the religious leaders of his time by referring to the Ninevites’ belief and repentance ([Matthew 12:41](#)). While Jesus’ ministry primarily focused on Israel, their response led to his condemnation ([11:20–24](#)). In contrast, Gentiles positively received Jonah’s preaching despite no record of him performing any miracles.

What Do You Think?

Why are sorrow and lament appropriate responses when we are confronted with our sin (see [Psalms 51:17; 119:136; 2 Corinthians 7:10; James 4:7–9](#))?

Digging Deeper

How do [Psalm 30:11–12; Romans 8:1, 34; Hebrews 7:25; and 1 John 3:20](#) offer encouragement in this state?

Powerful Motivator

As a high school English teacher, I observed particular habits in my students. One notable pattern emerged around the six-week mark of a nine-week quarter. When faced with the possibility of failing, students would ask about their grades. Their question was always the same: “What can I do to avoid failing?” Students who were once indifferent to their grades suddenly became very concerned. The threat of a failing grade was a powerful motivator.

Similarly, the warning of judgment prompted Nineveh to heed Jonah’s prophetic message. When imminent destruction was on the table, they repented for their sins and believed in God.

God gave us the Holy Spirit and Scripture to motivate and empower us to live as his children. Are you attentive to God’s guidance in convicting your heart of sin and leading you toward greater holiness?

—B. R.

II. The Prophet’s Anger ([Jonah 4:6–11](#))

When Jonah’s message reaches the king of Nineveh, he responds by clothing himself in sackcloth and sitting in ashes ([Jonah 3:6](#)). He issues a decree that all Ninevites should abandon their wicked ways and turn to God ([3:7–9](#)). The people obey his directives, and God promises not to destroy the city ([3:10](#)). God’s decision infuriates Jonah, and he asks the Lord to take his life ([4:1–3](#)). The Lord responds, “Is it right for you to be angry?” ([4:4](#)). Angry and sulking, Jonah goes outside the city, builds a small shelter ([4:5](#)), and waits to see whether the Lord will change his mind.

A. Divine Provision (vv. 6–7)

6. Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant.

This verse contains the first and only appearance of the title *LORD God* in the book of Jonah. *LORD* (with small caps) translates God’s proper name, often transliterated “Yahweh.” This name is first recorded in [Exodus 3:13–14](#) when Moses asks how to refer to the deity he encounters. The name means “I am who I am” or “I will be what I will be.” It conveys God’s reliability to be himself, not fickle or changing like people or pagan gods. The Hebrew word translated *God* is “Elohim.” While Elohim is one of the primary names for the true God of the Old Testament, the same word refers to “gods” in a general sense (examples: [Exodus 12:12](#); [20:3](#)). Thus, the composite name *LORD God* unites a generic word meaning “god” with the unique personal name of Israel’s one true God.

According to the book of Jonah, God *provided* four objects to interact with Jonah: a “huge fish” ([1:17](#)), a “plant” ([4:6](#)), a “worm” ([4:7](#)), and a “scorching east wind” ([4:8](#)). This verse introduces the second of these four items. The Lord God temporarily supplements the shelter Jonah built for protection from the sun with a rapidly growing *leafy plant*. The exact type of plant this Hebrew word represents is unknown. One possibility is that it refers to a castor oil plant, which can grow to about eight feet and features large leaves.

Jonah feels *very happy* for the shade. The Hebrew word translated *discomfort* refers elsewhere to Nineveh’s “wickedness” and “evil ways” ([Jonah 1:2](#); [3:8](#), [10](#)), the troublesome storm at sea ([1:7](#)), and Jonah’s own negative feelings ([4:1](#)). God’s love for Jonah’s perceived enemies continues to displease Jonah. While Jonah enjoys the shade, he mourns the Lord’s merciful response to Nineveh.

7. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered.

This verse identifies the third of four objects *provided* by God to teach Jonah (see commentary on [Jonah 3:6](#), above). God directs *a worm* to consume the same plant he established to shade Jonah. This action illustrates God’s sovereign control over the world; he possesses the power to give life and bring about destruction. Ironically, it is not the destruction of Nineveh that Jonah witnesses; instead, the natural protection from the sun God provided is destroyed.

