

Jonah - Living with Grace

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[0 : 00] First he's going to read the first one, it's on page 777, Jeremiah 18. Jeremiah 18, 1-10.

We'll lift him up now so you can hold your finger in Jeremiah 18, which is on page 777. Okay?

And then flick onto page 928 to Jonah chapter 4. 928, Jonah chapter 4.

So, Jeremiah 18, 1-10. And Jonah chapter 4. And Kirstie will read first and then. Kirstie, if you just want to follow in that verse, it's on page 4.

Jeremiah 18, verses 1-10. This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message. So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel.

[1 : 19] But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands. So the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it, as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me.

O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does, declares the Lord. Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed, and if that nation, I warned, repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I have planned.

And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I have intended to do for it.

Jonah chapter 4, page 928. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home?

[2 : 30] This 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.

Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live. But the Lord replied, Have you any right to be angry? Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city.

There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade, and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort.

And Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint.

He wanted to die and said, It would be better for me to die than to live. But God said to Jonah, Do you have a right to be angry about the vine? I do, he said.

[3 : 41] I am angry enough to die. But the Lord said, You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight, and it died overnight.

But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?

Thanks, Kirsty, and thanks, Chris. There are some sheets of paper there with notes. Questions? Questions? Any left, Joe?

No? They're all out. There's some there. If anybody wants one, Joe will give you one and a ten.

Well, over the last few weeks, we've been going through this book of Jonah.

What we've discovered is that Jonah has very little to do with a great big fish, and everything to do with a great big God. A God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love.

[4 : 56] And this morning, we come to the end of the story. The last chapter, chapter 4, and the title we've given it is Living with Grace. Let's pray together.

Let's pray together. We thank you, God, for who you are.

Great and awesome. And we come before you humbly, because we recognize that when we read your word and look at what it says, it is you speaking to us.

And so we ask that you, by your power, by your spirit, would speak into our lives individually, speak into our lives as families, speak into the family of this church, that together we would better understand who you are, the kind of response we should give you, and the way we should live, and the way we should treat those around us.

Please help us. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, last Tuesday, the long-awaited Savile Report into Bloody Sunday was released.

[6 : 24] It's been an attempt to look into the events which took place at the Civil Rights March over 38 years ago in Derry, in which 14 people were killed. The hope has been to uncover the truth and correct any injustice.

Of course, the release of this report and all the discussion around it has raised the issue of justice in Northern Ireland. People talk about the soldiers who fired indiscriminately and murdered innocent victims and have never been charged.

Others talk about those who caused terrible acts of terrorism but were released early from prison. It's a highly emotive issue.

All demands justice, so when the scales tip in favour of the guilty, there is understandably outrage. Not just frustration, but real anger.

And I think we all feel angry when faced with injustice. Nothing boils our blood more than seeing the guilty walk free.

[7 : 41] We are incensed at the thought that people who cause so much hurt, so much pain, so much wrong, doesn't matter how sorry they feel, doesn't matter their remorse, how on earth they can avoid punishment.

Well, Jonah was a prophet called by God to bring God's justice and judgment on the people of Nineveh.

Chapter 1, verse 2, Go to that great city of Nineveh, preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me. Chapter 3, verse 4, On the first day Jonah started into the city, he proclaimed, Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned, or destroyed.

But then something very surprising happened. Chapter 3, verse 10, When God saw what they did, and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion, and he did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

It seems like the scales have kicked in favour of the guilty. No matter how sorry they are, surely they still deserve to be punished for what they've done.

[9 : 12] Jonah's not just frustrated with God, he's angry with God. Look at verse 1 of chapter 4, But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

Literally, it reads, Jonah was hot with anger. And in his anger, he comes to God in a prayer. It's always good to pray to God when we're angry.

Let him know how we feel. And this is how Jonah prays, verse 2. We mustn't think of him here quietly in a nice little church, sitting in a wooden pew with his hands together.

No, he's angry. He prayed to the Lord. Oh 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're a gracious and a compassionate God.

You're slow to anger and abounding in love. A God who relents from sending calamity. That's the kind of God you are.

[10 : 19] How could you do this? Look at what they've done. You know their evil and their wickedness. And now you're going to go and show them compassion? You promised that you were going to bring your justice and your judgment.

How can you relent and let them go unpunished? That's unjust. You can't do that sort of thing. If that's the kind of God that you are, look at verse 3.

Now, oh Lord, take away my life. For it is better for me to die than to live. Can we understand how Jonah must have felt?

