

Why did God destroy the gourd?

Someone asked this question after our Bible Study Thursday. I wanted to follow up with all of you in the event that you might also have the same question.

Why did God destroy the gourd?

The summary answer, I believe, is this: God destroyed the gourd as a picture of His sovereign mercy in Christ withheld from a rebellious, proud world, which refuses God's righteousness in Christ, preferring their own righteousness over His!

But this lesson comes after the entire book of Jonah, and in the immediate context of the entire fourth chapter. I believe the answer developed from consideration of that larger context gives us a greater understanding. Here is some more detail from that lesson.

- What Jonah valued, he pitied. But Jonah did not value what God both made and pitied.
- Jonah was angry that God pitied Nineveh (4:1). Jonah's opposition to God's will was sinful.
- The gourd is an object lesson. God made the gourd and God destroyed the gourd.
- Jonah wanted God to spare the gourd. But God saw fit to take it away instead. Jonah was motivated to spare the gourd because it comforted him. Jonah was not motivated to join God's purpose and delight in sparing Nineveh.

Scaling up from the relative insignificant importance of the gourd,...

- God made Nineveh. Now, Jonah wanted God to take away Nineveh. But God did not. He saved Nineveh. God delights in mercy (Micah 7:18-19).

The case of the gourd extends upwards to the case of men and even cattle.

- God made men and cattle and all things. He made them for His pleasure (Colossians 1:16).
- Jonah wanted God to show mercy to the gourd.
- Jonah did not want God to show mercy to Nineveh.
- God chose to show mercy to Nineveh.
- He did not choose to show mercy to the gourd.

The lesson taught by all of this follows

- God chose to show mercy to His elect, those He chose in Christ (Eph. 1:3-11; Romans 9:11-30).
- God did not choose to show mercy to others (Romans 9:22-23; Exodus 33:18-19; 34:6).
- The elect were created for God's glory, the glory of His grace (Isaiah 43:1-ff; Colossians 1:16; Ephesians 1:3-23).

- The rest of mankind (and fallen angels) were created for the glory of God too. "The LORD hath made all things for Himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil" (Proverbs 16:4).
- God makes known the riches of His grace on the vessels of mercy (Romans 9:23).
- He makes known His power and justice on the vessels of wrath (Romans 9:22). Both are right because God did it (Genesis 18:25).

Jonah should have had a high regard for God and a low valuation of himself. But he rather had a high, self-conceited notion of himself and of his (Jonah's) "mercy" for the gourd. In this, Jonah considered himself more righteous than God.

Jonah considered himself more righteous than God with respect to Nineveh also. Jonah had a high regard for his own sense of what was fair/just for Nineveh. In his own eyes, he was more righteous than God because in his opinion, they deserved to perish (John 8:1-11).

Jonah should have a high regard for God and for what God created. After all, where was Jonah when God called all things that are made out of their empty, dark void and nothingness (Gen. 1:1-ff; Hebrew 11:3)?!

But in this book of Jonah, Jonah should especially have known and learned the lesson to hold and show a high regard for those on whom God chooses to show mercy! Jesus told the Pharisees, who exhibited this unsanctified attitude of Jonah's, "If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:7).

On the one hand, "There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?" (James 4:12). Do we make ourselves more righteous than the Judge of all and the only Lawgiver, and in so doing, usurp God's throne to arrogate to ourselves the role of Lawgiver and Judge (remember Haman in Esther)?! If God spares them, who are we to condemn them (Romans 8:33-34; John 8:1-12)?!

And, on the other hand, if God condemns devils or men, who are we to say that God, the righteous Judge of all, is not fit to Judge, because He is unjust (Romans 9:1-30)!? Do we have a higher justice than He does because we are more merciful and righteous than God is merciful and righteous?!

Hence, the lesson is that **God is sovereign in His mercy**, and we ought to defer to Him in all matters, knowing He is the Creator, the Judge and the Savior. He shall do right in all that He thinks and does!

