

Offended by Grace

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[0 : 00] We're coming to the very end of a short sermon series on the book of Jonah. And I don't know about you, but I have been surprised by this book.

It's a book that, even though it is small, there is so much to it. There is so much for us to see as we dig into it. We see layers and layers. And what we see, I think, most of all, the thing that strikes me as I look through this and read through this book is God's undeserved grace that permeates the book, that flows through all of the events that happen in it.

You see grace poured out on pagan sailors, on Nineveh, evil Nineveh, Nineveh's animals even, and Jonah himself, undeserved grace all through it.

God's patience, his mercy, his love, his kindness through it all. And the thing that's interesting about Jonah is that he really helps us to see God's grace in stark relief because he is a rather ungraceful character.

And he is a man for our times, actually. He feels entitled in many, many ways. He believes that he and his people have the right to succeed and to be great in the eyes of the world.

[1 : 27] He really believes that he should have, he and his people should have the privilege of exclusive access to God, an exclusive relationship, and to know God's love and his mercy in a way that the rest of the world doesn't.

And he believes that God should further his personal agenda and that he, Jonah, should have major input in what God does and says in the world.

He's a man of entitlement. And we live in an entitlement culture that tells us we all deserve the best that our affluent and well-ordered society can give.

And we have a right to see the agenda of good health, of successful plans, of a happy family, of the perfect spouse, having fulfilling relationships, a fantastic vacation, among the many things that the society gives.

These are the things that we have a right to. And if you believe in God this morning, you know that there is a particular temptation that you have, that the culture really places on you, of expecting God's mission to be all about boosting our own personal agendas.

[2 : 42] If you are like me, I fall into that very easily. God is the one who helps me to fulfill the agenda that I have for life. But God, in this book of Jonah, shakes Jonah's entitlement life with his grace.

And he does it in the strangest way. He says three words to Jonah, Go to Nineveh. And you see, what he's doing there, what God does, is he's telling him to go to Nineveh, that great city, the enemy superpower capital of Assyrians, a place that is gaining influence in the world at Israel's expense.

And he says, Jonah, bring my grace to those people. Now, this is something ground shaking for Jonah.

Did you know that the ruins of Nineveh are just across the river from present day Mosul, Iraq, which has been occupied by ISIS for the last 18 months.

And that city right now is known for many of the same kinds of atrocities that the people in that city of Nineveh were committing themselves.

[4 : 06] And they were every bit as much a threat, even more of a threat to Israel than ISIS is to us today. And so you can see why Jonah didn't want to have anything to do with that call.

In fact, he didn't want to even be in the presence of the God who would call him to bring grace to that city. And so he ran to the opposite end of the earth from that great city.

But God, as we've heard in Jonah, turns that flight into a detour of grace. And we know that Jonah was thrown overboard and faces death.

And even as he faces death, God lifts him up from the depths through a creature that he appoints. And do you remember chapter 2 was a beautiful psalm that is written about a person who is saved by grace.

So Jonah, in that prayer, says, I was an enemy of God. God was bringing me to the rightful place of death, but God pursued me in love and mercy and saved me.

[5 : 17] And that's why Jonah exclaims at the end of that psalm, salvation belongs to the Lord. Well, he knows that from personal experience. He is a sinner saved by grace.

And this is something that he is gripped by. It's the heart of God's powerful work in the world, he is saying.

Salvation belongs to God. I've seen it in my own life. But something happens. Jonah seems to take on God's agenda in chapter 2, this vision of very big grace, of wide love.

He knows that he's just like the Ninevites and deserves death. He, like the Ninevites, can only be saved by God's powerful, undeserved grace, his work and his life.

And God pursues both him and Ninevites because of a love that is far greater than he can imagine. So Jonah knows that God hears the cries, the prayers of even the very worst sinner and saves.

[6 : 19] He appears to be gripped by that grace, the good news of grace. And he obeys God's agenda. But something happens on this long, hot journey to Nineveh in present-day Iraq because God's agenda that he has taken on gets narrowed and gets turned into his own agenda.

He pushes away his own joy and gratitude for God's grace. And his own resentment and anger takes over. So I can imagine that as he's walking to Nineveh, he's saying they don't deserve this, they don't deserve this, they don't deserve this.

And there's a warning for us here that Jonah shows us, that it does not take us long to forget the grace of God poured into our own lives.

Our own angers, our own resentments can push away gratitude, can push away the joy of the grace of God in our own lives that has saved us and brought us into the very life of God.