I think we would all feel that way when we see the injustices in the world. When things go wrong. Why does God not bring about the judgment that they deserve? Why doesn't he wipe out the wicked? Why does he let them live? Well, that's the problem with living with grace.

[11:20] God does not treat us the way we deserve to be treated. And that can make us angry. You see, when we're the guilty ones, we cry out for grace.

We want to be treated, or rather we don't want to be treated as we deserve. We want the God of Jonah chapter 2, who's slow to anger, abounding in love. A God who relents from sending calamity. But perhaps, like Jonah, when others cry for grace and compassion, we get angry at God. And in our temper, we stamp our foot and we say, You can't do that, God.

That's unjust. If that's the kind of God you are, then I don't want anything to do with you. But that's what living with grace does.

It can make us angry. How could you do that, God? Well, like Jonah, I think we all need to be humbled by grace.

[12:25] Look at verse 4. But the Lord replied, Have you any right to be angry? You see, in response to Jonah's outburst, God provides a little object lesson.

It acts like a little parable. Verse 5. Jonah went out. This is after he had delivered his speech. He goes up onto the hill and he sat down to the place east of the city.

There he made himself a shelter. He sat in its shade and he waited to see what would happen to the city. It's like Jonah's still stunned by God's response. He sits there fuming away.

He can't show compassion to these people. There's no way he's going to do it. Well, as he molds the matter over, God does something for Jonah, verse 6.

The Lord God provided a vine and made it to grow up over Jonah to give him shade for his head to ease his discomfort. And Jonah was very happy about the vine.

[13:32] All of a sudden, his emotion changes. The anger is gone and now he's really excited. He's happy. And there Jonah sits, quite content in the shade of this lovely cool vine.

He nods off to sleep and falls away at peace. Verse 7. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered.

When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind and then the sun blazed on Jonah's head so he grew faint. He wanted to die and said, it would be better for me to die than to live.

Now what's going on here? Well, I think it's God's way of humbling Jonah. It's like God is coming to Jonah and saying, look Jonah, if you want fairness and justice, then let me show you what's fair.

You didn't even ask. And I made a vine to grow up to provide shelter for you and to cool you from the sun. And when you sat there in the shade, I didn't hear you say, God, that's not fair.

[14:50] But yet when the vine was destroyed, you start complaining and giving off. If it's fairness you want, then in fairness you don't deserve anything.

Come on, Jonah, wake up and smell the coffee. The truth is, when grace came to you, I didn't hear you cry unjust and unfair.

Let's think about God's grace in our own lives. If you have health to be here, if you have a home that you're going to go back to, if you have work or some means of living, then it's all down to God's grace.

Our skills that we have, our abilities, our friendships, our families that we enjoy, the joys that we have, the loves around us, it's all part of God's grace.

And what about our salvation? Forgiveness for all of our sins, the assurance of eternal life, the blessing of his Holy Spirit, the joy and peace of God's presence, it's all God's grace.

[16:01] It's his gift, his generosity towards us. But rather than give thanks for his grace, we very often abuse his grace.

We take it all for granted. We're too busy enjoying it all to stop and reflect and acknowledge where it all came from. Sometimes we need to be humbled.

Sometimes we need to be reminded. Sometimes God not only gives things, but sometimes God has to take things so that we remember his grace.

Look at verse 6. The Lord God provided a vine. He provided it. Verse 7. The next day God provided a worm.

Worm, I've got a job for you today. Worm eats vine. And he did. In verse 8, it says, God provided a scorching east wind.

[17:08] This is the same God who provided the storm in chapter 1, verse 4. The same God who provided the fish in chapter 1, verse 17.

God is supremely and sovereignly in control of every detail of our life. God gives things and he takes things as he pleases.

He does what he sees best for us so that we can stop and wonder at his grace. Rather than give out about a lack of grace, we should be humbled by his provision of grace.

None of us deserve what we have, but yet we receive it in bucket loads every day. And that's what living with grace does.

It makes us humble for all that we have. This grace that Jonah is having to live with is a real challenge.

[18:14] It challenges him and it challenges us. Verse 9. But God said to Jonah, Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?

I do. I'm angry enough to die. Can we see here how Jonah's concern has changed? In verse 3, Jonah was angry that God was going to show compassion to undeserving wicked people like Nineveh.

Now in verse 9, Jonah is angry that God has taken his vine away. What's going on? Well, God uses the vine incident, I think, to challenge Jonah and us in two ways.