We not only ought to defer to Him in passive submission, but we ought to implore Him and with active submission to acknowledge His wisdom and righteousness in all things!

We ought to do this first of all because He is the only Creator. He alone is able to do all things, and so, He alone can raise the dead and create us in Christ out of our spiritual nothingness as new creatures in Christ!

He is the Judge. As Judge, He is the One who must justify.

He is the only Savior. As Savior, He can be both just and justify the ungodly (Romans 4:5; 8:33-34)!!

Consider the mercy of God revealed in the book of Jonah

- Jonah deserved to die for his rebellion and anger. But God spared him!
- The mariners ought to have perished for their idolatry. But God calmed the sea by requiring Jonah's life for theirs in substitution!
- Jonah deserved to die in the fish's belly. But God raised him from that watery grave again and commanded that death to release him!

Jonah ought to have rejoiced with heaven over the thousands of sinners that repented (Luke 15)!

Jonah took pity on the relatively insignificant gourd.

God removed the gourd to expose Jonah to the heat of the sun and then added to his affliction by the vehement east wind!

Jonah could have understood by these that God's mercy (the gourd with its shadow that Jonah's own booth could not provide, as a picture of Christ crucified), saved him from the heat, from fainting, from affliction all of which made him want to die!

God's mercy that spared Jonah from the scorching heat that he deserved from God for his anger and opposition to God's ways and works, and especially the mercy of God that spared him from his self-conceited preference of himself to God and His works and His holy character! Jonah should have learned sovereign mercy by God's mercy to himself.

God spared that great city of Nineveh, in which there were 120,000 that could not discern the most basic truth (Romans 3:10-12; 1 Corinthians 2:14; John 3:3)!

God also spared much cattle!

Neither the 120,000 simple-minded in Nineveh, nor the cattle seemed important to Jonah. But both were important to God and to His glory!

Thus, the cattle and the 120,000 and the rest of Nineveh (some 1.5 M to 2.5 M people) represent God's estimation of His elect throughout time. It is for them that God made the world and orders it and shall bring it to its predetermined end (Ephesians 1:22-23; 1 Corinthians 3:21-23; Isaiah 43)!

The gourd shaded Jonah. But God exposed him to the scorching heat of the sun and east wind when He took away the gourd.

Thus it is that all outside of Christ are left exposed to the scorching heat of the wrath of God.

Again, the lesson here is that God gives or withholds His mercy at His sole discretion, by His own prerogative (Matthew 11:25-27).

Since God's mercy and justice arise from God alone, this means that His salvation is HOLY and His wrath is HOLY, because God is holy!

God's mercy makes us willing. It makes us submissive in willingness to the way God saves sinners!

And God's mercy makes us submissive to God's sovereignty.

God showed mercy on these:

- Rebellious Jonah fleeing to Tarshish,
- Idolatrous mariners,
- Jonah, in the belly of the great fish, having cast him into the flood of the seas and having prepared a fish to swallow him,
- Nineveh, because God rejoices over His own work — His work by Christ to redeem and then give repentance borne out Christ's redeeming work for God's elect (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 13:48; 26:18)
- The gourd
- Jonah, the angry prophet (Jonah 4:1-2)

God did not show mercy on these:

- The withered gourd
- Most in national Israel (Romans 9-11)
- Most Gentiles

Is it right that God would spare so "many," and yet, withhold from another great number of men entrance into His presence, because they would not submit to His righteousness (Romans 10:1-4)?!

God saved a great multitude in Nineveh, probably between 1.5 million and 2.5 million people¹!

Whatever the population of Nineveh, it is clear that their conversion amounts to the greatest number of converts ever recorded in scripture by one sermon!

The application is this: In fulfillment of His covenant, God will save millions and hundreds of millions -- a number that cannot be counted by men (Revelation 5:11 -- 100s of millions, which is itself but a representative number!!).

- The gourd is thus God's sovereign mercy in Christ to His elect.
- The withered gourd is the withholding of God's mercy from the non-elect.

