

GROWING IN GRACE

Jonah 4:1-5

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But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?" (JON. 4:1-2).

Jonah chapter four completes the Bible's record of this fascinating prophet as he reacts to the great public repentance of evil Nineveh. As we prepare to bid farewell to our study of Jonah, it would be good to recall his progression in the Lord's school of grace.

Jonah had previously been employed by the Lord to deliver a message to King Jeroboam II, informing the wicked monarch about the undeserved mercy he had been shown by God (2 Ki. 14:25-27). The Book of Jonah starts with God giving Jonah another mission that would stretch his appreciation for grace even further, summoning him to preach in the wicked Assyrian capital of Nineveh. At this, the prophet snapped. Giving himself over to resentment, he fled "from the presence of the LORD" (Jon. 1:3), boarding a ship bound for the distant port of Tarshish. In response, "the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea and there was a great tempest" that threatened the ship (Jon. 1:4). In a bitter spirit, Jonah advised the pagan sailors to throw him overboard in the sea. Chapter 1 might have ended as a classic tale of sin and judgment. But Jonah learned that just as he could not flee from God's presence, he could not flee from God's grace. "The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (Jon. 1:17).

There in the fish's belly, Jonah found grace to repent. His repentance and renewed faith expressed themselves in the classic words, "Salvation belongs to the LORD" (Jon. 2:9). They also inspired renewed faithfulness, as chapter three records Jonah's obedience to God's commission to preach in wicked Nineveh. In an astonishing display of divine power, Jonah's preaching provoked one of the

greatest mass expressions of repentance: “They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them” (Jon. 3:5).

Against this background, we might expect Jonah’s story to conclude in triumph. But Jonah chapter four tells us otherwise. His story reminds us that few believers follow an unbroken ascent from unbelief upward into gloriously victorious faith. Instead, we tend to progress with steps and halts, advances and slips. R. T. Kendall speaks for many when he writes, “Jonah had such a marvelous revelation of God’s mercy and grace to him that, humanly speaking, we might expect he would never have a serious problem again. For, after once seeing God in this extraordinary way in his own life, that should set him up for life.”¹ Instead, Jonah shows us that when it comes to growing in God’s grace, none of us is set up for life; we all have need for continual and perpetual growth in the grace of God. So it is that Jonah’s final chapter begins with a most distressing report: “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry” (Jon. 4:1).

JONAH’S ANGER

It seemed that Jonah had come so far in his spiritual journey, but here is Jonah right back where he was at the beginning. God had saved Jonah and God had used Jonah for the sake of his grace. But far from being exultant over God’s decision to relent from the judgment of Nineveh, Jonah instead burned with great anger.

The basis for Jonah’s new complaint is provided in Jonah 1:2: “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.” This shows that Jonah’s previous repentance had not been so thorough as it seemed: he justifies his prior conduct on the basis of God’s unreasonable grace. Instead of thinking he was wrong for disobeying God, he now reveals that he thinks he was right all along: “I knew you were going to forgive those wicked Ninevites!”

¹ R. T. Kendall, *Jonah: An Exposition* (Atlanta: Authentic, 2006), 204.

We can assess Jonah's anger from three perspectives. The first and most obvious perspective is *his resentment over God's mercy for sinners*. Jonah was committed to the judgment of the wicked; this is what seemed right in his eyes. Leslie Allen comments, "The cessation of God's anger is the signal for Jonah's to start."² Basically, Jonah thinks God is soft on sin. Gordon Keddie writes: "The Lord might be rejoicing 'in the presence of the angels' over sinners come to repentance, but Jonah was seething with discontent and bitter revulsion."³

It is tempting to think that Jonah has forgotten that he is himself a sinner. But a more complex answer seems to be required. More likely, Jonah simply thought that there were sinners, and then there were *sinners*. He was in the former category – a basically good and religious person who has some issues to work out – while the Ninevites were in the latter category – wicked miscreants worthy only of destruction. Many people think this way. While they admit to some sin, they don't think they deserve to be sent to hell. But when you bring up a really big sinner – someone like Adolf Hitler or Osama bin Laden – they are quick to agree that *that sinner* deserves the wrath of God. Once again, Jonah reminds us that the only way to glory in the grace of God for everyone is to realize our own dire need of God's grace for the forgiveness of our own transgressions of his holy law.

