

If what Jonah really needed was an explanation from God as to why mercy for Nineveh was not covenant-breaking, but actually covenant keeping, God could have given Jonah a good explanation. But what Jonah really needs is not more information for his head. He needs transformation for his heart! His problem isn't fundamentally that he doesn't *understand* what God is doing, but that he doesn't *trust* God to do what is best.

For Jonah, mercy has no place in what is best; when Jonah's faith left, it took Jonah's compassion with it. Mercy only makes sense if you have faith in God's wisdom, in His justice, and in His faithfulness. When it seems like mercy has come at the cost of justice and covenant-keeping, faith says, "God must have another way for justice to be satisfied and the covenant to be upheld." But because Jonah doesn't have faith in God at this point, he concludes that there is *no possible way* for justice to be satisfied and the covenant kept if mercy is given to Nineveh.

And so in Jonah 4:5-11 God uses an object lesson to go to work on Jonah's heart, acting out a drama in Jonah's own life to expose the hard-hearted hypocrisy that led Jonah to hate God's mercy. Jonah will be given a taste of a merciless God, and when God shows him his own reaction, Jonah will get to see a glimpse of his withered-up heart.

In 4:4, God responds to Jonah's anger with a heart-searching question, and in response, Jonah marches out of the city, going east. And ever since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of Eden, "going east" has almost become biblical shorthand for going in the wrong direction, *leaving* the presence of God. In his anger at God's mercy, Jonah exiles himself from the place of God's blessing and heads for the desert, where there is no natural shade and where the sun will kill you, which Israel knows is the place you go when you complain about what God has done. All the biblical clues are making it clear that this is *bad*, really bad.

But Jonah is oblivious to this, and makes himself a booth for shade (kinda like a fig leaf, especially when God has to replace it with a better shade in the next verse). He sits there, waiting for God to change His mind and destroy Nineveh after all, since Jonah has made it clear that it's either *them* or *him*. He thinks he's being Moses, saving the covenant people, when actually, he's one of the complainers who needs someone to save him!

And so the Lord God intervenes, appointing a *plant* just like He appointed the *whale*, to come and save his angry prophet from “discomfort”, which is yet *another* new English word for the same Hebrew word for evil that has filled the previous verses. Jonah’s efforts to save himself with the booth weren’t enough, just like the sailors couldn’t save themselves in chapter 2. God saves Jonah from evil by raising up the plant.

And when Jonah receives this unexpected mercy, he rejoices with joy, completely opposite his reaction to God’s mercy on Nineveh in 4:1, where he is “eviled with evil”. “Mercy for me, but not for thee.” But remember, Jonah thinks that he’s entitled to mercy as a covenant member. Ninevites are covenant enemies; no mercy for them!

But there’s another detail we need to see: *who* appoints this plant? One of the keys to the book of Jonah is to track the names for God: we saw last time that when God deals with Jonah, the covenant name *Yahweh* is used, but when He deal with Gentiles, He is known as *Elohim*. But here in verse 6, *Yahweh Elohim* creates the plant. Both names are used together, signifying *the God of all*. And not only that: elsewhere in the Bible, beginning in Genesis 2:4, the first place where God is called *Yahweh Elohim*, the name highlights God’s role as Sovereign Creator of heaven and earth. This particular name indicates that God created everything and is in charge of everything.

Between Jonah’s eastward journey, God’s Creator name and action of creating a plant, followed by v. 7’s worm attack on a tree that leads to death, we should be setting *the creation account* and God’s role as *Creator* as our frame of reference. Jonah tried to set the frame of reference in *covenantal* terms, talking to *Yahweh* and quoting the covenant charter, but the clues in these verses indicate that *Yahweh Elohim* wants His role as sovereign Creator of all to be the foundation for the discussion. This is a Creation story, not a covenant story!

Jonah, on the other hand, wants the discussion of mercy to start with the covenant and end with the covenant. He’s privileging one aspect of who God is, the “better for him” part, and forgetting the bigger picture, the fullness of who God is. And of course limiting God ends up limiting mercy, too.

But God isn’t denying Jonah’s covenantal concerns; He’s simply zooming out to capture all of the concentric circles of God’s mercy, not just one. Because God is merciful by nature, He has

mercy for all that He has made. There is a focused and special mercy for covenant members, but covenant mercy is not the only kind of mercy there is; God also has creational mercy.

This is why the creation itself plays such a huge role in the book of Jonah: the sea, the desert, the wind, the whale, the sun, the plant, the worm, and even the cattle of Nineveh. Here's the point: God is not just the covenant God; He's the Creator God. And since the Creator God is in His very nature merciful, the covenant is only one expression of His mercy. God's mercy is as wide as His creation.

Now, back to the text. When morning comes, God commissions yet another creature, and Jonah wakes up in verse 7 to find that the worm of judgment has mercilessly eaten his beloved mercy-plant, and it's all withered, no longer providing the life-giving shade between Jonah and the burning sun and the scorching east wind.

