

It was 1947, and Corrie ten Boom was speaking in Germany about forgiveness. The country had been torn apart after WW2 and Corrie knew that Germans needed to hear the message of God's forgiveness.

Corrie and her family had hidden Jews in their Dutch home during WW2, protecting them from certain death at the hands of the Nazis. But when they were discovered to have been harbouring Jews, Corrie and her family were sent to concentration camps.

At Ravensbrück, Corrie's sister Betsie had died at the hands of the cruelty of the Nazis. And now, as Corrie finished her talk about forgiveness, a man came forward in the crowd. Corrie immediately recognized him – he had been one of the guards at Ravensbrück. As he came forward, he approached Corrie, and said to her, "You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there. But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein"—again the hand came out—"will you forgive me?" At in that moment, Corrie was faced with the difficult decision – what would she do?

The mission of God is to extend mercy. God is a God of mercy. And when we come to the book of Jonah, what we hear about is a God who is slow to anger and abundantly rich in mercy.

In order to appreciate the story of Jonah and God's missionary heart, we need to understand the situation that Jonah found himself in. Jonah was a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II. After the days of Elijah and Elisha, the northern kingdom of Israel had been confronted with their sin of worshipping golden calves. Just like Jeroboam I, Jeroboam II continued the idolatrous practices and spread the false worship throughout the Northern kingdom. While it was a time of relative peace, Jonah had preached a message to Israel that her borders would be restored to their Solomonic days (2 Kings 14:24-26). And true enough, the word of the Lord had come true.

So Jonah is preaching in a day where false worship is abounding more and more, and the enemies of God are growing in strength. Within a few generations of Jonah's preaching, the Assyrians, Israel's enemies, will overrun Israel and destroy the nation, taking the people as captives and into exile.

So it is in this context that we come to the book of Jonah and we see the answer to this question: What does the missionary heart of God look like?

Don't run from God's mercy

When Jonah is called to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, he doesn't respond like Isaiah's great call, "Here am I, send me." Instead, he runs. Instead of going inland to Nineveh, he boards

a ship to go the opposite direction – to Tarshish – the furthest point from Nineveh. The whole time he’s going down – he goes down to Joppa to get a boat (1:3), down into the boat (1:5), and then when a storm comes and the boat is being beaten and battered, Jonah tells the sailors to toss him overboard. And down he goes to the depths of what he thinks is his watery grave (2:2).

But running from God’s mercy doesn’t take you anywhere good – it leads you down into the depths. Running from the mercy of God will only cause you torment and torture. The Lord, in his mercy, pursues Jonah by throwing a great wind (1:4) and sending a great fish (1:17). Jonah can run, but he cannot escape the mercy of God.

What Jonah is running from is not from God as much as he is running away from being God’s prophet with a message of mercy. He may try to escape from the presence of the Lord (1:3, 10), but as Psalm 139 says, “Even if I make my bed in the depths of the grave, you are there.”

Even in Jonah’s running, as the storm rages, the sailors become afraid and we are told that as they find out about why Jonah is running, they fear the Lord (1:14, 16). And in the end, the reluctant prophet may run, but he cannot outrun the mercy of God that causes idol worshipping sailors to turn to the living God.

But Jonah is tossed into the sea where he is swallowed by a fish. And from there he prays to the Lord, knowing that God has saved him. So when the fish spits him up on dry land, he knows he cannot outrun the mercy of God. So he heads to Nineveh and preaches for three days and nights in the city, warning the people of the coming judgment of God.

Desire mercy, not judgment

After Jonah preaches to the Ninevites, the king announces a season of repentance. They turn from their evil ways. But Jonah isn’t convinced that these people are worthy of mercy. So he goes up onto a hill where he watches the city, waiting for God’s judgment to fall upon them. As he sits there in the heat of the day, a plant grows up and gives him shade. But when a worm comes along and destroys the plant, Jonah is more concerned about his shade than the Ninevites’ salvation. In a conversation with the Lord, the Lord confronts Jonah. Why is he so upset? Because, Jonah says, I knew that you were a God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We hear the words of God that he spoke to Moses after Israel had worshipped the golden calf in Exod. 32-33.

Jonah’s complaint is that God is too merciful. Jonah doesn’t want mercy for his enemies; he wants justice. And this is the human problem. We want mercy for ourselves, but not for those with whom we disagree. We want them to get what they deserve, but we want to get better than we deserve. We don’t want to get what we deserve; we want better.

