

But Jonah

Jonah 1:1-4

Rick Philips begins his commentary on the book of Jonah with this line:

"It is one thing to know the doctrines of grace, and quite another to know the grace of the doctrines."

In other words, an intellectual assent to the doctrines of grace and a transformative experience of God's grace are not the same thing. The book of Jonah is the story of a man who believed in grace but did not understand or embrace grace. The evidence is simple – he did not share God's heart for a lost and wicked world.

M. Schout: *"The book of Jonah is the story of a man whose concept of grace was so truncated, nearsighted, and perverted that it neither delighted his soul nor propelled him to mission, but left him self-absorbed, proud, judgmental, and deeply disobedient."*

The book of Jonah is written to show that God and Israel are at missional cross-purposes. They had come to believe that God's grace was exclusively for them, due them because of their ethnic origin, and meant for their comfort and peace. In this short book, God shows that his saving grace is not for Israel's comfort but for his own glory; that his saving purposes include the whole world, and that the evidence of a people who understand grace and know the God of grace will be a people eager to share that grace with a lost and wicked world.

Schout: *"If Jonah tells the tale of an ungracious Hebrew prophet who cares only about himself and his own people, it also shows the astonishing graciousness of the God whose heart beats with an evangelistic rhythm; the God who loves saving lost, underserving, and ungodly sinners like the Ninevites, and like Jonah, and like you and me."*

Historical Context

- 750 BC
- Approximately 200 years after Solomon

The kingdom has been divided for a long time between the southern two tribes called "the nation of Judah," and the northern 10 tribes called "the nation of Israel." Jonah is a prophet to Israel. They are slowly but surely apostatizing, led by their wicked kings. They have many worshipers of Baal. They will very soon, in 722 BC, be conquered by Assyria, scattered around the world, and disappear as a nation belonging to God.

I. The Command

1:1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai...

A. The Man

We don't know much at all about Jonah. But what we do know is very significant.

1. He was a prophet of God, someone specifically commissioned by God to be a spokesperson for God. It is very possible that Jonah had been trained under Elisha, and so had seen or at least heard of the mighty acts of God performed in Elijah's and Elisha's day.
2. He was a man who had seen mercy. The only reference to Jonah outside of this book is found in **2 Kings 14:23–26**:

In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel.

So, Jonah had been the mouthpiece of God to wicked King Jeroboam, in which God promised to show mercy and grace to Israel and grant them relief from the wicked Assyrians. He had seen grace.

B. The Mission

God's command was clear:

Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

This was a direct command, in the imperative. God isn't suggesting. He gives his servant a mission and He clearly expects Jonah to go – it's what prophets are supposed to do. It's the job description.

Isaiah 20: *Go three years naked. And he did.*

God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. Now, that's a bit of a shock. Prophets were God's mouthpiece for God's people. They often pronounced God's judgements against the wickedness of neighboring nations, but were always able to do so from the safe confines of Israel. This mission looks, from the outside, like a suicide mission. It's a long, arduous journey – 600 miles of walking and riding through desert, through enemy territory, to preach a message that would be highly offensive to a people who killed for fun.

Nineveh was the military capital of Assyria (Israel's' greatest enemy). It was a place of unbounded violence and evil. They delighted in torture and utter depravity.

Tim Keller: *"After capturing enemies, the Assyrians would typically cut off their legs and one arm, leaving the other arm and hand so they could shake the victim's hand in mockery as he was dying. They forced friends and family members to parade with the decapitated heads of their loved ones elevated on poles. They pulled out prisoners' tongues and stretched their bodies with ropes so they could be flayed alive and their skins displayed on city walls. They burned adolescents alive."*

Assyrian history is, "as gory a history as we know."

No wonder God says in vs. 2b, “their evil has come up before me,” literally, “in my face.” And now maybe we can gain some insight into Jonah’s response. Imagine being called by God to go to North Korea or Iraq in order to rebuke them publicly for their sin. You wouldn’t expect to make it out alive.

So, how did Jonah respond? Here’s one possible response – maybe the expected response.

“Lord, I’m nervous about this, but you are the God of heaven and earth. You sent Moses to wicked Pharaoh and protected him. I believe you will also protect me. Give me courage to speak and glorify your name through the power of your word.” And then he started packing. THAT would have been a good response.

Boys and girls, is that what he did?

II. The Flight

1:3 But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah’s response is astounding. He did the exact opposite of what God had commanded.

God told Jonah to “arise,” to go up – instead he “went down” to Joppa.

God told Jonah to go northeast, to Nineveh – instead he went south and then headed straight west.

And not just anywhere west. Jonah was heading for the ends of the earth. Tarshish is over 2,500 miles from Israel. The entire length of the Mediterranean Sea – by sail. He was seeking to get as far away from Israel and Israel’s God as possible. Notice, he’s not just running from his duty – he’s running from God! The text tells us twice that he was **“fleeing from the presence of the Lord.”** He’s not merely abandoning his post – he’s renouncing his God.

Jonah was apparently under the foolish idea that God was a tribal God, like the pagan gods of the surrounding nations. He seemed to assume that if he left Israel and went far, far away, he would be able to be done with Israel’s God.

Of course, Jonah couldn’t have known that a ship was scheduled to leave for Tarshish. They didn’t publish ship departures on the Internet. He would have headed down to the harbor looking for any available route away from the Lord. He must have been surprised by his good fortune to find this ship ready to go – a perfect escape from God’s call.

