

Yes, There Is Grace in the OT

Puzzled by Grace Frankton – 7/05/15

Scripture: Jonah 4.1-3 Jonah describes God as grace-filled

Proposition: Grace is predictably unpredictable.

Today we finish a series I have titled [SLIDE] “Yes, There Is Grace in the Old Testament.” Many people look at the New Testament and see a God of love, then they look in the Old Testament expecting to see that same God of love, but all they see is a god of wrath. I think they are so wrong. First, we talked about Abraham finding God grace in being chosen to be the recipient of God’s promise. We talked about Rahab being rescued by grace. We talked about David and his being sustained by grace. Today we finish by talking about Jonah and how grace is predictably unpredictable.

Perhaps the richest and most profound statement about God’s grace is found in one of the strangest stories in the Bible – the story of Jonah. For centuries, skeptics have argued whether or not this story could be true, particularly the part of the three days in the belly of a fish. Jesus referenced Jonah, so apparently he thought the story was true. I guess that’s good enough for me. I tend to side with Jesus on debatable matters. After all, he rose from the dead and I would like to someday. So I go with Jesus take on things, even if they are hard to take. This story isn’t so much about a man who was swallowed by a fish as it a story about a man wrestling with the complications of grace. Jonah was a man who understood what it meant to need grace, but at the same time, he found himself unwilling to extend grace to certain kinds of people. Mostly people who he thought didn’t deserve grace. But the problem is that no one deserves grace. If you deserve it, it isn’t grace. But let’s get into the story to parse this out.

[SLIDE] Jonah live in a tiny town near Nazareth around the 8th century BC. God called Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, one of Israel’s dreaded enemies, and tell them that God was going to destroy the city in 40 days. Jonah didn’t want to do this for two reasons: 1) if he went to Nineveh, he felt that they would just kill him rather than listen to him. 2) Jonah wanted the Ninevites to pay for all they had done to Israel and every other nation the Ninevites had conquered. You see, I appreciate why Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, one of the two main enemies of Israel. The Assyrians had turned cruelty into an art. They had perfected torture. They dismembered and disfigured people, skinned them alive, boiled them in oil, and impaled them on stakes. From Jonah’s point of view, the Ninevites weren’t worth saving. So he certainly didn’t want to tell them that God was going to destroy their city in 40 days and give any of them 40 days to get out of the city. They deserved God’s judgment; God’s wrath. He wanted them all to die. So he ran.

So, Jonah ran away from God. He went to the port city of Joppa and boarded a ship for the furthest destination west he could go – Tarshish, 2400 miles west of Joppa in what is now Spain, clear across the Mediterranean Sea. Now Nineveh was about 500 east of Jonah’s town. Jonah couldn’t have chosen a destination any farther from Nineveh than Tarshish was. Jonah was not content to simply tell God no, he wanted to go a very long way in the complete opposite direction. He was telling God, “Heck, NO!”

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I find it interesting that Jonah didn't go to someplace familiar to him. If you are running from God, why not go to a place you know to be safe. But that's what people do when they are running from God. They run to the strangest, most dangerous places they have heard about because they are trying to go where God won't look for them. However Jonah would soon learn that **[SLIDE] you can run from God, but you can't outrun God.**

Jonah loaded himself and his possessions on the ship and breathed a sigh of relief as the coast of Israel slid beneath the horizon. The problem was that there was a storm on the other horizon. The storm was huge, threatening to reduce the ship to splinters. The crew threw the cargo overboard trying to lighten the ship to ride higher on the seas so the waves wouldn't crash over the side of the boat. But it was a futile effort. As religious men, they believed that gods sent natural disasters to punish people who displeased them. So, there must be some god angry at someone on the ship and is bringing the storm as punishment. They cast lots and Jonah was chosen as the culprit. The sailors started asking Jonah questions and Jonah answered, **[SLIDE] I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.** [1.9]

The sailors then asked Jonah what they should do to appease this angry Hebrew God. I find Jonah's answer really amazing. He told the sailors that in order for God to stop the storm, they had to throw him into the sea. I think, at that moment Jonah realized that he couldn't outrun God. But rather than repent and call on God to forgive him and go to Nineveh as had God asked, Jonah attempted suicide by sailor. He told the sailors to throw him into the sea. In other words, Jonah hated the Ninevites so much that he would rather die than go to Nineveh. That's a lot of hatred.