Jonah's reaction to this takes us right back to 4:3, only God has inverted the picture: now Jonah wants to die because God *didn't* show mercy and spare the plant. But notice how the covenantal issue has been taken out of the picture. The plant wasn't God's covenant plant; it didn't have any special promises of mercy. But Jonah furiously expects God to be merciful to the plant anyway.

And God repeats His question from earlier, but this time with reference to the plant. And with this buffer in place ("Well, if we're talking about the plant..."), Jonah finally answers, "Yes, it's right for me to be deathly angry. It's completely unjust for mercy to be taken away once it's been given."

"Good!" God responds, "We agree on that. But realize that that plant didn't cost you anything: you didn't work for it or grow it; it just sprang up overnight and then died. All you've got to lose here is the blessing of free shade." God is raising the issue of *standing* to Jonah: You don't really get to complain when your credit card changes their free perks. If they violate their contract, sure, but Jonah, I thought all bets were off *outside* the covenant. God isn't trying to convince Jonah that he shouldn't pity the plant; He's showing Jonah that he needs more than simply selfish reasons to justify his pity. Mercy is the right response, Jonah, but *why?*

And then God brings the discussion back to Nineveh, and argues from the lesser to the greater: “Jonah, if you are blazing with righteous anger when a short-lived soulless plant doesn’t get mercy, how much more should I care for a great city full of lost people (120,000 was Israel’s standard big number, like we might use “a million”), and also much cattle?” You’re mad at me for not having mercy on the shrubbery, but you won’t let me have mercy on a whole city?

God is full of better reasons to show mercy to Nineveh than to a plant: Nineveh is huge and has many people, a plant is just a plant. Nineveh is full of people with souls, but plants don’t have souls. Because Ninevites have souls, Nineveh’s destruction would have eternal consequences; a plant is here one day, gone the next. And ask any parent how much labor it takes to grow a child versus a plant; God fathered a city full of people and has cared for them their whole lives!

It’s possible that God uses the phrase “they don’t know their right hand from their left” as a reference to keeping God’s law, which is how that idea is used in Deuteronomy and elsewhere. Israel must be careful not to turn from the law to the right hand or to the left, but Nineveh doesn’t even have the law! They have the shattered remnants of a functioning conscience, but nothing like the covenant lawbook that Israel has. It’s not that ignorance takes away their guilt, but it certainly mitigates it.

By that measure, who’s more evil, Jonah, ignorant Nineveh, or rebellious Israel? Ignorant Nineveh, or God’s own prophet? To whom much is given, of him much will be required. Jonah thought that God should be *especially merciless* because Nineveh was so lawless, but no: God should be *especially merciful* to Nineveh because they don’t know their right hand from their left. Again, one more thread that connects the book of Jonah to Jesus, who absolutely hammers the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, while being prodigal with his mercy towards prostitutes and tax collectors.

And it doesn’t affect God’s argument to raise the issue of the difference between a sinless plant and sinful people. Jonah doesn’t have a problem with mercy being shown to sinners; just sinners who are outside the covenant. Sin doesn’t forfeit mercy; sin is the big reason why human beings need mercy! Mercy is meant for sinners, but here’s what Jonah missed: *mercy comes not by covenant-keeping, but by faith*. The Ninevites believed God, and so God had mercy on them.

This is what rattled that old Pharisee Paul to his core: the true sons of Abraham are not his biological offspring who keep the covenant; the true covenant children are those who share Abraham's faith. This is the gospel breaking through in the book of Jonah: you cannot earn mercy by law-keeping. You receive mercy as a gracious gift when you believe God, like Abraham did, like the Ninevites did, and like everyone who lays aside any claim to have *merited* God's mercy, and simply trusts in Christ alone for salvation.

And what a phrase to end the book on: "and also much cattle?" Finally, we've worked back down to the closest comparison to a plant: why should the livestock that Nineveh cares for suffer? Who's going to feed and milk the cows when all the Ninevites are dead? The argument is simple and devastating: If a plant should receive mercy, then an animal should receive mercy. If an animal should receive mercy, then a man should receive mercy. If a man should receive mercy, then a great city full of men should certainly receive mercy. God cares about plants and sparrows and cows and whales; God cares so much more for you, and for all people created in His image.

Why does Yahweh Elohim, the Sovereign Creator, have mercy on Nineveh? Because He made each and every Ninevite in His image, labored to care for them, called them to repentance, and because they have laid hold of His mercy by faith.

And what a blessing it is for us to know not only covenant mercy and creation mercy, but to have seen the fullness of God's mercy displayed in Jesus Christ, who entered into creation to announce the gospel of mercy, to suffer and die in our place, and to rise again and ascend to God's right hand, where He now stands asking God to show mercy to you. The different aspects of God's mercy are never in competition; they all come together in Christ. And so as Christians, you are called to show special covenant mercy to God's people, *and* to have mercy for everything that God has created, especially for a city full of people who don't know God. God has poured out His mercy on you; should you not also pity Annapolis, and take God's message of mercy to your neighbors?

So hear this charge from Jesus in light of God's great mercy: "Love your enemies, and do good ... and you will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*