

The Problem of Grace: Missing Out on Grace – Jonah 4:1-11

There are many things in life that you really can't understand until you experience them. Things like Ghost peppers, skydiving, and giving birth to a human being. I have been physically present at the birth of 4 children and I am no closer to truly grasping that experience. And neither is any guy in this room. I don't care if you've had a kidney stone. Can we just agree out of respect for the women present never to compare birthing a child to passing a kidney stone again?

Understanding requires experience in some cases. This led Jonathan Edwards to write this: *There is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness. A man may have the former, that knows not how honey tastes; but a man can't have the latter, unless he has an idea of the taste of honey in his mind* - Jonathan Edwards

This is a helpful truth to keep in mind, and yet, I think grace is one of those things you can experience personally and still not fully understand. You see, you can come face to face with God's grace in your own life and think about it and appreciate it and even praise God for it and still be missing something in your grasp of it. This is the problem of grace. If you don't or won't extend grace to others and desire grace for others, you don't grasp grace at the core. So you miss the real joy of it and delight that comes from it. This is the heart of the message of Jonah and Jonah 4 shows us this quite clearly. We find a miserable prophet who is mad at God when others receive grace but thrilled with grace when he receives it.

Jonah 4 is the culmination of this little prophetic book. All the threads come together, and we see the differences between God's grace and Jonah's heart. This book leaves us with a question so that you and I can continue to evaluate our own hearts and lives. Am I living a self-centered life that fundamentally lacks the joy of grace? Do I believe that I somehow merit God's favor and others don't? Am I missing out on grace? To help us answer these questions let's look at **4 Ways to Miss Out on Grace** in Jonah 4 today.

1. Assume that Some Don't Deserve Grace (vv. 1-4)

Let me remind you of what happened in chapter 3. Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches and remember the time frame for judgment in his message. 3:4. The people turn from their wickedness and violence and throw themselves on God's mercy. 3:9. And how does God respond? Verse 10.

We haven't read about Jonah since he gave his message in 3:4 so what has he been up to? No doubt he watched the sackcloth and ashes and heard about the published proclamation from the king of Nineveh. Would this be enough to divert God's judgment? Jonah probably had to wait the 40 days to find out and when 40 days passed he realized that God wasn't going to immediately destroy the city. He's none too happy about it. Look at 4:1.

The wording here means that God's relenting from the destruction of Nineveh was evil to Jonah. He hated what God had done and it made him very angry. He thought that God had made the wrong call here and he lets God know. Look at verse 2. There's a lot going on here.

We finally find out why Jonah ran away from God's call on his life. Look back to 1:3. Why did he run? Look again at verse 3. Jonah's articulates truths about God's character that he knows are true. He lists 5 of them here. Do you recognize this list? It's taken from Exodus 34:6 where God reveals His character to Moses. Jonah doesn't quote the whole thing, but he lists the attributes of God that most clearly display God's gracious kindness and willingness to forgive.

Jonah is a good theologian. He knows what God is like and he appreciates it most of the time. But when God decided to even open the possibility of this grace toward those Jonah sees as unworthy of it, he despises God's gracious character.

In Jonah's prayer in verses 2-3 he uses the personal pronoun, "I", "me", or "my" 9 times in the original language. Jonah wants to be the one to determine who receives grace and who doesn't. He doesn't like that God will show mercy to those that Jonah deems unworthy. And this makes Jonah angry and even unwilling to go on living. Look at verse 3.

God doesn't respond by rebuking Jonah. He simply asks him a question. Verse 4. Is it right for you to be angry? Is this appropriate, rational, and fitting?

It's clearly not because we do not grasp grace if we somehow imagine ourselves as worthy of it and others as not. This is an increasing danger for us in our culture today because our culture is so polarized and this polarization is most often not based in reality. We hear things online and on cable news and we immediately dismiss and hate "those" other people. They are trying to ruin our country! They are trying to take over! We can't imagine extending grace and wanting God's grace in their lives because it's "us" verses "them".

When we feed the anger of polarization we are in danger of believing that we have merited God's grace and others can't. And this leads us to our second way to miss out on grace.

2. Anticipate the Downfall of Others (v. 5)

God asks Jonah this question in verse 4 and Jonah doesn't answer that we know of. Instead, he exits the city, but he doesn't begin the journey back to Israel. Look at verse 5. He constructed a shelter for himself, indicating he intended to stay for at least a little while. Why? Continue in verse 5.

Jonah is waiting to see if the change of heart of the people of Nineveh will be short lived. He desperately wants God to wipe them out and he is hoping their "repentance" won't stick. So, he waits and watches, hoping for their downfall.