B. Divine Questioning (vv. 8–9)

8. When 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.”

By the time *the sun rose*, the plant no longer provides shade. God further increases Jonah’s discomfort by sending *a scorching east wind* (compare [Jeremiah 18:17](#)). Such winds are life-threatening, as they blow in sand and intensify the sun’s heat. The combination of the sun and wind causes Jonah to become light-headed and dizzy, to the point that he faints. Jonah’s reaction is not merely dramatic; he is physically and spiritually miserable, far from home. The exhaustion from a preaching tour he didn’t ask for is worsened by the threat of heatstroke. Jonah experiences a small taste of God’s judg-

ment.



Visual for [Lessons 9 & 11](#). Point to this visual and discuss the connection between God's generosity and the ways we deal generously with others.

9a. But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

The first six words of God's question are the same as his initial question to Jonah in verse 4. The question demonstrates God as a gracious and kind teacher who pursues Jonah, even when Jonah's values are misaligned.

9b. “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

Jonah's answer is petty, defensive, and defiant. He attempts to bolster his position by asserting once again his preference for death. From Jonah's perspective, God is inconsistent: why would God spare the evil city of Nineveh while allowing the destruction of a harmless shade plant?

Readers quickly notice the irony. On the one hand, Jonah, a prophet of Yahweh, reacts angrily to God's mercy toward Nineveh. On the other hand, the pagan king of Nineveh, who likely does not even know the name of Israel's God, acts piously by repenting of sin ([Jonah 3:6–9](#)). Jonah's anger reveals his lack of compassion for the Ninevites.

What Do You Think?

Is it appropriate for us to be angry at God? Why, or why not?

Digging Deeper

How can we prevent anger from becoming hatred, bitterness, or unbelief?

Flying Off the Handle

In the early days of the United States, ax heads were made in the industrialized East and then shipped to the frontier West. When the ax heads arrived at their destination, they were fit to wooden handles. The handles were often hastily fashioned, yielding the deadly possibility that an ax head could fly off an ill-fitting handle when in use.

The suddenness of such an event became a metaphor for an outburst of anger: *flying off the handle*. Possibly, the first use of this figure of speech in print was in a satirical story titled *The Attaché*. It was published in 1844 by the Canadian humorist Thomas C. Haliburton. However, the idea goes back much further than that! God’s directive for Jonah to preach in Nineveh struck deep resentment in that prophet; thus, we see him “flying off the handle” at God. Do you deal with your anger better than Jonah? See [James 1:19–20](#).

—C. R. B.

C. Divine Corrective (vv. 10–11)

10. But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.”

The Lord forcefully points out Jonah’s misdirected sense of concern. Jonah had no ownership of the *plant*; he neither planted nor tended to it. It was a gracious gift from the Lord. Nevertheless, Jonah was angry when it *died*. One would hope these facts led the prophet to realize the absurdity of his misplaced pity. However, God has more to say.

11. “And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

The text indicates the population of Nineveh as *a hundred and twenty thousand people*. Some commentators propose that it reflects the total population of the city. A city of this size could easily accommodate twice that number. Under this view, the declaration that they *cannot tell their right hand from their left* has a spiritual dimension. Spiritually, the Ninevites are deficient in distinguishing good from evil.

An alternate interpretation holds that 120,000 refers specifically to children who are not yet old enough to know right from wrong. If this interpretation is accurate, then the total population is significantly greater. However, the Hebrew word translated *people* does not explicitly indicate children. Therefore, the number likely refers to the total population of Nineveh—a people who, until Jonah’s

visit, were spiritually ignorant. They were, in essence, spiritual infants.

The mention of *many animals* serves as a reminder that God also cares for animal life (see [Psalm 36:6](#)).

The Lord's question abruptly concludes the book. The Lord presses Jonah to consider the *people* of Nineveh and whether they should have the chance to repent. The Lord's words indicate mercy toward the undiscerning and a desire to spare the ignorant. The book of Jonah wraps up with a timely question: Is God not free to show mercy and compassion to whomever he desires ([Psalm 145:8–9](#))?

What Do You Think?

What ministries can your church offer to those of the nearest "great city"?

Digging Deeper

How does ministry in a "great city" differ from ministry in a rural context?

In what ways are they similar?