The story of Jonah confronts us with the missionary heart of God. God's heart is filled with mercy. As the puritan writer Thomas Goodwin would say, God's judgment is his strange work, but mercy is his natural work. Mercy is the way that God most naturally operates. And the question of the book of Jonah isn't primarily about a big fish but a merciful God. Jonah would have rather died in the belly of the fish than preach to his enemies; Jonah would rather die up on the hillside than see Nineveh spared.

But not God. God's heart is mercy for those who are his enemies. And all of this is intended to show us the glory of Christ.

See the glory of Christ

The book of Jonah ends with a question that remains unanswered: Should I not be concerned about that great city? (4:11). We don't know Jonah's answer. I would like to think that we know so many details about this story because Jonah repented and told his story. And this story is one of the famous stories of the Old Testament.

But the point of the book of Jonah is not the fish or the running prophet, but the mercy of the missionary heart of God. Jonah knows his bible well. Jonah knows what God is like. He runs because he loves his country and his people. But his people are idol worshippers. If God would strike down Assyria, then things would go better for Israel. But if God would show mercy to Assyria, it will mean greater difficulty for his people.

While other prophets have spoken against the nations, Jonah is the only example of a prophet who is sent to the nations. And in being sent to the nations, Jonah knows his Bible well enough to know that this means one thing.

In Deuteronomy 32, Moses had warned Israel what would happen if they turned from God. READ Deut. 32:15-21. If Israel will provoke the Lord to jealousy, he will provoke them to jealousy. He will do this by turning his attention to other nations. So when Jonah is called to go to Nineveh, he knows what is going to happen. He is being sent to his enemies because the Lord will show mercy upon them and use this to call Israel back to himself. If Israel will act like the Gentiles do by worshipping idols, why wouldn't the Lord show mercy to the nations as well as to Israel? Jonah doesn't want the nations to repent, and he doesn't want the Lord to turn his attention away from Israel to another nation.

And yet, this will not be the end of Israel. Just as Jonah was rescued by the great fish, so the Lord will rescue his people from their exile. He may discipline them, but only for a while. Because God's heart is a heart of mercy for his enemies.

Because God would send his own Son into the world. And when Jesus was confronted by his enemies who demanded that he show them a miracle on demand to prove what he was saying

was true, Jesus said that no sign would be given to them except the sign of the prophet Jonah (Matt. 12:39). What Jesus was saying was that the only proof they would get would be that just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and nights, so the Jesus would die and rise again. And just as God spared Nineveh from its destruction after Jonah the Galilean's three day preaching tour through the city, so Jesus the Galilean brings salvation from the coming judgment.

But the difference between Jonah and Jesus is great.

Where Jonah was reluctant to preach to his enemies, Jesus was willing.

Where Jonah complained about the mercy of God, Jesus was meek.

Where Jonah just preached a message of judgment, Jesus took the judgment.

And this is the message of the good news of Jesus. There is mercy for those who turn to God. Mercy will triumph over judgment, as James says (Jas. 2:13). And Paul understands that his mission to the Gentiles is intended to do the same thing – provoke the Jewish people to jealousy. Just as Paul saw that God had preserved a remnant, as we saw last time in 1 Kings 19, Paul not only quotes the words of Elijah, but he has the song of Moses in mind in Romans 11:12. Israel will be provoked to jealousy by the Lord's mercy to the nations. And Jonah in the fish is a sign that the Lord will not forget his people in exile.

As Corrie ten Boom stood in front of her former Ravensbrück guard, his hand held out to offer forgiveness, thoughts of her sister Betsie dying there raced through her mind. Could she release the slow and painful death of her sister from her heart by extending her hand in forgiveness and mercy to this guard? And as she thought about the Lord's mercy to her, she wrestled deeply with the question of Jonah. And as she wrestled for a few seconds, it felt like hours. But she knew that the only way forward after WW2 was for the forgiveness of Christ to take hold of the hearts of Germans. And so, she extended her hand.

And so the Lord holds out his mercy to you and me. Will we be a part of the mercy of God? Will we see that God sent his Son while we were his enemies (Rom. 5:5-8)? Will we see that we have received mercy so that we can extend the mercy of God – even to those who hurt us?

Mercy doesn't start with a feeling. It starts with an action. So who is the Lord asking you to extend mercy to, even today?