Have you ever found yourself with this sort of desire in your heart? There are times when you may want someone to hit rock bottom so that they have no other option to turn to the Lord. That's a different attitude than Jonah's here. Jonah doesn't even want their repentance. He just wants to see them wiped out because of their sin. He wants their downfall. It's with this anger saturating his heart that God attempts to intervene in Jonah's life and teach him about grace. And this brings us to our 3rd way to miss out on grace.

3. Accuse God of Unfairness (vv. 6-9)

Jonah has created a shelter for himself and has some measure of shade. But it's hot in this part of the world, up to 110 degrees during the day. Whatever leaves Jonah used for shade would have wilted rather quickly in the oppressive sun. But even in Jonah's anger and frustration, God graciously teaches. Look at verse 6.

God appointed a plant. Same word used in 1:17 of the fish. God sovereignly reaches out to Jonah using creation to help him. This time God provides a very gracious gift. A plant for the very purpose of giving Jonah shade and protection from discomfort. How kind! How undeserving of this gift was Jonah! How does Jonah respond? Look at the end of verse 6.

I want you to make note of the word "exceedingly" here. Same word used in 4:1, but very clearly a different emotion. Jonah was raging mad in verse 1 over God's grace toward Nineveh. Now he's rejoicing with great rejoicing over this shade that God has brought his way for some temporal relief. The wording here is extreme. Jonah was unusually happy about this. If you would have been near Jonah's shelter here it would have been an awkwardly delighted reaction. Calm down Jonah, this is weird. Again, Jonah loves it when he receives grace, but he's angry when God gives it to someone he feels is unfit for it. But then, God does some more appointing to expose Jonah's self-righteousness and twisted heart. Look at verses 7-8.

What does this tell us about God? Job 1:20-22. The Lord gives and the Lord's takes away. God dispenses grace to whom He will. God provides good gifts all the time and God also removes some of those gifts from us. God's grace is unmerited and free. We do not earn it or deserve it, and we do not get to choose when it's given and to whom.

How often do you and I mimic Jonah's reaction here in our lives? We love and delight in God's gracious gifts but even as we appreciate them, we rarely recognize them as gifts from God. But then, the moment that gift is removed or altered or pulled back, we get frustrated and angry with God. We turn to despair. We think that God is unfair. Notice Jonah's reaction again at the end of verse 8 and then God's gracious attempt to teach in verse 9.

Jonah's values are twisted and bent out of shape and the book ends with God contrasting Jonah's values with His own to help Jonah see his failure to grasp grace. This ending is for us too and this is the last way we miss out on God's grace.

4. Abandon God's Compassion (vv. 10-11)

So far in chapter 4 God has only spoken twice and he's asked the same question both times. He's been patient and gracious with Jonah. But here he sets out the problem clearly and definitively. Look at verse 10.

Jonah loves the plant. But Jonah didn't do anything to make the plant grow or to keep it alive. He couldn't! It was a gift of creation that was temporary and relatively unimportant. But Jonah valued it and had compassion on it. He was angry when it was destroyed by the worm, but he wanted God to destroy an entire city of people! Look at verse 11.

What does God mean that there are 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left? This isn't referring to children. It's a way of saying that these people are ethically and morally naïve. Not that they weren't responsible for their sin, just that they didn't have the law, as Israel did. They were to be pitied for their lack of knowledge.

Why the mention of cattle? Jonah was angry over the "death" of a plant, but plants are typically viewed as less important than animals, and animals are less valuable than people. God created this city full of people and despite their sin, he has compassion on them and wants to see them turn from their sin and to Him.

But Jonah has missed the joy of grace by loving what God loves and longing for sinners to come to repentance. Instead he's become a sad and miserable prophet who thinks he merits God's favor and gets frustrated when God gives and takes away.

What can we, as a church, take away from God's lesson to Jonah here? Why does this little book matter thousands of years later? I'll help you answer that by asking some questions that look back over the whole series. Please spend a few moments this week pondering these in your own life.

- What's one example of a time when I appreciated grace given to me, but was frustrated by grace shown to someone outside of my group?
- What are some ways I interpret life circumstances with self at the center? How does this impact my actions and relationships?
- When was the last time I truly sat down and repented to God for self-righteousness and sin?
- Rather than looking to Christ's righteousness as the grounds for my daily assurance of God, what else am I tempted to rely on? Which of these four possible foundations for acceptance and assurance am I most likely to turn to?
 - My Sincerity
 - Past Experience of Conversion
 - Religious Performance
 - Relative Infrequency of Conscious Disobedience
- Who are the groups or people I am most likely to want to see God's hand of judgment fall on? When was the last time I prayed for them?
- Who is one person I can pray for to come to faith in Christ who seems very unlikely to respond to the gospel?
- Am I regularly experiencing the joy of grace given to me and others or am I most often a negative and joyless person because of frustrations and difficulties in life? (the Lord takes away. Job 1:20-22)