

The Problem of Grace: Introducing Jonah

It's one of the most iconic stories in the Bible and in all of literature. A man is swallowed alive by a fish, survives for 3 days and is vomited back up onto dry land. This story is mentioned by Jesus in the NT, by the Quran, and depicted in works of art throughout the centuries. Jonah appears on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and there's a new movie coming out this year where a scuba diver is swallowed alive by a sperm whale and must find his way out on limited oxygen.

This story is so wild that it's easy to get distracted and let this become all we think about in the book of Jonah. Some Christians are intent on nailing down exactly what "fish" this could possibly have been. They will say that it couldn't have been a whale because it says "fish". The Bible isn't making a statement one way or the other. It's simply using language available at the time to describe a large sea creature. Others just can't believe that God could do a miracle like this and so they will say this is a parable or allegory. Everything about the way the book of Jonah is written treats it as a historical event with real people and places. Jesus certainly thought of Jonah as a real figure who lived and was swallowed by this fish.

The simple facts are that the "fish" is only mentioned in 3 verses in this book. It's a part of the story, but certainly not the main part and that's why I've titled this study "The Problem of Grace". I got this language from a study of the OT prophets I read, and I think it fits the message of this prophetic book. You might be thinking, "how can grace be a problem? Grace isn't a problem for me! I love it and appreciate it." Jonah did too. When it was given to him. But he struggled when grace was offered to others, especially to people he didn't consider worthy of it.

And that's the problem. We all want grace and we value it when we receive it. But if that's as far as our grasp of grace goes, then we really don't get it. Grace isn't grace because it's given to people we think deserve it and who fit our criteria. We don't understand grace until we rejoice when it is given to those on the outside, those who we think don't deserve it, and those we despise.

This short prophetic book aims to teach us about God's character and grace but for that to happen we have to see so much more than the fish. One author posed

the dilemma of this book like this: *Who is this God who sends his servant into the jaws of a violent city, chases him down with a destructive tempest, nearly drowns him, burps him back to land via a fish, gives him a message to broadcast that could get him skewered, and in the end aggravates him with persistent questions? What is the point of it all?* – Elaine Phillips

My goal is to help you see the point of it all by knowing God better and grasping grace more fully. Today we will do a basic introduction to the book and then we will jump back into it in a few weeks and go through it in more detail. Here's what we will see today: **4 Guides to Help Us Know God through the Book of Jonah.**

1. Context

When trying to understand a book of the Bible, it's vital that we grasp it in its original context and historical setting. For most biblical books it's hard to make sense of what's being said without some historical background. Jonah was a prophet and this little book is part of a collection of prophetic books called The Book of the Twelve. We often call these twelve the minor prophets, but they were meant to be read together and would have come on one scroll. Jonah is one of those twelve prophetic voices, but his book is quite unique within the twelve.

Prophets were to convey God's Words to the people, whether Israel or occasionally a foreign nation and Jonah wrote this book about his experience as a way to teach the nation of Israel about God's character and mission to the nations.

You see, throughout the Book of the Twelve there's a thread where the prophets tell Israel that in the latter days the nations will turn to God. Listen to the book right after Jonah. Micah 4:1-4. Israel has always been responsible to represent God to the nations, but they have clearly failed at this consistently.

Jonah represents the nation of Israel in this book and his reaction to God's grace going to the nations showcases how Israel felt about those outside of Israel receiving grace. And we need to understand which nation in particular Jonah is frustrated about. Look at Jonah 1:1-2.

Ninevah was a major city in the Assyrian Empire, and these events took place in the middle of the 700's BC. The northern kingdom of Israel eventually fell to

Assyria in 722BC, but this was probably 40-50 years before that and Assyria was a problem. They were harassing Israel and other nations and they were known to be cruel and extremely violent. They were oppressive, powerful, and merciless. In other words, they were the worst of the worst and easy to hate. It's in this context that we see 3 major characters interact. Sorry, the fish isn't one of these.

2. Characters

Obviously, Jonah is one of the main characters of the book and he's a dynamic character. We are meant to pay careful attention to Jonah's actions and words and interpret them together. It's easy to read Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 as a model of gratefulness to God. I mean, listen to how the prayer ends in 2:9. But it's not that simple. We have to read this prayer considering the entire book and the flow of the story. Jonah says some good things in this prayer, but he says good things because he's only concerned about himself and thankful that he has received grace. It becomes clear later in the book that he really doesn't grasp grace at all.

We're meant to see Jonah's character and then read him in contrast to God. This highlights God's character even more. How do we see God acting in this book? He's patient with Jonah, compassionate toward the wicked, and has a desire for people to repent. He saves Jonah, teaches Jonah, and shows grace to Jonah. Additionally, notice his perspective of the Assyrians in 4:11. This isn't describing children, it's a very generous perspective on the Assyrians. And the Assyrians are part of the 3rd character we see in the book, the nations or Gentiles.