William Banks: *“When a person decides to run from the Lord, Satan always provides complete transportation facilities.”*

Isn’t that the truth? If you are ready to sin, the Devil is ready to help. Jonah was ready to deny his God and defy his clear command, and the Devil had a ship ready. And so, off they went! Jonah must have

sighed with relief when the ship left the harbor. He'd done it. He had managed to escape. No one could stop him now. He was safely on his way to a new life in a new world.

But this raises a significant question. Why did Jonah run? Why such a drastic and radical response? Commentators offer different suggestions, but we don't have to guess. Fortunately, we are told later in the book by Jonah himself. In chapter 4, the Ninevites repent and God shows mercy to them. And then we read Jonah's response:

Jonah 4:2 *And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."*

Philips: *"What bothered Jonah so much? Simply this – his knowledge of the grace of God...Knowing the grace of God as he did...Jonah suspected God's purposes towards the hated Nineveh." (6)*

Jonah was deeply offended by God's command. He was a man of Israel, and any gracious disposition on the part of God towards Nineveh would feel like a betrayal. God was Israel's God, and should not be showing mercy to Israel's sworn enemy. Nineveh was the epitome of evil. They had killed good Israeli men and raped their wives and daughters. They were a vicious, degenerate, barbaric nation. And now God wanted Jonah to go and call them to repentance – so he could show them grace?

James Boice: *"Jonah would be dammed (literally) before he would see God's blessings shed on these enemies."*

If you've ever been deeply wounded by someone, you might know what this feels like. It is hard to desire God's grace for the people who have deeply hurt us and sinned against us.

- The person who slandered and betrayed you at work – and you lost your job or business.
- The person who broke into your home and stole from you.
- The spouse who was routinely abusive or unfaithful.

Isn't it true that we want God's grace for ourselves, but it's hard to want it for our enemies?

Christians are being persecuted and killed all over the world. Imagine being a Christian in Nigeria and Boko Haram attacked your village, abducted your daughters, and killed your sons. Would you want God to show grace to them? Wouldn't you resent God showing kindness to them? How could God even **consider** showing grace to Nineveh – the great enemy of Israel?

This is Jonah's offense, his wound. He had experienced the grace of God to Israel – but it was somewhat understandable grace. After all, Israel was God's chosen people. Grace made sense. And God's grace to Jonah personally would make sense. After all, Jonah was a faithful prophet of God – why wouldn't God be good to him? But grace for the Ninevites was deeply offensive. And so he ran.

III. But the Lord

Imagine Jonah, confident he has escaped. No one knows where he is or where he is going. No one, of course, except the Lord. And the Lord would have the last word. In verse 3 we read, “But Jonah.” Here we read, “But the Lord.”

1:4 But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.

The word "hurled" is the word you would use for throwing a javelin. The image is of God, the Living God, in all his greatness and glory, taking aim at Jonah's ship and hurling a storm with perfect precision and infinite skill. And it didn't miss. The winds obeyed the voice of their master, and the sea responded to his command. The storm was so great that the ship began to break up. We will look at the following verses next week, Lord-willing. For now, I just want us to see the gracious, constraining hand of God.

I'm so thankful for verse 4. I'm so thankful, because my life is full of "But Dales." My life is full of instances when God said in his word, "Dale, do this." But Dale arose and did the opposite. Or, Dale arose and ignored the command. Isn't that true of you? And what if the story ended there? What if verse 3 was the end of the story and Jonah sailed off to die in a faraway land, forever outside the presence of God? What if that was the story of my life or yours? It could be. God would be perfectly just to let us sail away in our disobedience and unbelief, setting a chart according to the flesh and spending the rest of our life and all of eternity outside the presence of God. God could have justly done so.

And that's why I love verse 4: "But the Lord." The Lord, in his grace, would not allow Jonah to destroy his soul this way.

"But the Lord" is the story of the gospel.

Eph. 2:1–5 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience — among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.

And it is this astounding grace of God that is the point of the book. This is the grace that Israel had forgotten.

Hugh Martin points out that Israel's spiritual decline is rooted in their loss of the wonder of God's grace. Vibrant faith had been replaced with cold formalism. Legalism replaced love. Pride replaced piety. They prided themselves on being God's people, yet did not share God's heart for the lost or his passion for his glory. They had been called, in Abraham, to be a gospel light to the nations. But the religious pride made them a stench to the surrounding world. As Jesus would tell them, "The Gentiles blaspheme the name of God because of you."

This can easily happen, and does happen, to churches. And the evidence is when we are no longer amazed by God's grace to us or eager to see his grace shown to others – even our enemies.

Richard Philips: *“If we gaze upon the wicked world around us and see mainly a threat to our Christian life-style instead of perishing sinners in need of the gospel, and if we pray for forgiveness for our sins but justice for the agents of a wicked culture, then it cannot be doubted that the spirit of Jonah is in us.” (8)*

God is not only seeking to rescue Nineveh – he’s seeking to rescue Israel. And through this old book, God is seeking to rescue and help us. The Ninevites were blinded to the glory of God by their unbelief and paganism. The Israelites were blinded to the glory of God by their religious self-righteousness and covenant pride. Both were equally deserving of divine condemnation and equally in need of divine grace. The ones who repented received it.

I’m praying that the Lord will use this book to root out our own pride, amaze us with his mercy, and grace, and move us to share his heart for the lost and his passion for his glory.