The best commentary on Jonah's attitude was given by Jesus in one of his most famous parables, the parable of the prodigal son. While this teaching is beloved to many people, its true point is lost on most. Jesus told of a son who demanded his portion of the inheritance. When he received it, he journeyed far away, squandering his money in reckless sin. As a result he became destitute, falling so low as to envy even the slop that was fed to pigs. In that low condition, the son came to his senses and resolved to return home. He would no longer be a son but would be content just to be a servant. Yet as he approached, his father spied him. Racing to meet his son along the road, the father "embraced him and kissed him" (Lk. 15:20). Calling

² Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 227.

³ Gordon J. Keddie, *Preacher on the Run: The Message of Jonah* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1986), 105.

to his servants, he had a rich robe draped over his shoulders, a ring put on his hand, and shoes placed on his feet. Then they held a joyful feast to celebrate the prodigal son's return. The loving father exclaimed, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Lk. 15:24).

Most people delight in this parable as a picture of God's merciful love for lost sinners who come home. And so it is. But this was not the primary point of Jesus' parable. To get this, we have to keep reading, for we learn of the older brother who resents the mercy shown to his sibling. He had never run off with his father's money. He had never disgraced his father's name. "Yet," he complained, "you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" (Lk. 15:29-30).

What was Jesus' point? He explained, "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Lk. 15:7). The joy of salvation! The marvel of God's grace! If we want to understand the heart of God, we have to grasp this rejoicing for redemption. There is no glory in heaven or on earth to compare with the glory of the forgiveness of sins. But like the older brother in Jesus' parable, Jonah thought it best for the Ninevites' gross sin to be condemned and judged. It never dawned on him that it was more glorious for God to provide for their forgiveness through repentance and faith.

A second perspective on Jonah's anger arises from *his hostility towards the salvation of the Gentiles*. We see this in his emphasis on "my country" (Jon. 4:2). Jonah could embrace the grace of God for his countrymen, but not for alien pagans like the Ninevites. He knew, he says, that God was gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And it was wrong, he believed, for these to be shown to the Gentiles – especially Gentiles who had shown such violence to the covenant people of God, the nation of Israel.

Jonah's confession of God's gracious attributes seems consciously to recall God's call to Israel in Joel 2:13: "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster." It also echoes an

important episode in Israel's history, namely, God's self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 34:6, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." In Jonah's mind, this knowledge of God was the exclusive property of Israel, who received it through Moses in the exodus. Joyce Baldwin explains: "He does not see why Nineveh should participate in the special benefits Israel enjoyed in knowing such a God."⁴

We may critique this view with another of Jesus' parables – the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. Some men had been working all day in the vineyard, each receiving a denarius in payment. But then they learned that other workers who had only come during the last hour had also received a denarius in pay. So they grumbled, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Mt. 20:12). But the master replied, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (Mt. 20:13-15). Jonah did begrudge God's generosity to Nineveh, wrongly thinking that God thereby cheated his ancient people of Israel.

This leads to the last perspective on Jonah's anger: *his disgust over God's sovereign will*. The Lord challenged him, "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jon. 4:4). By his actions, Jonah answered, "Yes, I do!" In short, Jonah saw God's saving purpose as lacking in justice. This seems to be the cause of Jonah's tantrum: "Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jon. 4:4). If only Jonah was God, how different things would be! So offensive is God's plan of grace that Jonah no longer wants to live. "Over my dead body" is his vehement reaction to God's grace."⁵

Jonah's objection reveals a great pride in his attitude to God. How else could Jonah presume to think better of things than God does?

⁴ Joyce Baldwin, "Jonah," in Thomas Edward McComiskey, ed., *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 2:583.

⁵ Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 229.

