

Jonah 4:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And 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?

Analysis

And 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 book's final verse and climactic question—va-ani lo achus al-Nineveh ha'ir haggedolah asher yesh-bah harbeh mishtem-esreh ribbo adam asher lo-yada bein-yemino lismolo uvehemah rabbah אָנִי לֹא אָחֹס עַל־נִינְיָה בָּעֵיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יְשִׁבָּה הַרְבָּה מִשְׁתִּים־עֶשֶׂרָה רַבּוֹ אֲנָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע בֵּין־) (וְיָמֵנוּ לְשָׁמָלָנוּ וְבָהָמָה בְּהָה. God doesn't wait for Jonah's response but declares His sovereign prerogative to show mercy.

"Sixscore thousand" (120,000) "that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand" likely refers to young children morally innocent, though some interpret it as the whole population in spiritual ignorance. Either way, God's point stands: these are people He created, values, and will save if they repent. "Should not I spare" (ani lo achus) uses chus (וְיָמֵנוּ), synonym of chasah from 4:10—God has right to show compassion on His creation. The question is rhetorical, expecting affirmative answer: "Yes, You absolutely should spare them!"

"And also much cattle" seems anticlimactic but demonstrates God's comprehensive concern. Even animals matter to their Creator (Proverbs 12:10, "A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast"). The book ends abruptly—no recorded response from Jonah. This deliberate literary device forces readers into the story: How will

you respond to God's mercy toward enemies? Will you rejoice in grace or, like Jonah, resent it? The gospel answers: God spared not His own Son (Romans 8:32) to save both Jews and Gentiles, making mercy available to all who repent. Jonah prefigures Christ but also Israel's failure; Christ is the faithful prophet who joyfully accomplishes redemption.

Historical Context

Nineveh's archaeological excavations confirm it was indeed a "great city"—inner walls enclosed 1,800 acres with population estimates from 120,000-175,000 (plus surrounding suburbs). The phrase "three days' journey" (3:3) may refer to circumference or total administrative district. The 120,000 children suggest total population significantly higher. Assyrian brutality is well-documented in their own inscriptions and confirmed by biblical accounts (2 Kings 17-19, Nahum). Yet God desired their repentance, demonstrating mercy extends even to violent oppressors—if they repent. Later Nahum prophesies Nineveh's destruction (fulfilled 612 BC) when they returned to wickedness, showing repentance must be sustained, not merely momentary.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does God's concern even for Nineveh's cattle demonstrate the comprehensive scope of His creative care and redemptive purposes?
2. What does the book's open ending—no recorded response from Jonah—force us to consider about our own response to God's mercy?
3. How should God's willingness to spare 120,000 Ninevites shape our evangelistic zeal and compassion for the lost, including our enemies?

Interlinear Text

בָּגְדוֹל הַ	בָּעֵיר	נִינְוָה	עַל	אַחֲרֵיכֶם	לֹא אָנֹכִי	וְאַתָּה	אַחֲרֵיכֶם	לֹא אָנֹכִי
H1419	H5892	H5210	H5921	H2347	H3808	H589	H3808	H589
that great	city	Nineveh	upon	you	And should not I spare	behold	you	behold
					H2347			
רַב וּשְׁנָה הַ	רַב	מִשְׁשָׁתִים	מִשְׁשָׁתִים	בְּהַרְבָּה	בְּהַרְבָּה	בְּהַרְבָּה	אֲשֶׁר	אֲשֶׁר
H7239	H6240	H8147	H8147	H7235	H0	H7235	H3426	H3426
thousand	more	than sixscore	more	more	more	more	wherein are	wherein are
							H834	H834
וּמִנְיָנִים בְּ	בְּ	בֵּין	בֵּין	בֵּין	בֵּין	בֵּין	אֲשֶׁר	אֲשֶׁר
H3225	H996	H3045	H3045	H996	H3045	H3045	H3808	H3808
between their right hand	between	that cannot discern	that cannot discern	that cannot discern	that cannot discern	that cannot discern	persons	persons
							H120	H120
לְשָׂמֶאל וּ	וּבְהַמִּתְחָדָה	בְּבָהָה	בְּבָהָה	בְּבָהָה	בְּבָהָה	בְּבָהָה	and their left hand	and their left hand
H7227	H929	H8040	H8040	H929	H929	H929		
and also much	cattle	and also much	and also much	and also much	and also much	and also much		

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 18:33 (Parallel theme): Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?

Psalms 36:6 (Parallel theme): Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; thy judgments are a great deep: O LORD, thou preservest man and beast.

Jonah 1:2 (Parallel theme): Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.

Deuteronomy 1:39 (Parallel theme): Moreover your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, and your children, which in that day had no knowledge between good and evil, they shall go in thither, and unto them will I give it, and they shall possess it.

Isaiah 1:18 (Parallel theme): Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

Psalms 104:14 (Parallel theme): He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth;

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