The first, it challenges us to think again about what God's character is really like. Look at verse 10.

The Lord says, You've been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow.

It sprang up overnight and it died overnight. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from the left. That means they don't know what's right or wrong.

[19:30] And many cattle as well. Well, should I not be concerned about that great city? You're concerned about a vine that you didn't deserve.

So why shouldn't I be concerned for Nineveh who doesn't deserve my grace? In other words, who are we to decide where God's grace goes?

I was gracious with you, Jonah, so why can't I be gracious to Nineveh? I was patient with you when you ran off, Jonah, and I gave you a second chance, so why can't I be patient and give Nineveh a second chance?

And I was compassionate with you, Jonah, and I provided a vine to shelter you from the sun, so why should I not be compassionate to Nineveh and provide them shelter from my wrath?

Do we like it where God's grace takes us? The reality is we all want God's grace, but we also want to control who it goes to.

[20:38] Well, as the message of Jonah tells us, we are not God. Grace is not ours. We do not decide who gets it and where it goes.

Let me give just a couple of examples of this, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. The first one is Jeremiah 18.

We had it read at the beginning. Jeremiah 18. From page 777. I'll just read it there. Verse 7 to 10.

Verse 7 to 10. Verse 7 to 10. Verse 7 to 10.

Verse 7 to 10. Verse 7 to 10. Verse 7.

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warn repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.

[21:38] And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is... Sorry, verse 9. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil and in my sight does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I intended to do for it.

And then have a look at Romans chapter 2, verse 4. Romans 2, verse 4.

Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, his tolerance, and his patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you towards repentance?

You see, sometimes when we take these two readings from Jeremiah and Romans together, sometimes God gives his grace because people are repentant.

And we can get our heads around that. But sometimes God gives his grace to people who aren't repentant. To lead them towards repentance.

[23:10] And that's what we have trouble with. But just as we have no automatic right to grace, so we have no right to say who should receive God's grace.

This is God's character. And we need to let God be God. So it challenges us to think afresh what God's character is like.

And then second, it challenges us to think through what our character is like. Back at Jonah chapter 4, verse 10. The Lord said, You've been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow.

Verse 11. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people. It seems that Jonah's character has been exposed. He has more compassion for a plant than he has for one fellow human being.

He's more upset that his precious little plant has died than a whole city that sits under God's judgment. And it's as if God is saying to Jonah, Why can't you have at least the same concern for the people of Nineveh as you do over a little vine?

[24 : 30] Like Jonah, we can get angry when something is taken away from us. You ever get the flu?

We complain as if it's our right to be in perfect health every single day. We get stressed out with the pressure of work and family as if I have a right to a trouble-free life.

We get angry when our computer crashes as if I have a right to live in a broken free world. We whinge and we whine at every upset.

And it seems that we have more concern and compassion for the insignificant details of our lives than we have for our fellow human beings who live under God's judgment.

And that's the challenge of living with God's grace. The book of Jonah ends with a question.

[25 : 38] The very end of verse 11. God said to Jonah, Should I not be concerned about that great city? There's no answer.

Because I think it's written in such a way to say this is a question that each one of us has to answer having gone through all the book of Jonah as we've looked at God's amazing grace.

It's asking us the question. Should we not be concerned for the people around us? Just like God was concerned for Jonah and concerned for the people of Nineveh.

It doesn't matter who they are, where they come from, the color of their skin, their religious background, or what they have done.

Who are we to say where God's grace goes? We've received his grace day by day. And we should offer God's grace to one another.

[26 : 46] Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for you have reminded us afresh of your character, of who you are.

and we look at our own characters and our own way of thinking and we confess that we do not treat people the way you have treated us.

Father, please change our character. Please change us from the inside out. God bless you. Lord, please change us from the inside out. Lord, please change us from the inside out. Lord, please change us from the inside out. Give us a heart for those around us.

Give us compassion for the people who do not yet know the Lord. Lord, please change us from the inside out. Lord, please change us from the inside out. Lord, please change us from the inside out. Give us love for those who are under God's judgment.

We pray, Father God, that in your mercy and in your grace you would be tolerant, you would be patient, and you would be kind that it may lead people to repentance, that it may lead people to turn to you.

[28 : 21] Father, help us to do our job of bringing the good news and let us leave the work you do in people's lives up to you as to how you see them.

Help us then, we pray, and we thank you for this book of Jonah, for all that we have learnt and all that we have seen. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen.