

# THE GRACE OF THE LORD

Jonah 3:1-5

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But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!" (JON. 2:9).

**T**he book of Jonah records the education a prophet received in the school of God's grace. Those who study this topic will often speak of God's plan of grace. Having permitted mankind to fall into sin, God worked out his gracious plan in human history, centered on the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ. But the same God who planned his grace in the great sweep of history does the same in individual lives. The third chapter of Jonah shows how God's gracious purposes always succeed, although they often follow a path that is surprising to the human observer. Jonah's experience proves the words written so much later by the apostle Paul: "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Cor. 1:25, NIV).

## THE GRACE OF THE LORD

**G**od's grace is first revealed in this chapter by the second chance God provides to Jonah: "Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you'" (Jon. 3:1-2).

We remember that this book opened with very similar words, a calling to preach to the Ninevites that Jonah rejected. Unwilling to obey, he fled for Joppa and from there he boarded a ship bound for the most distant port imaginable. But God intervened with a great storm that threatened to destroy Jonah's ship. To save the ship, Jonah was cast overboard. But instead of drowning, he was swallowed by a great fish or a whale that God had sent. In the belly of the fish, Jonah

recognized his utter need for the very grace he had been withholding from Nineveh. The prophet repented and called out to God, and the Lord answered his prayer by delivering him safe to dry ground. And now he is called a second time to God's task. This tells us much about God's grace. O. Palmer Robertson comments: "God forgets, and never holds the thing against you. Think of how wonderful are the implications of that one fact for your life. God simply does not hold grudges against people who humble themselves and ask his forgiveness through Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Jonah was given a second chance by God, just as God's people often receive second, third, and seventy-seventh chances when they repent and call upon the Lord. Abraham received a second chance when he had stopped short of the promised land, but God called him again to go forth. Moses received a second chance after he had murdered an Egyptian slave driver and was forced to flee across the desert. Perhaps most poignantly, Peter was given another chance after he had denied the Lord three times on the night of his arrest. What an encouragement this is to you to face your disobedience and sin, repent, and seek the grace of the Lord again.

This also meant that God intended to get his way with his servant. Jonah's deliverance through the belly of the great fish was not a way out of God's calling on his life. God still called Jonah to preach in Nineveh, so Jonah's restoration to God's presence included the restoration of his calling to serve.

Consider what marvelous grace it was that not only forgave Jonah and restored him to God's favor, but that also restored him to his office before the Lord. Hugh Martin writes:

It would have been a very conspicuous instance of gracious condescension and forgiving love, had the Lord simply forgiven the penitent prophet his great sin in disobeying the heavenly command and fleeing from the presence of the Lord... In bringing His erring servant to repentance, and reinstating him in favour, He reinstates him in office also; sealing to him the assurance of his own personal forgiveness by the restoration of his holy calling.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *Jonah: A Study in Compassion* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Martin, *A Commentary on Jonah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1870, reprint 1958), 226-227.

It is to the glory of God's grace that our salvation progresses beyond forgiveness to full restoration. Mankind fell from his status as God's image-bearing son by Adam's sin in the Garden. But our salvation in Christ restores us both to our lost calling and to our lost status. Christians are children of God and lights in the world, declaring God's praises through our witness and works. Every Christian who has turned to the Lord for forgiveness from sin also finds the great purpose and meaning of his life that had been lost in the paths of sin.

## THE GRACE OF JONAH

Therefore, when Jonah receives God's calling again to preach in Nineveh, he goes forth as a living testimony to the grace of the Lord. In this way we realize that Jonah's rebellion had actually served the purposes of God. God is never to blame for our sin, yet in his sovereign plan of grace for our lives he uses even our folly, sin, and rebellion as occasions for achieving the designs of his grace in our lives. So it is that when Jonah received his second call to Nineveh, he answered it as a man who had been changed by grace.

Another way to say this is to observe that God's hand of chastisement in the lives of his children is guided by his purpose for our lives. John Calvin notes that through Jonah "we... learn how well God provides for us and for our salvation, when he corrects our perverseness; though sharp may be our chastisements... we know that nothing is better for us than to be humbled under God's hand."<sup>3</sup> Having been changed by God's disciplining grace, Jonah is now ready to serve as an instrument fit for God's design in preaching the gospel.

We can mark the change in Jonah's life by first realizing that he now knew himself to be *a sinner who had been forgiven*. Earlier, Jonah had refused to preach to Nineveh because he did not think that such great sinners deserved to receive God's grace. But what an education he had received while at sea! Hugh Martin comments: "As a sinful man, whose sin had been forgiven, [Jonah] could not fail to accept at the hand of the Lord, the mission now assigned him in a spirit of reverence and dutifulness – of gratitude, submission, and

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 3:94.

obedience... Jonah would not only be prepared, but desirous to be engaged again in his Master's service."<sup>4</sup>

Why was Jonah more fitting for God's mission now that he knew himself as a sinner forgiven? The answer can be seen in a small detail in the Hebrew text. In Jonah's first calling, God had directed him to rise and go to Nineveh and call out "against" it. But in this second calling, there is a slight but significant change. Now, Jonah is called to arise and go to Nineveh and preach God's message "to" it. In both cases, Jonah would go to the same place and do the same thing. But God would have him go with a different attitude: an attitude of grace. Jonah was to seek earnestly the repentance and forgiveness of Nineveh, and for this he needed to know himself as a penitent and forgiven man. Now, Jonah could arrive in Nineveh and declare: "Look at me! Forgiveness and restoration are possible even for those who disobey and run away from God."<sup>5</sup>

Jonah's lesson is one that God wants all his servants to learn. This is one reason why the Lord permits us to slide back into sin. For when he has called us to repentance we are ready to serve him again in the joy of God's amazing grace. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. / I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." It is those whose hearts readily sing those words who are most useful for the gospel in this world.

The change in Jonah's life is reflected immediately in his response to God's renewed call. The first time God called Jonah to preach against wicked Nineveh, the prophet fled from the Lord's presence. But now, "Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD" (Jon. 3:3). His gratitude for God's grace showed forth in new obedience. Martin comments: "Thus a true reception of the true forgiveness fills the soul, in the very instant, with reverential submission, quickening and calling forth a promise and pledge – yea, a longing desire and a loyal endeavour – to obey."<sup>6</sup> How often it is their own sense of forgiveness that fuels the zeal of God's people to serve him. It was after Isaiah had realized the depths of his sin, and felt the angel press to his lips a coal from the atoning altar, that he

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<sup>4</sup> Martin, *Jonah*, 230.

<sup>5</sup> Robertson, *Jonah*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> Martin, *Jonah*, 232.

answered God's call to service by exclaiming, "Here am I! Send me" (Isa. 6:8).

But Jonah had been changed in a second way that also shaped his response to God's renewed call. He now was *a man who had prayed and been heard by God*. Jonah now knew what it was like to be in total need and utter dependence on God's answer to prayer, only to find how faithful the Lord is to all who call on him in faith.

It is easy for us to underestimate what it meant for Jonah to obey the Lord's calling to Nineveh. He was to make a long and perilous journey into the heart of the most violent empire of that day. God described Nineveh as "that great city." And Jonah was to call out against it, God said, "for their evil has come up before me" (Jon. 1:2). Jonah "was about to enter, unprotected, a city, whose inhabitants were pre-eminently wicked and violent; and he was to threaten them in the name of the Almighty with speedy and complete destruction. It was as going into the lion's den. Nothing but an implicit reliance on the presence, the faithfulness, the power, and the protection of God could possibly bear him through, in the calmness and courage befitting an ambassador of God."<sup>7</sup>

It was by grace that Jonah obeyed the Lord, a grace that he learned in desperate prayer. This is always how it is with God's mightiest servants. Gordon Keddie writes, "The experience of prayer, together with the answers to that prayer, constitute the most profound encouragements to a deepening commitment to the Lord."<sup>8</sup>

An example is Hudson Taylor, founder of China Inland Mission. Early in his Christian life, Taylor undertook to make a trial of God's faithfulness in prayer. He prayed for everything, often ignoring even prudent means for seeing to his needs. When his employer forgot to pay him, Taylor said nothing but only prayed. And the employer remembered his mistake and made good on his debt to the young believer. Taylor later admitted that he had been immature in much of his approach, yet the lesson he learned as a man who knew that his prayers were heard would shape the rest of his ministry.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 238-239.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Preacher on the Run: The Message of Jonah* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1986), 84.