The sailors refused to throw him overboard, but the storm just kept hitting them. Finally, they saw no other choice and threw Jonah overboard. The seas immediately calmed. The ship undoubtedly returned to port where the sailors reloaded it with more cargo and told an incredible story to anyone who would listen. Jonah, on the other hand, sank like a rock, and would certainly have died, but was saved by a hungry fish. I'm sure Jonah was shocked to find himself swallowed by a fish. But I think maybe one of the first realizations that Jonah had in the belly of the fish was that **even though he had given up on God, God had not given up on him.** And that's probably a good thing for all of us to remember. Even though Jonah had given up on the people of Nineveh, God had not given up on them.

While he was in the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed. It starts out: **[SLIDE] I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble...** [2.1] How many times have we called out to God when we were in a jam, particularly a jam we created, and God allowed to happen. Why would God answer prayers from someone who turned his back on God, then asked God for help only after hitting rock bottom? Perhaps it is because **the purpose of God's discipline isn't to pay us back, but to bring us back.** The purpose of God's discipline isn't punitive; it's reconciliatory. If you think about it, it's not uncommon for people who have spent a time running from God to later thank him for the difficult circumstances that brought them back to God. Disciplining grace is certainly not pleasant at the time; but it's appreciated later. So remember, **[SLIDE] to run from God, is to run from God's grace.**

Jonah spent three days in the belly of that fish. I don't think it took him three days to change his mind about going to Nineveh. I think he was bargaining with God about getting a second chance within the first few minutes of seeing the ribs of a fish. I think he promised God everything he

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could think of if God would get him the heck out of there. But I think it took three days for Jonah to learn his lesson: **God is thorough with his discipline**. And when God offered him a second chance to go to Nineveh, Jonah gladly accepted it.

Nineveh was a city of about 120,000 people – huge for the day. According to Jonah it took him three full days to spread his message of destruction to the city: *Forty days from now, Nineveh will be destroyed*. [3.4] His heart really wasn't in it, he still wanted them to pay for what they had done to people. But the Ninevites responded anyway. From the king on down, they repented, fasted and began calling on God to save them. And this took Jonah completely by surprise. He was a Jew carrying a message about a God the Ninevites did not worship. Yet the Ninevites listened to him and repented anyway. And God relented on his destroying the city.

Jonah was furious that the Ninevites repented and God relented. Remember, he wanted them to suffer. Jonah makes one of the most profound statement about God's grace recorded anywhere in scripture. It's certainly not something you would expect from an OT prophet. [SLIDE] *I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger and filled with unfailing love*. Jonah reached back into the archives of his experiences with God and concluded that God looks for opportunities to extend his grace and compassion. He overflows with love. He chooses not to give sinners what they deserve. And Jonah was fine with that as long as that mercy and compassion were directed toward him and toward Israel. But the Ninevites? You've got to be kidding. Jonah wanted justice; God wanted mercy. Jonah wanted judgment; God opted for compassion.

There's more to the story of Jonah that involves a plant, a worm, and a lot of anger. But it all just goes to reinforce the moral to the story which is: [SLIDE] **receiving grace is often easier than dispensing it**. Jonah's sin was that his religion was all about him and his people. He thought God was on their side. The problem is that it's not so much if God is on our side, because he's on everyone's side, it's more important that we be on God's side. While Jonah eventually surrendered to the will of God – he did what God wanted him to do – but he never surrendered to the purposes of God in the world. It's like following the letter of the law, but not the intent of the law. Jonah was a descendant of Abraham and resisted the notion of God extending his grace to anyone who isn't of Jewish descent. For whatever reason, Jonah could never embrace God's global message of grace for all humankind.

But Jonah is not alone. When we open the pages of the NT, we discover the sin of Jonah was the majority view in the Israel of Jesus' day. The Jews were saying that God was on their side and not so much on anyone else's side. The early Christian church was divided over the same issue. Is God on our side or can grace be extended to those outside Christianity? Truth be told, this conflict of grace has been an issue for the Christians in every generation, including today's generations. I've heard it said that the God is on the United States side. It was our manifest destiny, God's ordained destiny for us that we become the superpower we are. Individually, we say the same thing. Since I'm a Christian, God will grant me grace. But woe to all you who are not Christian because God will withhold his grace from you.

So before we are too hard on Jonah, let's take a little inventory. Who are the Ninevites in your life? Who are the people to which you have a hard time extending grace? Whose calamity do you secretly celebrate? Who do you secretly wish would get what you think they have coming to them? I know you can answer those questions with groups of people: blacks, addicts, the poor, and the

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uneducated. But you can also answer with individuals: your boss, an ex-spouse, the guy next door, the one who has hurt you, or someone you love, immeasurably. Regardless, they are all people who need God's grace, just as you do. And someday, God may rename you "Jonah" and assign you the task of extending his grace in their direction. And when he does, I'm sure you will have a greater appreciation for our friend Jonah.