Jonah and we ought to join heaven in rejoicing over one sinner that repents, more than over the "99" that did not need to repent.

How much then ought Jonah have rejoiced over these Gentiles?!

¹ Calculated by the statistic that between 5.5% and 8% of a given population is made up of children five years old and under, and assuming that the number of 120,000 represents children five and under: $120,000/0.08 = 1.5 \text{ M}$; $120,000/0.55 = 2.18 \text{ M}$.

The gourd was an object lesson.

- The sun represents God's wrath upon all men, by nature (Eph. 2:1-3)
- The booth Jonah made represents his and our attempts to avert the wrath of God by our works
- The gourd represents God's mercy to His elect in Christ, which delivers them from the just wrath of God they deserve
- The worm that destroyed the gourd is the same symbol: God's covering withheld from a proud, disobedient, unbelieving world that refuses to bow to God's righteousness in Christ (Romans 10:1-4)
- The vehement east wind and sun upon Jonah's head, and his subsequent fainting and wishing to die, but not being able to die, collectively teach the awful consequence of our sins that God's justice demands. Men seek death in hell but cannot die.

All believers are surprised by God's grace.

- They are surprised that God would choose them out of the world. "Why me?!"
- They are surprised that God would require of His Son to fulfill their righteousness and answer for their sins by suffering the heat of God's wrath for them, instead of them, but in Him!

All unbelievers are surprised by God's justice.

- Like the world that perished in Noah's day, they will be surprised when their judgment comes. "As in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" (Matthew 24:38)

All believers are surprised by grace. And they are also surprised by God's justice!

- God expended the full extent of His justice for our sins when He poured out His wrath upon Christ our Savior! (Zechariah 13:7; Romans 8:32; Mark 14:33)
- Never before or since was there such a display of God's justice!

Jonah was not the only one God taught by this prophecy. It is a lesson for us all.

The book of Jonah ends with a question. We must understand that it is a question whose answer is obvious from the context and the question itself (a rhetorical question).

And yet, the question refers to things outside of the story. The question speaks of the city of Nineveh and 120,000 people with no understanding of the most basic things and of much cattle. But these surely refer to all those the LORD will save.

Here is the question. It is God's question to you and to me. Let us have grace to answer it according to God's own revelation of His character, for we are saved for His name's sake (for who He is as God): "Thou *art* a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil" (Jonah 4:4).

"Should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and *also* much cattle?"

The answer surely is, "YES!!" Whatever seems good in Thy sight must be good!

Listen to the heart and the gracious words of our Savior and Judge:

"At that time **Jesus** answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because **thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.** All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him. **Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.** Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:25-27).

Conclusion

God destroyed the gourd as a picture of His sovereign mercy in Christ withheld from a rebellious, proud world, which refuses God's righteousness in Christ, preferring their own righteousness over His!

God destroyed the gourd just as Jonah would have had God destroy Nineveh.

God did withhold mercy from the greater part of Israel, who remained in their unbelief by obstinate refusal to submit themselves to Christ's righteousness alone in all of their coming to God (Romans 9:22-10:4).

Where Jonah wanted God to withhold mercy, God showed mercy.

Where Jonah thought mercy was deserved as an entitlement, God withheld it.

Mercy is God's prerogative.

Mercy is not an entitlement.

Nor is mercy deserved. "To him that worketh, the reward is reckoned of debt" (Rom. 4:4).

Mercy, by definition, is God's grant to the ill-deserving. Therefore, it cannot be earned!

Salvation depends on sovereign mercy.

Salvation cannot be earned, but God gives it by His prerogative.

Salvation is not an entitlement.

Nor is God's love an entitlement.

Consider Noah and his family and the world of the ungodly that perished in the flood.

Consider also Sodom and Gomorrah.

Then consider Nineveh and the queen of Sheba and the elect remnant within Israel and within the Gentile nations.

Let us praise the God of all grace, for if salvation were not of grace, all of grace, and of grace alone, then we who deserve God's just wrath could not be spared from it!