

Fear and Grace

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[0 : 00] What happens when one is faced with impending doom?! In Gravity, Sandra Bullock's character, stranded in space, faces death alone.

! And so what does she do? She says, no one will mourn for me. I'll pray for myself, but I've never prayed. Nobody ever taught me how.

And that's what fear does. Fear strips us. Fear shows us what we believe, what we hope might actually save us.

And when faced with this unavoidable doom, we instinctively turn to something for help. We turn to something that will save. And last week, Nick beautifully set up the premise of Jonah for us.

And we see a prophet who has received the word of God, yet has decided to depart from that same word. And what today's passage brings us is the question of what is the role of fear for the Christian?

[1 : 08] In fact, what is the role, maybe even with the circumstances that bring fear for the Christian? In other words, the question this passage deems to answer is, where is God amidst our fear?

Where is he? What is he doing? And to answer that question, we need to unpack both the idea of fear and grace in this passage. And so the three simple points are, number one, the character of fear, the character of grace, and lastly, fear the gracious one.

Those points are also in your St. Paul's app if you want to open that up to follow along and take some notes. But firstly, the character of fear. Notice in this passage, as we read it, the predominant emotion that keeps coming up, that surrounds all of the characters, is fear.

Jonah and the sailors are situated in the sea, and suddenly there is a great storm, the cause of their fear. And it is not just an ordinary one, a storm that threatens to break the ship apart.

And so again, they are facing this impending doom, this certain death by drowning. And just like us, when we get overwhelmed, the sailors cry out for help.

[2 : 28] But their help reveals something. It reveals something deeper about the nature of their misplaced fear. But notice how it's worded in verse 5. All the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his own God.

Each cried out to his own God. In other words, these sailors, they all have a God, and they're all different. But the storm didn't stop.

The gods were silent. Multiple. All of the things, all of the things that they put their trust and their faith in, they are powerless. And so what do they do? Immediately what we see in the same verse is that they start lightening the load of the ship.

So let's throw out the cargo. And the sailors realise that they have no control. They cannot control the external. And if they cannot control the storm, they will ultimately try to save themselves.

That makes sense? But the logic here is the storm doesn't dissipate. The logic is when you try to calm your fears with false gods or even yourself, your efforts are futile.

[3 : 45] You see, Jonah believed that the Ninevites were not worthy enough to receive the mercy and grace of God for the evil works that they had done. And in a sense, he is right. But that is what God's mercy and grace is at display, because there is no good work that one can do to receive the forgiveness and pardon of God.

And so what we're presented here is that not even our hardest efforts can even satisfy not just God, but your own deepest longing or even solve your own fear.

And so where was God in this storm? You see, God gives an undeserving people who have rejected him his mercy, and it's a reminder to turn back to him.

And where does it happen? At the very beginning of Jonah, it says, It is the word of God that goes out to bring an unrepentant people to his fold. The word of God.

It is spoken to an unwilling prophet who must literally be reminded of God's compassion, who flees and departs from the word and the will of God. And so what happens?

[4 : 59] That wonderful word in verse 4. But, that magical word, but the Lord sent a storm. This is a divine storm, one that God intentions and plans, and he sends it.

It's not reckless. It's not unplanned. It's sort of spontaneous. Ooh, let's play a storm. He is the author of this experience. He is fully sovereign over every moment of your life, and so too of this storm.

And the question is, where is God? What is he doing here? And this is the character of grace. God uses this moment to redirect Jonah, who tries to flee, not just from the ways of the Lord, but what is best for him and the Ninevites.

Because God could have just let Jonah run. He could have let Ninevites stay in the dark. But his grace won't be ignored.

And there's this interesting phrase that has travelled around the Christian community, and I appreciate its sentiment, but I don't know if the Bible fully affirms it, and it's this.

[6 : 16] How will the nations know if we do not go? Or how could we judge the one who does not know God if they haven't been told about Jesus?

And what I appreciate by questions like that is that it plays on this sense of urgency, which is true of Scripture. It's this outward desperation that you must go.

And there is a reality that I do want to say, St. Paul's, are you really on mission? Are you on fire for Jesus? Have you considered the nations? What is your heart for the lost? But I don't want to pray on anxiety to push you on mission, because I don't think it's right to.

Because this passage, and like many, are saying that God's grace is at display in a non-Christian's life, in a Christian's life, in everyone's life, that is so visible, that's so tangible, that's so evident, that it's an opportunity to turn back to him.

Sometimes it's not a big storm. It might be that quiet realisation that work has become a personal religion, and there's this gaping hole in your life. But God's usage of the storm is grace to reveal that he is present.

[7 : 35] He is the sovereign one. In fact, Romans 1 makes it clear that no one has an excuse from seeing the presence, reality, and existence of God. So in other words, when you're in crisis mode, and you see that you are helpless, and you're in need of God, that's God's grace.

