

The Problem of Grace: Grace in Action – Jonah 3:1-10

I haven't met that many famous people in my life, but maybe some of you have. Most people say one of two things about meeting a movie star, politician, musician, or professional athlete in person. Either they say something like, "he or she seemed so normal and down to earth" or "he was such a jerk." There's not a lot of in between. It's very easy to have a perception of a person you have seen on TV or online that isn't accurate to who they truly are in real life.

For many of us we go through life with a perception of God that often isn't accurate to how the Bible portrays God. This is shaped by our background, culture, life circumstances, teaching we've heard, stories we believe, and a host of other influences. All of it comes together and forms a picture of what God is like in our minds and this matters.

It really doesn't matter a whole lot to my daily life if my perception of who Matt Damon is as a real person is inaccurate. But it makes significant difference to every moment of my day if my underlying perception of God's character is off. *What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us...a right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well.* -A.W. Tozer

If you wake up each morning and automatically perceive God as frustrated and annoyed with you, you will move through the day differently. If God isn't in control or is in control but can't be trusted to use that power for your good, you will approach each decision differently.

But here's the problem most of us have. We can list all the right attributes of God. We know God is loving and gracious, and kind, and just and holy and powerful. We affirm those qualities in Him, but we don't truly know Him in a way that grabs us by the gut. We know about God but don't really know Him. How do we move from affirming character qualities to knowing in relationship? How does God become more to us than a TV personality or professional athlete that we "know" at a distance? J.I. Packer explains how this movement from knowing about to knowing takes place:

The rule for doing this is demanding, but simple. It is that we turn each truth that we learn about God into matter for meditation before God, leading to prayer and praise to God. -J.I. Packer

I want to help you with this in Jonah 3 this morning by watching God in action. But don't listen to this story like you would watch a movie or at a distance. Instead, take what you see here and turn it into a matter of mediation before God that leads you to pray and praise. **4 Descriptions of God That Help us to Grasp Grace.**

1. Compassionate Authority (v. 1)

The story so far in Jonah has been surprising across the board. Jonah, God's prophet, runs in the opposite direction when God commands him to go preach to the Ninevites, Israel's hated enemy. He boards a ship to run away. God stops him with a storm. Jonah ends up tossed overboard and some pagan sailors end up worshiping Yahweh.

God won't allow Jonah to drown, instead He sends a great fish to swallow Jonah and keep him alive for 3 days and 3 nights in the ocean. Jonah prays to God and is very thankful for God's gracious deliverance for himself but puts his own self-righteousness on display in the process. God nudges the fish and it pukes Jonah back up on dry land and this brings us to chapter 3. What does God have next for Jonah? Look at verses 1-2.

Almost identical instructions to Jonah as we find in 1:1-2. God hasn't changed his requirement and hasn't dropped His commands. Same God and very much still in charge. But we also find ourselves right back where the book started. Jonah's been through a lot and has sinned a lot and God gives him a very clear fresh start. Try again Jonah. God doesn't always give second chances, but it's amazing how often He does. David, Israel, Peter, Paul, and others.

Again, notice the combination of compassionate authority. God will not give up on what He wants from Jonah, but He is compassionate with Jonah, even in his rebellion and sin. How many times has God given you a second chance, a third chance? How many times have you messed up, and yet, it's like God is giving you a fresh start again. Micah 7:18-19.

2. Gracious Judge (vv. 2-4)

So, God gives Jonah this second chance to do what he wouldn't do at first. What does God want Jonah to do? This time he only tells Jonah to call out with the message He will give Him, but we have already been given a taste of that message and the reason for the journey to Nineveh. Listen to 1:2.

Make no mistake about it, this is a message of judgment to Nineveh for sin and wickedness. What will Jonah do this time? Look at verse 3. A much more positive response from Jonah and after a month or so he arrives at Nineveh. Verse 3 tells us it was three days journey in breadth. This probably indicated the city and the surrounding villages and towns. Either way, it's a large city and a lot of people.

Look at verse 4. Did Jonah just show up and start shouting in the street? Did he make contact with city leadership and get some sort of official status to enter the city? We have no idea, but by the end of the first day he is actively conveying God's message to the city. There's something specific I want you to notice about this message.

That last word overthrown can be read in a couple of different ways and I think Jonah would have been aware of the two possible meanings. This word could mean "overthrow" as in judgment will fall and the city will fall. Or it could mean "to turn around", "overturn" or "transform." The first meaning is clearly negative while the second would be positive. Either the city would fall under God's judgment and be turned over like Sodom and Gomorrah, or it would be turned over to change and repentance.