Yet many object to the Bible's doctrines of grace in just this way. When Paul wrote of God's sovereign grace in Romans 9, he rehearsed two objections. The first demanded, "Is there injustice on God's part?" (Rom. 9:14). People frequently object this way to the doctrine of election. Paul rejoined, "By no means! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy'" (Rom. 9:15). In other words, Paul reminds us that when we are talking about the salvation of any sinners, the proper category is God's mercy, not God's justice. To claim injustice when it comes to grace is simply to confuse categories. The second objection to sovereign grace is even worse: "You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?'" (Rom. 9:19). This is a common objection to sovereign election. But notice Paul's answer: "Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" (Rom. 9:20).

This is the right answer to Jonah's narrow complaint. Douglas Stuart comments: "It was a stupid request, voiced out of frustration and pettiness, and Yahweh did not honor it with a response."⁶ The true approach to God and his Word is stated by Paul earlier in Romans: "Let God be true though every one were a liar" (Rom. 3:4). God being who and what he is, whatever he does is right and whatever he says is true. Jonah's request to die warns us about the suicidal folly of placing human wisdom against the mind and heart of God.

JONAH'S FALL FROM GRACE

In his scathing epistle to the Galatians, the apostle Paul denounces his opponents, saying, "You have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4). Paul's point was not that true believers had lost their salvation, as is sometimes taught. Rather, he argues that his opponents had fallen away from the doctrine of grace: "You who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4).

The same argument might be made against Jonah. He agreed with God's grace for Israel: he just rejected the grace of God for anybody else! This raises a question about Jonah's prior repentance, since he effectively renounces it here. But Jonah's true repentance should not

⁶ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 503-504.

be doubted. After all, he had not only turned to the Lord for salvation, but he had followed up by submitting to the Lord's call. So how do we explain Jonah's change of heart?

First, we can observe a vital error in Jonah's thinking about salvation. He does not reject the salvation by grace he had celebrated within the fish's belly. But he does misunderstand the *extent* of that grace. Behind this is his spiritual pride, which thinks that only Israel deserves to be saved by grace. He is angry with God because God is not doing what Jonah wants him to do. And what Jonah wants God to do is reward only Israel with compassion and grace.

How widely spread the Jonah syndrome is! Some Christians think this way in terms of race. If God is for us, then he must be against them. It is right for God to show mercy to our race – whether we are white, black, or brown – but not to those of another race. We can also think this way nationally, especially in times of war. If God is to bless our country, then he must judge our enemies. But are we prepared for God to show mercy to those who hate us? We can even think this way with respect to divisions in the church. We look around and see churches that don't seem to be following God's Word. "They don't deserve to experience God's grace," we therefore say. And if a refreshing of God's Spirit should occur in such churches we may be bitter, disappointed, and even angry with God. But Jesus asks us: "Do you begrudge my generosity?" (Mt. 20:15). Gordon Keddie comments: "If Paul could rejoice when Christ was preached, 'whether from false motives or true,' then so can we when we see Christ preached today and lives changed by his grace!"⁷

Even more significant than the problem of Jonah's thinking is the problem of his heart. Jonah reveals a deep-seated bitterness against the Ninevites, no doubt nurtured in response to Nineveh's sins against Israel. His was an advanced case of the kind of resentment that spoils so many hearts. A woman is betrayed by her husband, so she nurtures bitterness towards men. A man is taken advantage of by lawyers, so he seethes whenever he meets a legal professional. Such bitterness may involve hatred towards other nations or other regions of the

⁷ Keddie, *Preacher on the Run*, 109.

nation. It may include churches and denominations. It may involve different races or specific people and families.

Notice what this heart-sickness has done to Jonah's spiritual life. For the reality is that a failure to love other people will always poison our relationship with God. "I knew you would forgive Nineveh!" Jonah objects. So because of his hatred for Nineveh, he fled from the presence of the Lord, nearly ruining his eternal soul. Now, having witnessed in Nineveh a striking display of the glory of God's grace, Jonah seethes with anger. James Limburg writes, "Therein lay the problem: If the Assyrians were in on the love of God, then Jonah wanted out."⁸ If God was going to show love to Nineveh, then Jonah did not want God's love. He would rather die.

Against this background, we see why the New Testament makes such a point about the spirit of forgiveness. The fact is that our hearts cannot be right with God unless they are right towards other men. Jesus said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt. 5:23-24). Paul states that if we have a complaint against another, we must "[forgive] each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col. 3:13). Notice that Paul does not say that we forgive others when they have deserved it, or even when they have sufficiently repented. We forgive out of gratitude for God having forgiven us. We forgive others because we are aware that we have received a far greater, far more costly forgiveness through the blood of Jesus.

So essential is our forgiving to our salvation that Jesus said, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt. 6:14-15). His point was not that we earn forgiveness by forgiving others, but that an unforgiving spirit is so alien to God's grace that it is fundamentally inconsistent for one to be forgiven by God and yet to hold grudges against others.

⁸ James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 155-156.

In our assessment of Jonah's spiritual state, we have taken counsel of Jesus' parables, and here another parable will help us to see the importance. A certain servant owed his king a vast sum of money. The man could not pay, so his family was to be sold into slavery. But the man came to the king and begged for his mercy. "Out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt" (Mt. 18:27). Shortly afterwards, the man found a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller amount of money. But when the man begged his forgiveness, he refused and had the man put into prison. News of this reached the king, who called him back and rebuked him for his own lack of mercy, throwing him into prison. Jesus concluded, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Mt. 18:35).

JONAH'S GROWTH IN GRACE

This parable shows us on what shaky ground Jonah has placed himself. In fact, where he placed himself informs us precisely of his spiritual attitude: "Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city" (Jon. 4:5). Nurturing his malice towards Nineveh, Jonah separates himself from the city, and watches. No doubt he is nursing his wrath and hoping their repentance will not last.

As we conclude our assessment of Jonah, for all the discouraging signs, there is yet evidence of his growth in grace. We should notice one striking difference between Jonah in chapter four and in chapter one. When he first was called to preach in Nineveh, Jonah responded by fleeing from the presence of the Lord. But now, for all his bitterness over Nineveh's repentance, Jonah responds by turning to the Lord: "He prayed to the LORD" (Jon. 4:2).

The significance of this cannot be overstated. Hugh Martin observes: "Agitated and alarmed, he fled *from* the Lord. Agitated and alarmed now again, he flees *to* the Lord... He does not seek a refuge from God. He makes God his refuge."⁹ In this respect, Jonah recalls the experience of Asaph in Psalm 73. Asaph confesses that he envied

⁹ Hugh Martin, *A Commentary on Jonah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1870, reprint 1958), 350.

“the prosperity of the wicked” (Ps. 73:3). As a result, he says, “My feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped” (Ps. 73:2); “my soul was embittered” (Ps. 73:21). So how did he avoid falling altogether? “When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God” (Ps. 73:16-17). Asaph turned to God. And in the house of God he remembered the grave peril of the wicked. “You make them fall to ruin,” he realized. “How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!” (Ps. 73:18-19). Instead of resenting God’s forbearance in judgment, Asaph became thankful for God’s mercy in his own salvation: “For me,” he concludes, “it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge” (Ps. 73:28).

This is the kind of growth most of us need, as well. We need to realize that the grace of God is not an offense to our sense of justice but rather the only hope of our own salvation. At all times, we will celebrate mercy and grace, since by them we gained our own forgiveness. And instead of drawing back from God in perplexity, we should learn to draw near to God for refuge. Jonah had learned this, and because of it he was moving in the right direction.

So how does Jonah turn out in the end? As his book concludes, we gain no definitive answer. But I think we have good reason for hope. Jonah is in the hands of the gracious God, and the chapter concludes with God patiently leading Jonah forward into grace. The fact that Jonah himself must be the source of this material suggests that he wants us to profit from his experience and grow in grace with him.

Indeed, this is the proper approach to considering Jonah’s tale. How do we feel about God’s mercy for those who have wronged us? Do we resent God’s grace for others? Or do we rejoice in every display of divine favor and mercy, remembering the kindness God has shown to us? And how do we respond when we are perplexed at God’s actions in the world? What do we do when God doesn’t seem to be answering our prayers the way we think he should? Do we pull away from God in anger? Or do we draw near to God, even in our consternation. Jonah’s example would suggest that God is never the problem, but always the answer. And he especially teaches us that God’s grace should ever be the chief of all our glories and delights. If

we begin to grasp these mighty truths, then we are indeed growing in grace.