

Why is Heaven So Unfair?

The book of Jonah is a very important book. And, while Jonah is indeed swallowed by a big fish, which is what most of us remember about the book. It is nevertheless a minor part of the book. In the beginning of the book the LORD goes to Jonah and tells him to preach the gospel to the people of Nineveh. When Jonah hears this, he instead gets on a boat, heading toward Tarshish (Spain). And as soon as he gets onto this boat, we are asking ourselves: “Why?” Why are you running away from the LORD, Jonah. Finally, everything catches up with Jonah. And he answers the question for us: (*Jonah 4:2 NIV*) “He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

If you listen closely, you can hear Jonah’s objection. Jonah was angry at God. Why? Because God was unfair. He was ever-so angry at God because God would give heaven to a people who didn’t deserve it. These were the Ninevites, the leaders of Assyria. Assyria was a powerful, wicked, disgusting nation. They did not deserve salvation. They did not deserve heaven. And yet, the LORD chose to give it to them anyway.

If there is a thread and a theme that we see running through these last words in the book of Isaiah, that’s it. How unfair! How unfair heaven is. In the opening words of our first reading, Isaiah tells us: “*I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations.*” (*Isaiah 66:19 NIV*)

There are a number of details in this verse. And it’s important that we understand the two unfair thoughts that flow through these words. First, the LORD says: “*I will send some of those who survive to the nations.*” The Survivors are the ones who survived the exile. They are the ones who stubbornly refused to repent. They refused throw away their pagan, evil gods and turn to the LORD. So the LORD sent the Assyrians to conquer them and scatter them. Then, he sent the Babylonians to do the same. Many, many Jews went to Babylon as a conquered people. And yet, what does the LORD do? He chooses some of them. He turns their hearts toward him. He causes them to see their sins. He causes them to see the suffering Savior that Isaiah speaks of in chapter 53 of his book. The LORD causes them to see a Savior who pierces, crushed and dies in their place. He moves them to rejoice in this fact. For it means that now they have heaven. And finally, he then sends them out into the world to share God’s word. How unfair! How unfair it is that God would take these people who have rebelled against him again and again and again and give heaven to them! And yet, that’s exactly what he did. We have a word for that, don’t we? We call it *grace*. Grace is God’s *undeserved* loved.

And that leads us to the second thought in this verse. If it’s unfair that God would choose to forgive, convert and cherish his rebellious Jews, just look at what he does with the Gentiles! Even though most of the Jews choose to hate and reject the LORD, nevertheless, he takes these survivors, these refugees and sends them across the globe. Why? He sends them so that they can share in this privilege of sharing God’s word with the pagan Gentiles. And look what happens then. In verse 20, Isaiah says: “*And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD—on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels,*” says the LORD. “*They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels. And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites,*” says the LORD.” (*Isaiah 66:20–21 NIV*)

The LORD doesn’t just bring these Gentiles to faith. He makes them co-heirs of heaven with the Jews. Oh, how unfair this must have seemed to them! It was horrible for Jonah to think that the LORD would let the Ninevites into heaven at all. But, to think that these Gentiles would not be less than the Jews in heaven, but instead, at the same status and the same level as these Jews—there’s only one word for that: *unfair!*

But, oh, my brothers and sisters, we can fall into the same trap. There might be the day when you go out to a bar and grill to eat. And you see a man there who has drunk way too much. He’s telling dirty jokes and saying stupid things. And then what happens? He shows up in *your* church the next day. How unfair. Why does he even bother? There might be the member of your church who comes here only a couple times a year. He shows up

and pretends everything is just “A-OK.” How unfair! Why does he even bother. There might be that person who shows up to your bible study who hasn’t been there before. And what does she do? She does nothing but ask a bunch of stupid questions and you can’t get anywhere in class that day. How unfair! Why does she even bother?

But, even as we ask the question, the better person to ask the question about is *not* them—but you. Why should the LORD bother with me? Why should the Lord forgive me? I did nothing to earn that forgiveness. How unfair! Why should the LORD search me out and find me? I did not even move toward him in the slightest. How unfair! Why should the LORD tell me about a suffering Savior who took my sins on himself and gave to me peace and joy? I did not deserve it. How unfair. Why should the LORD give me faith? I didn’t even ask for it. How unfair! Yes, indeed, how unfair. But how gloriously true. God gives heaven to you. We call that word grace—God’s undeserved love.

It’s so unfair. It’s unfair that we or anyone would have heaven. And, just when we think that that is the only issue that is unfair, Isaiah changes the subject. In the final words of the book of Isaiah, the LORD tells us: *“And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”* (Isaiah 66:24 NIV)

If God’s grace seems strange and unfair, then what about God’s justice? For that is what we see in these words. Isaiah paints for us a picture of heaven. If we ask the question: “what will we do in heaven”, Isaiah gives us an answer. In heaven, day by day, we will go out and look at those in hell. We will look at those who rebelled against the LORD. We will see what hell is really, truly like. It is a place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. Just think about that. The worm does not die. Right now, there are worms on our pear trees. They are disgusting to look at. But, at least I know this. They will die. In hell, the ugliness unbelievers hide on the inside will be shown on the outside. Likewise, the fire will not be quenched. The most painful thing a person can endure is to be burned. And, in hell the burning and the pain will never end. The saints in heaven see this on a daily basis and what is their reaction? They say “amen.”

You see, there are so many people today, even many Christians who hate these words. They say that it’s unfair. It’s unfair that God would send so many *decent* people to hell. What they fail to understand is that God is giving to them the only thing they want. They hate him with all of their heart and strength. And so, the only thing left for him to do is to give them what they want. This is what life apart from Christ looks like: The ugliness of the worm that does not die and the pain of the fire that is not quenched.

My brothers and sisters, this is exactly what you pray for every Sunday. Luther reminds us that when we pray “Thy kingdom come” what we are praying for is this: *“[that] Your kingdom may triumph among us. And we pray that the devil’s kingdom be put down.”*¹ He reminds us that when we pray “Thy kingdom come” we also, of necessity, pray “deliver us from evil.” What does ‘delivering from evil’ look like? It means that, if the kingdom of heaven wins, then the kingdom hell lose. It means that if, Jesus’ kingdom endures and grows, then Satan’s kingdom is confined and then punished—and not just Satan, but also everyone who puts their trust in him.

And so, my brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, ponder these words. Know that hell is the very description of fair. For there is no more fitting place for those who hate God than in a place where their ugliness will be shown forever and they will feel their pain forever. Know this fact. But, even more so, know that the LORD is so very unfair to you. In his grace he has forgiven your sins—even the times we despise his word. Let us then look forward to that day when we will be there with that rebellious Jonah and those pagan Ninevites in heaven. Let us look forward to that day because we did not deserve it and it is ours by grace. Amen.

¹The Large Catechism, part III, paragraph 54