This is why we need to think of God as a gracious judge. Even as He has Jonah announces the potential of judgement here, there's a pathway out of it. He offers the possibility of repentance and change. This is precisely why he sent Jonah. He could have just destroyed the city without even notifying Jonah. And yet, God is gracious to provide the opportunity for repentance. Why does He do this?

Look back to verse 3 at the phrase "exceedingly great city." Your Bible may have an alternate translation in the margin that says this, "a great city to God." The word for God is here in Hebrew and sometimes it can mean a superlative like

“exceedingly.” However, it makes sense in the book to view this as saying that Nineveh was important to God. Why? Because He’s compassionate to the core of who He is. Spoiler alert but look ahead with me to the end of the book in 4:11. Why does Nineveh matter to God? Because people matter to God.

He will not excuse sin or forgo judgment, but he’s compassionate and provides a way of salvation. So what happens as Jonah announces this message? This brings us to our 3rd description of God.

3. Sovereign Mercy (vv. 5-9)

Look at verse 5. The response is quick and immediate. For starters, they believe God. What exactly does this mean? We’ll get into the larger response of the people as we go, but at a minimum they heard Jonah’s message and believed the words of God that judgment was coming because of their wickedness. So, what did they do because of this belief? They called for a fast and put on sackcloth.

This isn’t something we do today, but this was often the response of Israelites to judgment proclaimed in the OT. This also wasn’t the typical response of Assyrians to suffering and the potential of the wrath of one of their gods. Their normal response would have involved some sort of sacrifice to try and appease the god and the consumption of large amounts of alcohol. This humble response to Jonah’s message wasn’t limited to one group of people. Notice the end of verse 5 again. And it spread far and wide, even to the local governor of the city, called the king here. Look at verse 6.

He doesn’t try and correct people but responds in kind. He rises and removes his royal garments and puts on sackcloth as a sign of sorrow over the wrong done. He then sits in ashes rather than sitting back on his throne. But it isn’t just a personal response for him. The situation seems dire and so he calls for action from everyone. Look at verses 7-8.

He’s so desperate that he even includes animals in the mourning! But it isn’t just that they are to fast and put on sackcloth. Notice the end of verse 8. I told you a few weeks ago that the Assyrians were known for their extreme violence as they waged war. There’s no way that level of violence stayed isolated to foreign battle

fields in their culture. There's every reason to believe the city of Nineveh was filled with personal acts of violence as well. The king recognizes that they must turn from these actions as well. If they will respond this way there may be hope. Look at verse 9.

This recognition is like that of the sailors in chapter 1. Look at 1:14. God does as it pleases Him and here the king recognizes the reality that they can do all they want and it's ultimately up to God whether or not he will relent from judgment.

And this is why it's important we understand that God is a God of sovereign mercy. Romans 9:14-16. The decision ultimate lies with Him, but He's a God who loves to show mercy. And this brings us to our final description.

4. Eager Patience (v. 10)

Before we read very 10, let's ask what actually happened here. Was this the largest revival in the history of the world? Did the city of Nineveh become worshippers of Yahweh and experience genuine conversion? The reality is that we don't read about forgiveness or worship or anything we would expect and yet there's some sort of reform that happens here. And this is enough for God to hold off bringing judgment.

In the biblical story the Assyrians do suffer God's judgment as a new empire takes over just a few decades after this. But God relents here from immediate judgment to give them more time. Look at verse 10. And this gets to the heart of how God is presented in this book. He's full of forbearance and patience. He does not delight in the death of the wicked. He will judge, but longs to see sinners turn from their wickedness and even if they don't turn to Him, He will do all that He can to give them that opportunity. He is eager to be patient with sinners. Listen to 2 Peter 3:8-10.

So, what do you think about when you think of God? What do you feel when you ponder Him? He's all of these qualities at the same time. Take this story of watching God in action, mediate on it, pray through it, and praise God for it and then see if this picture of God as compassionate, patient, and gracious doesn't become more embedded in your heart. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Question – 8/16/26

- Who is the most famous person you have ever met? How would you describe the interaction?
- What do you think are the most prominent influences in your perception of God?
- Give an example of why your perception of God shapes daily life.
- What would it practically mean for you to follow J.I. Packer's advice to move from knowledge about God to knowing God?
- Have you ever been given a second chance?
- Explain the two possible meanings of the word "overthrown" in verse 4. Why is it important to understand the double meaning here?
- Why was Nineveh important to God? What does this tell us about our city today?
- How does God demonstrate sovereign mercy in this passage?
- How would you describe the repentance of Nineveh? Did they become worshippers of Yahweh?

- Which picture of God given in this text resonates most with you?