Believing that God had called him to take the gospel to the inner regions of China, Taylor faced tremendous opposition. One minister asked him how he expected to get to so distant a place with no money. Taylor replied that he did not know. “It seemed to be probable,” he writes, “that I should need to do as the Twelve and seventy had done in Judea, go without purse or scrip, relying on Him who had sent me to supply all my need.” Unable to find a suitable missionary society to support him, Taylor concluded, “So God and God alone is my hope, and I need no other.”<sup>9</sup>

History records that Hudson Taylor did go to China and found the China Inland Mission, a great missionary society that succeeded in reaching millions of people with the gospel of Christ. He was a man of vision, courage, and love. But above all he was a man who had experienced God’s faithfulness in answering prayer. Howard Taylor said of his missionary father that for forty years the sun never rose over China without God finding Hudson Taylor on his knees.

There is a feature of Jonah’s obedience to the Lord that should be especially noted by everyone called to teach and preach God’s Word. Jonah 3:3 tells us that “Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.” In other words, his obedience was defined by his faithfulness to the command of God’s Word. And the message which Jonah spoke in Nineveh was the very message God had given him to speak. So it must be with all who proclaim God’s message. The preacher is not invited to invent his own sermon, much less to tailor his preaching to the tickling fancies of his hearers. Peter Williams writes: “It is the preacher’s task and privilege to declare, as clearly and as powerfully as God will enable him, the truth revealed in the Bible.”<sup>10</sup> The faithful servant of God is, as J. I. Packer has written, “take care to make clear that what he offers is not his own ideas, but God’s message from God’s book... to let the text talk through him.”<sup>11</sup> As John the Baptist noted: “He whom God has sent utters the words of God” (Jn. 3:34).

There is a third aspect we should note regarding how God’s grace had changed Jonah. For through the trials brought on by his own sin, he

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<sup>9</sup> Cited from Marshall Broomhall, *The Man Who Believed God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1929), 41-52.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Williams, *Jonah – Running from God* (Epsom, Surrey, UK: Day One, 2003), 74.

<sup>11</sup> J. I. Packer, introduction to *Preaching* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1986), 8.

was a man who had known affliction and found the blessing of God. We should never glamorize God's chastisement, and we can be sure that for Jonah, his afflictions in the fish's belly were great indeed. Yet it was through these afflictions that he was blessed. Hugh Martin comments: "Before he was afflicted, he went astray; but now he will keep God's word. Chastened and subdued, of a meek and quiet spirit, overwhelmingly convinced that no device of man can prosper against the strong hand of the Most High, he would return with a readiness to render implicit and unquestioning obedience to whatever the Divine oracle should enjoin... Not any less than the royal Psalmist could he say, 'I believed, therefore have I spoken; I was greatly afflicted.'"<sup>12</sup>

The effect of Jonah's experience and the change worked in him by the grace of God went beyond mere obedience. It conveyed to him a holy boldness about God's work. We can scarcely imagine traveling through all the neighborhoods of one of our great cities today – through the business district, the ghettos, the markets and the parks – crying out a message like Jonah's: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:4). We could hardly expect anything short of rejection, abject failure, ridicule and possibly official abuse. How much more boldness did Jonah require to preach in this way as he crossed for the three days the "exceedingly great city" of Nineveh! But he had learned the reality of God's power, and the tenacity of God's purposes. He had been afflicted greatly at the hands of God, and he had experienced the great blessing of God's grace. Therefore, writes John Calvin, "He is not now moved in any degree by the greatness of the city, but resolutely follows where the Lord leads. We hence see, that faith, when once it gains the ascendancy in our hearts, surmounts all obstacles, and despises all the greatness of the world."<sup>13</sup>

So we see that all along Jonah's flight had been in a straight line towards God's objective. How true it is that God draws straight lines with crooked sticks. And how often it will be for us that the detours of trial and even sin are shaped by God for his precise purposes in our lives, fitting us through an increased awareness of our own forgiveness, a intense experience of answered prayer, and deep

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<sup>12</sup> Martin, *Jonah*, 240. Citation is Psalm 116:10 (KJV).

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *The Minor Prophets*, 3:93.

afflictions that end in blessing from the Lord, for the sake of his gospel of grace in the world.

## THE GRACE OF NINEVEH

We will consider in our next study the remarkable revival that took place in the world's greatest and most evil city in Jonah's day. But while reflecting on the grace of God for Jonah, we should observe the grace of God through Jonah's preaching in Nineveh.

Jonah finally arrived in the great city and began preaching: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:4). This was a warning of God's judgment, apparently according to instructions God had given. This does not seem to be a very gracious message, until we realize what a blessing such a warning is. William Banks writes: "The warnings of judgment are evidence of God's mercy, for He is not willing that any should perish."<sup>14</sup> While we must properly distinguish between the law and the gospel, that is, between God's just requirements and his promise of salvation, we also should realize that "the message of God's judgment is itself evangelistic. It is an evidence of God's mercy and grace, a warning to men and women of what awaits them if they do not repent."<sup>15</sup>

This is where the grace of the gospel properly begins, with warnings of God's certain judgment on sin. There is always a great danger that Christians would be so concerned to "win over" their hearers that they would withhold the unpleasant reality of judgment for which the gospel is the answer. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

The essence of evangelism is to start by preaching the law; and it is because the law has not been preached that we have had so much superficial evangelism... So evangelism must start with the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the demands of the law, the punishment meted out by the law and the eternal consequences of evil and wrongdoing. It is only the man who is brought to see his guilt in this way who flies to Christ for deliverance and redemption.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> William Banks, *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 80.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Jonah – Running from God*, 77.

<sup>16</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Expositions on the Sermon on the Mount*. Vol. I, pp. 235, 236).

If God's grace in Nineveh began with the law, then where was the gospel? The answer is that Jonah himself presented the gospel; he was a living sermon on the grace of God that brings life to the dead, and delivers sinners from just condemnation.

Many of us do not expect to see mighty works of God, looking at things as we often do from a strictly human perspective. So we do not expect to see our witness blessed with the salvation of a neighbor or friend, and we little imagine that God can use our church to reach great masses of people. Such a limited view of God's grace would not expect much of Jonah's mission to Nineveh. But how wrong it would be. For God sent Jonah to Nineveh, and God's purposes are attended by God's power. Therefore, we read of the beginning of one of the greatest revivals in the history of the world: "And the people of Nineveh believed God" (Jon. 3:5).

It seems that practically as soon as Jonah began preaching, people started to believe and repent. And they not only believed Jonah, but they "believed God." O. Palmer Robertson remarks:

It was not the force of the argument presented by the prophet that moved the people. It was the power of God's truth that pierced to the heart. Never rely on your own persuasive powers as the way to save sinners. Never wait until you have confidence in yourself to speak up for Christ. It is God and his truth that people believe. You must remain only the instrument.<sup>17</sup>

When God sends his message of grace, he sends it to save. We must therefore pray for God's mercy upon those to whom he would have us witness and preach, believing that nothing is too great or difficult for the almighty power of God working through his gospel.

Lastly, we note that God further gave the Ninevites grace to respond: "They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them" (Jon. 3:5). This was the proper response to Jonah's message, just as confession of sin and mourning for our guilt is always the sign that God's gospel has been believed. Repentance, like faith, is the gift of God (Eph. 2:9), and even the most hardened sinner will humble himself before the Lord when the law and the gospel go forth in the power of God's grace.

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<sup>17</sup> Robertson, *Jonah*, 49.

## THE GRACE OF JESUS TODAY

Lastly, we should observe the similarity between Jonah's ministry to Nineveh and Jesus' ministry to the world. Like Jonah, Jesus was sent from the Father with a message of warning and salvation to the world. Jesus said of himself: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (Jn. 3:18). Like Jonah, Jesus obeyed God's command and faithfully delivered the message from heaven. And like the earlier prophet, Jesus went forth in the power of God so that the most unlikely and hardened sinners responded in repentance, by God's grace believing God as he spoke through the witnessed gospel.

Indeed, the situation in our very world is little different from that of Nineveh. And the call of warning and invitation is going out still today. Jonah gave Nineveh a warning with a specific time-period for a response: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:4). The number forty is often used in Scripture for times of preparation or warning. The rain of Noah's flood fell for forty days, and Israel was tried for forty days while Moses met with God on the mountain. Perhaps most notable is that Jesus was tempted by the devil in the desert for forty days. Forty days therefore speaks of a definite time established by God before his coming either in judgment or in grace.

So it is today. The word of the Lord has come to the wicked corner of the world in which we now live. The time is established by God, with a definite opportunity for grace, after which comes judgment. The day of judgment could be tomorrow, but it will certainly come at the definite time of God's appointment. Jesus has come in the power of his death and resurrection, and if you will believe, the amazing grace of God will come to restore you, to change you, and then to you use to carry the message of this grace to others in the world.