I say they are a part of this character because the sailors in chapter 1 are also idol worshipping Gentiles. And so, as you read the book, notice how God and Jonah handle these two groups of Gentiles and how these groups respond to Jonah and God. To see this, let's look at the way the book is organized.

3. Construction

A major part of grasping the message of a particular book of the Bible is seeing how that book is put together or organized. The structure of the book helps us to see the main message and Jonah is a wonderful example of that. This is part of the reason we can't simply focus on the fish. So, how is the book put together?

Well, it comes in two parallel halves. Chapters 1 & 2 go together and chapter 3 & 4 go together. These halves have similar structures. I'm going to give you Eric Tully's organization of the book to help you see this.

Jonah's Call	Event	Jonah's Response
Call to Go to Ninevah (1:1-2)	"Sinful" sailors are delivered from death (1:3-16)	Jonah is thankful that he is shown mercy (2:1-10)
Call to Go to Ninevah (3:1-2)	"Sinful" Ninevites are delivered from death (3:3-10)	Jonah is angry that the Ninevites are shown mercy (4:1-11)

It's amazing, isn't it? And you can even go further into these sections to see parallel phrases across the two sections. Notice the response of the sailors in 1:14 and the response of the Ninevites in 3:8. Notice God's appointment of the means to teach Jonah in 1:17 and 4:6.

So, when you read the book of Jonah in the coming weeks, pay attention to these two sections. Notice the similarities between them and the differences. Finally, what are some of the major themes to look for and learn from in the book? Let's connect it to life today.

4. Connection

We will explore many connections and applications in our study of Jonah, but let me highlight three major ones today.

God's Mission. It's clear from the early moments after the fall into sin that God has a redemptive plan for humanity. He chooses Israel to be his special people, but they are to represent him to the nations. Listen to their purpose in Exodus 19:4-6. But it's vital that you understand that Israel was not called to send missionaries to other nations in the OT. Their approach to mission was more of a "come and see" approach. But as Israel fails and we move into the prophetic literature we get hints that in the future God will call the nations to Himself and pursue them. Jonah is a preview of that approach. Now, through Christ, God's people, the church don't have a come and see approach. We have a go and tell approach. However, the

mission stays the same. To represent God and call people to repentance and faith, but this time in God's Son. Matthew 28:18-20.

Grace for Me, not for Thee. The book of Jonah forces us to grapple with God's grace in ways we wouldn't otherwise. You can hear a definition of grace as unmerited favor and nod along and appreciate it. You can experience God's kindness toward you and be thankful for it, much as Jonah did. But you and I don't really get grace until there's a gut wrenching moment of realization that God's grace extends to those we don't think deserve it and we don't want to receive it. This is the problem of grace. *"In some ways, it is only when we acknowledge the 'problem' of grace and wrestle with its full implications that we understand it fully."* – Eric Tully

Jonah is the OT version of the story of the Prodigal Son. You know the end of that story in Luke 15. What does the older brother say? Luke 15:25-30. He has the same reaction as Jonah! And our problem is that we tend to identify with the younger brother in Luke 15 and the Ninevites in Jonah. But in reality most of us are Jonah and the older brother. You and I don't really understand grace until we see ourselves as unworthy and undeserving of grace and we only reach that point when we rejoice when God's grace is extended to our enemies. Jonah forces us to confront these heart challenges.

God's Justice & Mercy. Jonah forces us to deal with grace, but there's also the reality of God's justice and punishment for sin throughout the book. We learn of Ninevah's sin and Jonah's sin. Repentance is necessary or judgment follows. We also learn of mercy and grace as we've talked about. Jonah knows God's gracious character and mentions it in 4:2 by quoting Exodus 34:6-7.

There's always a tension in the OT between justice and mercy and you can see it in Exodus 34. How can God punish sin and extend grace? How can he bring judgment and salvation? It's vital as we read Jonah not to read it as simply an OT book. It's a book meant to propel us forward to God's method of showing mercy while upholding justice. This is described beautifully in Romans 3:21-26. Jesus Christ resolves the OT tension by offering Himself as a propitiation for our sins so that

God can be just and we who are sinners can be justified. Justice upheld. Grace given.

So, let's wrestle with the problem of grace through this marvelous little prophetic book and let's always let it point us to God's most profound demonstration of grace, His Son. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 7/12/26

- Explain what is meant by the title of the series on Jonah, “The Problem of Grace”.
- Have you ever experienced this problem in your own life?
- Why is it impossible to truly grasp grace if you only appreciate it when you receive it?
- What do you know about the time period when Jonah lived and the background of the book? Why is this knowledge important?
- Why is it important to know that the twelve minor prophets were meant to be read together?
- Who are the main characters in the book of Jonah and what do we learn about each one?
- How is the book structured and how does this help us understand the main message of the book?
- Explain the difference between Israel’s approach to God’s mission in the OT and the church’s approach to God’s mission in the NT.

- Who is someone that it would be difficult for you to accept receiving God's grace?
- What will you do personally to prepare for our study in Jonah?