Conclusion

A. Our Graciously Patient God

The story of Jonah reveals God's expansive grace and mercy without partiality. God does not ignore Nineveh's wickedness; he is, of course, the just judge. However, when the people of Nineveh received the warning of destruction, they responded appropriately. In an act of compassion, God extended mercy and grace, relenting from the promised punishment.

Such manifestations of grace and mercy can surprise us. Like Jonah, we may quickly question God's willingness to extend forgiveness to our enemies—people we feel do not deserve salvation. However, God is the ultimate judge. His treatment of Nineveh exemplifies that his grace and forgiveness are available to all who will accept them. God's grace is massive, and his patience endures.

Jonah's example reveals how God pursues his people and wants to conform our desires to his. God did not immediately punish Jonah for his disobedience and rebellion. Instead, God remained in conversation with Jonah and taught him the comprehensive nature of divine grace. The Lord God is "slow to anger and abounding in love" ([Jonah 4:2](#)) to all people who respond to his grace and mercy. How do you remain in conversation with God? Are you leaning into the divine questions Scripture and the Holy Spirit continually ask? Are you willing to let your perception and understanding shift, change, and grow as you mature in faith?

What Do You Think?

What new insights have you discovered from this study of Jonah?

Digging Deeper

How will this insight strengthen your faith in God or reveal opportunities for spiritual growth?

B. Prayer

Lord 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 we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God's grace is expansive, and his patience is persistent.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Begin by asking, "When have you wanted someone else to experience the consequences of their actions?" Distribute a sheet of paper and a pen to each learner. Instruct them to create two columns by drawing a line down the middle of the paper. In the first column, ask them to list real or imaginary examples of someone who did wrong and faced consequences. In the second column, ask them to list real or imaginary examples of someone who received mercy and grace despite doing wrong.

After they have completed their lists, encourage them to compare the examples in the two columns and describe how it might feel to see someone else receive mercy and grace despite their wrongdoing.

Transition into the Bible study by saying, "It's a human tendency to desire justice for those who have wronged us. Today's study of the prophet Jonah will reveal how this tendency often overlooks the surprising and gracious ways that God works."

Into the Word

Ask one volunteer to read aloud [Jonah 3:1–5](#) and another to read aloud [Jonah 4:6–11](#). Divide the class into three groups. Provide each group with highlighters and handouts (you create) containing the lesson's Scripture text and the prompts and questions below.

Begin the activity by instructing each group to highlight words or phrases that describe their assigned namesake in one color. Then have them highlight in a different color any words or phrases related to the key actions taken by their namesake.

Ninevites Group. 1—Who were the Ninevites, and why might they have been considered enemies of Israel? 2—What details about the city can we discern from these Scriptures? 3—What is the significance of the Ninevites undertaking a fast and wearing sackcloth? 4—What does it mean that the Ninevites "cannot tell their right hand from their left" ([Jonah 4:11](#))?

Jonah Group. 1—Who was Jonah, and why might he have avoided traveling to Nineveh? 2—What was the content of Jonah’s message to the Ninevites? 3—Why did Jonah think it would be better to die? 4—Was Jonah’s anger justified? Why or why not?

Lord God Group. 1—What is the meaning of the title “LORD God” ([Jonah 4:6](#)), and why is the title significant in this narrative? 2—How does God show mercy to Jonah? 3—How does God show mercy to the Ninevites? 4—How do these Scripture texts depict the mercy and justice of God?

After calling time, ask a volunteer from each group to share their responses with the entire class. Conclude this section with a whole-class discussion on the following question: “Do we sometimes identify with Jonah, becoming upset with God’s impartial displays of mercy? Why or why not?”

As a group, write a statement on the board summarizing how God showed grace and mercy.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Surprised or Expected” activity from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners complete it in groups of three.

Into Life

Say, “Today’s study reminds us that God is impartial regarding his grace, mercy, and forgiveness. God desires for all people, regardless of their cultural or ethnic backgrounds, to come to know him as the Lord God.”

Conduct a whole-class brainstorming session on ways to extend God’s grace to our neighbors. Write the responses on the board. After five minutes of brainstorming, distribute an index card and pen to each participant. Invite them to write down a plan to use the ideas on the board to extend God’s grace to others in the community.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Verses of Grace” exercise from the activity page. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(May 3: Christian Expectation of Grace\)](#)