And there is no excuse, for God uses every mode to point in life back to him.

Have you watched any of those videos of children being jabbed by vaccinations? If you're a parent here, I can imagine that could have been traumatic for you, not the child. You know, the doctor tries to distract the child, and some are successful in distracting the baby, but the jab, regardless of what you do, it still stings.

So they cry, they don't understand, but the parent does, and they stay close. The child finds comfort not in the jab, even though it's going to be good for them, but in the parent who knows that it is for their good, and stays with them.

In the storms of your life, they are points of grace that say, turn back to God. He is the one who will keep your sails above the waves.

[9 : 00] Repent from your ways, and stop allaying your fears from what is worldly, and pursue Christ. Find your hidden place in the comfort of Jesus, amidst the typhoon.

And so just a little aside, St. Paul's, when you have a friend who comes to you in crisis mode, how will you witness to the grace of Christ in your life?

And of course, we want to do it really sensitively. We want to pray heaps, trust entirely. But we want to ask the Lord, is this an opportunity for the gospel? Is this an opportunity where God can display his grace to this person?

I mean, we even see grace in our main flawed witness in Jonah. Jonah's sin, despite being massive, is used still by God to display God's might and power in comparison to their self-will and their false gods.

The irony is here in verse 9. I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the land. Friends, this is the guy, who only six verses ago, who was shown the opposite of worship.

[10:16] He tells them of the God who he worships, yet he does not do that. He does not obey the creator of all things. And so what is the immediate response of the sailor that is in stark contrast of Jonah?

Verse 10. This terrified them. In other words, they truly understand that God, from his powerful and visible acts, that he is not one to be messed around with.

And the sailors, I guess, when you think about it, they now have some relationship with God. It's a fearful one, but they now have a name who controls the winds and the waves.

They know that this is a God who is in control of this storm, who brought it. And the fear of their circumstance has shifted. It's shifted to an object of fear.

They fear not the storm, but of God himself. And so how does Jonah respond in verse 12? Pick me up and throw me in the sea, he replied, and it will become calm.

[11:27] I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you. My community group this week is we were discussing what possible things could Jonah have done instead of verse 12.

I mean, when you think about it, he cares more about the sailors than he does about their own sin. And the obvious thing for Jonah, you know, I would assume, is that when he realizes that God is the one that has brought the storm, it's to repent.

It's to beckon to God. It's to say, sorry. But he's almost this imperfect, willing sacrifice, but not to appease God, but to appease the sailors who've been hounding him.

What have you been doing? Who are you? What is your business? And so what happens? He's thrown overboard, and the sea becomes calm.

And God uses this, doesn't he? There's a shift in their fear. Look at verse 16. At this, the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord, and made vows to him.

[12:36] There's still a fear here, but instead of this frightening terror, their fear has become worship.

They realize that God is the sovereign one who has power over the storm, and therefore, he is worthy of their praise and obedience.

And this is the Lord's grace at work, to bring such transformation in their life purely through the storm. Friends, the call for you and me is to fear the gracious one.

God, in his providence, has used the broken, the storm, so that you might fear him. Fear in the reverent sense.

It's not simply an emotional fear that makes you flee, or that makes you want to be filled with dread, even though that might happen. Fear in the world. But, it's a fear you see when you look out when you're on the plane, and you see the vast sea and land, and realize how small you are.

[13:56] It's the fear that humbles you, but the weight of God's glory increases. For us, it might be difficult to understand this sense of fear.

The fear of God isn't supposed to make you hide or flee from judgment. But if God is the one who judges, if he is the one who is supreme, who has control of all the events and sequences in your life, the only logic is to run to him.

Eric Thonese says, in a podcast, a true fear of the Lord realizes you can't run from God, and the only option is to run to him.

And when you do, you find the embracing arms of a loving father. It's a fear of reverence that is met with God's compassion.

The sailors are almost this picture of a rebuke for the believer, like Jonah, who has followed God all of their life. And it is asking you and me, what have you been turning to all this time?

[15:16] In any form of storm in your life, whether it's fear of failure, missing out, or death, you will turn to something. But the question is, when you are struck by fear, are you turning to the right thing?

Jesus' famous 12 disciples who shared life with Christ, they learnt the ways of the kingdom, they spent more time with Jesus than any other, and they, like Jonah, and the sailors, were caught in a storm, and we are asking the same question.

Do these disciples turn to the right thing? And the disciples, too, are fearful. In Mark chapter 4, we see that they question Jesus. They go, Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?

And so, what does Jesus do? Unlike Jonah, who says, throw me, he speaks to the storm. He calms the wind and the waves just by an utterance.

He simply says, Peace. Be still. What God did for the sailors when they sacrificed Jonah, God does better for you in Jesus.