Our own agenda, our own strivings take over. And so when he got to Nineveh, Jonah gave the sermon that could probably be called by the Guinness Book of World Records, the worst sermon in the world.

[7 : 39] The sermon most lacking in grace would be the category. Because basically the main point was this, yet 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed.

And I think he relished that main point. There was a complete lack of compassion for his congregation. No hope is offered at all.

And he delivers it in the most unimpassioned way that you possibly could. But the most extraordinary thing happened, as we heard last week.

God's grace swept through the whole city like a massive wind. And they all repented, led by their king. God changed their future.

He saved them from death and destruction. And it showed us the power of God's word. Even through the mouth of a very unwilling preacher.

[8 : 37] An ungrace-filled preacher. It really is amazing grace. But Jonah's not amazed. And instead, he is exceedingly displeased, as you can see as you turn to chapter 4, verse 1.

It turns his world upside down, that God would extend that grace through him to the enemies of his people. And so he prays in anger, this is exactly why I ran from you.

I knew you were a gracious God. I knew that you were slow to anger, abounding in great love. I knew that you would relent from disaster.

He is saying, I knew that you would give grace to Nineveh. And you see what Jonah knows here. He knows the grace of God.

That verse comes from Exodus. It's the creed for the Hebrew people that God gave Moses. But he wanted to keep that grace, these attributes of God, of who God is in his being, for his people and for himself.

[9 : 45] No one else deserves it. Especially not Nineveh. So Jonah's agenda is for the expansion and success of his people.

And this is far less likely to happen now. Because Nineveh is not going to be destroyed. It experiences God's grace. And the people reading this afterwards would know that Nineveh would a few decades later be the agent of destruction for the northern kingdom of Israel.

He's very, very angry. His agenda and God's agenda are clashing because of the outpouring of God's grace. And God warns him of a spiritual danger in a searching question, a searching grace-filled question.

He says simply this. He says, Do you do well to be angry? Do you do well to be angry? And I think that question is a fishy reminder.

It is a reminder of what happened to him through the fish. Of the grace that God has given to him that has saved his life. He has had the same saving grace poured on him, undeserved, that has been poured on Nineveh.

[11 : 04] And this is a huge danger for us. That is a searching question for us. Do you do well to be angry? Because we want God's grace as long as it furthers our personal agenda.

Our sinful nature wants to hold very tightly to God's grace. It tells us that it is our right to have it for ourselves.

But the nature of God's grace, very simply, is that it overflows. That's the nature of God's grace. If you believe that Jesus has forgiven your sin by the death of Jesus on a cross and that Jesus has risen in power to bring you into the very life of God, then you have received grace upon grace.

You are a daughter. You are a son of God by adoption. So Jesus has lifted you and I out of the pit and has brought you into the place of life.

You have entered his kingdom. And he has placed his Holy Spirit in you. The spirit of the living God making his home in you. And so Jesus says to us and to each of us who has received grace something very similar to what God said to Jonah.

[12 : 23] He says, get up, go, make disciples of all people. not just to those to whom, not just to those people who would make respectable Christians or who you would particularly like to have around.

He says, go make disciples of all people. Bring the grace of Jesus, his good news, into people's lives because you are my witnesses. You are witnesses of the grace that has been poured out on you just as Jonah is a witness of God's grace poured on him.

That's why 2 Corinthians 6 that if you remember from our sermon series said, working together with him then we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

Jonah is receiving the grace of God in vain. And that appeal says to us be channels of grace not a dead sea of grace where nothing flows out of it and everything flows in.

Be a channel of God's grace. God is calling each of us to extend the love and mercy this wide vision that God has of love and mercy for the world to this city and to one another.

[13 : 44] I don't know where you're at with that this morning. Jonah deeply resents this calling to be a channel of God's grace to God's enemies. And his response is just let me die.

I can't possibly do this. But God who has been the master teacher to Jonah throughout the book gives him an object lesson that reveals two hearts to Jonah and his own heart and God's heart. Two hearts. And it's good for us to think of these two hearts as we go away from this passage this morning. It's an important lesson for us. this plant is very significant for us.

We know Jonah is angry. He simply cannot surrender himself to God's agenda of saving Nineveh. So he goes outside the city and sets up camp.

And I wonder why does he do this? Why does he wait around outside Nineveh? Well, the Bible tells us here. It's because he is hoping that God will change his mind.

[14 : 48] God will take on Jonah's agenda. I'm going to see what happens to that city. They'll never be able to follow through with the repentance. And it might have been hard for him to go back and tell leaders of Israel that he has been God's means for saving Assyria.

Well, it's hot there in the summer. Average high temperature in Mosul in July is 43. It's like being in Sydney without the beach or the ocean.

It is hot. And God appoints a plant for Jonah and it flourishes very quickly. It provides cool shade to save him from his discomfort.

And Jonah, a man of extremes, is exceedingly glad because of the plant. It's the best thing that's happened to him in the whole book, he sees. But God immediately appoints a worm.

Having appointed the plant, he appoints a worm to kill the plant and then he appoints a scorching east wind that makes him miserable. Again, he's so angry that he just wants to die.

[15 : 51] But God asks the question of grace again. He says, do you do well to be angry for the plant? The question's repeated because it's so important for us.

And Jonah doesn't get it. He says, yes, actually I do. I do well to be angry, angry enough to die. But God's answer is very revealing. He says, you pity the plant for which you did not labor nor did you make it grow which came into being in a night and it perished in a night and should not I pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left hand and also much cattle.

He's saying, even if it were just the cattle, they would be far more important than that plant that you want to die over. And I think that God shows Jonah that his heart is filled with an extreme apathy for people in the world.

He loves a plant deeply and mourns its loss yet he is not moved one bit by the possibility of 120,000 people dying forever.

It's a shocking attitude. It would have been shocking for those first readers who were Jews coming back from exile even. But Jonah's heart is very easily our own heart.

[17:22] We can become so attached to God's gifts of material blessings and the life of comfort that we care nothing for the many people around us who are spiritually dead, who desperately need God's eternal life.

They are just numbers in that sense. But God's heart is different and here's the second heart.

Should I not be moved to pity each of those 120,000 people in Nineveh?

He knows the exact number. The personal love and mercy of God extends over and into the whole city in all its evil and rebellion.

And Vancouver is like Nineveh. It has wealth and intelligence and creativity but many do not know their right hand from their left hand when it comes to knowing God and his mercy, his grace and his life.

And God believes that every person on earth, this is what Jonah tells us, faces eternal death unless they somehow hear and know God's grace.

[18:32] love. And that may be a shocking thing for us to think about and realize again, but this is the basic heart of why God comes to save the world. It is a world that is dying.

So today, we are going to say John 3.16 in the communion service. And we say it every other Sunday at least. And in it we hear Jesus' words, God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish, should not die, but have eternal life.

And so Jesus is telling us, God tells us through all of his Bible that Vancouver is dying, that our neighbors are dying, and that he gave his son to die on a cross in order to save them.

It's very simple, but it is saying to all of us that the world is dying around us. And we can so easily lose sight of this truth, death. But God has done that in your life and my life as well.

He has saved us from death. And like Jonah, we continually need to be reminded of that gospel, of how his grace, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has saved us.

[19:48] That's why we meet together on Sundays, that's why we meet together in small groups, that's why we pray and read the Bible. We need to know this grace over and over in our life. And there is a gift to the world when that happens.

Jonah ends brilliantly, this book, with this open-ended question, because it asks each of us the same question. Will you love your city?

Will you see it through the eyes of God who created each person in that city and loves each of those people? The book of Jonah shows the immense power that God has over cities.

In fact, the one who creates everything. And it says that his care and his compassion is as great as his power. And his one agenda throughout Jonah, throughout the Bible, is to save life and see that it is not destroyed.

That's why he is a missionary God. So just as God loved Nineveh by sending Jonah, he extends this grace. This grace overflows through people who he has saved.

[20:57] by sending you and by sending me. And I think that as we leave this passage, if you are feeling inadequate this morning, then Jonah is the book for you.

If you feel inadequate about loving your neighbors, about somehow loving the city, loving those who are very different, about taking on God's agenda and surrendering your own agenda, Jonah's the book.

Because Jonah was the world's worst missionary. If it depended on his persuasive words and his ministry gifts and his strong faith and compassion, his brilliance, Nineveh is a lost city.

But it was God's power and it was his word that brought repentance. You have that word today. You have God's power.

In fact, unlike Jonah, you have the good news of our Savior Jesus Christ whom he sends with you. Jesus says, I am with you. And he gives you his Holy Spirit in order that you might love the city in his power.

[22 : 07] So may God by his Holy Spirit give us grace to surrender our agenda and take on his agenda. May we know the power of God in our own life, but especially the love and the mercy, this vision, massive vision of God's love and mercy as our own vision as well.

By God's Spirit, may he allow you to see the world around you through his eyes. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.