[16:36] Jesus can calm the storm for he created the sea and land. And God's son is not just your sacrifice, but the very one who can calm your inner storm for he is God.

friends, today, he is with you amidst the storm by his spirit. And when you come to the foot of the cross, when you understand the grace that you have in Jesus, your fears slowly allay knowing that you worship the God who formed and commands the wind to spin and the waves to roar.

Some of us might actually have this huge block of understanding God's grace and compassion because of the storm and the suffering. And so I really want to address this. In Jonah, what we do see is that the storm is a result of Jonah's disobedience.

I mean, the sailors would not be caught up in the storm if Jonah wasn't on the boat. And so the question is, is the storm in your life due to your sin?

Is it punishment? What happens if I'm amidst the storm? The answer of grace does not only say that Jesus took the punishment on the cross, but it promises God's presence amidst the storm.

[18:04] Regardless of a storm being a consequence of our foolishness or it might be some unimaginable random tragedy in your life. The Lord uses those moments as grace to redeem your heart, to know that there is only one thing that you can count on.

Friends, you rest on the promise and biblical reality that's set in Romans 8.28 that says, and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his promise.

Friends, there are pockets of grace in everything, both the good and the awful. And what that should cause you to do is that they should cause you to run.

Your fear should actually cause you to run harder. Run harder not from him but to him. Not because he will punish you but because he holds you amidst the storm.

When you experience joy, run to the Father who loves giving good gifts to his children. When you are stuck in doubt, come to God who brings you the spirit of truth.

[19:24] When dark days are all around, seek Christ, the Prince of Peace. For the solution of fear is not a suppression, it's not to ignore, it's to run.

But don't run away. Run toward the Father. The Father by whom you had received the best by his son on the cross despite you being at your worst.

And so the question at the beginning I asked, what is God doing in the storm of my life?

Where is God amidst our fear? And the answer is God is showing his grace to you so that you would fear him.

To fear the gracious one. Friends, you've looked out from the windowsill and seen this stormy tapestry unfold.

[20:32] But I wonder if there are similarities from Jonah that align with our lives. Some of you here have come to church over the many years and you hear the gospel of Jesus that Jesus died for your sins so that you can be made right with him.

But Jesus is only a matter of the spiritual. It's only a matter of heaven. But does he shape your everyday? I'll listen to the Bible and maybe the pastor even when I want to know what God is doing or to ask about the afterlife.

What happens? What comes after? But when it comes to my job, my family, my time, my house, my spending choices, that's for me. God's grace and what he has done in my life don't actually take account into all the other spheres.

And I wonder if that's sometimes how we treat God, intentionally and sometimes absolutely subconsciously. But God has made you to worship and has made everything to point to his grace. The winds and the waves are so wild that you can't escape seeing that God is saying look, look at what I'm doing. I'm the one who made you.

[21:50] Turn to me because I am your rock, your refuge, your strength, your solace. I am to be your hiding place. The winds and the waves in your life may not even be big.

You might be in a season that fills you with joy, but don't miss the sign. How is God showing his grace to you? Maybe your heart is sitting in dissatisfaction or discontent with the state of your life, but God's grace is so deeply visible and grand that it is inescapable.

And so I want to ask you, what is it that you fear that you don't believe God will bring you or do better in the gospel? Because God's word reveals that there is a reality in the gospel, the good

news of Jesus, that what is immediately in front of you?

And Jesus' word is so much better. God's word is so your child.

Maybe you're finding hanging up the laundry is boring. Give some space to look outward. Because often what I think is I think the grass is greener elsewhere.

[23 : 05] Perhaps we need to actually look at the sailors for encouragement. Just like what Jonah did with the sailors. Are you sitting in a place where you can observe, experience, and reap how God is graciously transforming non-Christians for his glory?

Join a ministry that involves people who are excited or keen to get stuck in the Bible to discover Jesus and see what God is doing at work. Because I'm convinced that God will use that to inspire and redeem what is boring or seemingly unfulfilling, and you'll see that good work for your boss, your colleagues.

It's a winsome witness for Christ. You'll see that praying with your kids and reading them a Bible story every night and then tucking them to bed has a purpose for the king because you fear the gracious one.

You revere that his name is great and to be made holy, and so you run to him. Storm or sunshine, grace is there.

Cry out to the one who calms the seas with a word. Cry out to Jesus. Don't run from him. Run to him, the gracious king. Run to the arms that are held out on the cross and are held out for you.

[24 : 31] Friends, let's pray. Father God, we thank you so much that in Jesus, we see not only our sacrifice, but we see one who is present amidst us in the storm through his spirit.

We ask that we might see that Jesus is the gracious one to turn to. He is our hiding place, both from the present turmoil or even the coming judgment.

We ask that we might have a life transformed by the reality that we are to fear the gracious one. Amen.