

ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

August 14, 2022 | *Offended by Grace (Jonah)*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Write down some ways in which God's grace is evident in your life. How has God been better to you than you deserve? Think of both spiritual and physical blessings.

Read Jonah.

Ask God to use Jonah, in its simplicity and complexity, to transform your understanding of grace.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jonah was offended when the grace shown to him was shown to those he believed were not worthy of it.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

If we are offended by God's grace to others, we do not understand grace, why we need it, or why we receive it.

MEDITATE

"And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:11).

GETTING STARTED

+This section introduces the main theme of Jonah and how the book's message speaks to modern audiences.

Q: *What do we learn about Jonah from 2 Kings 14:23-25? Was the king under whom Jonah ministered a good or a wicked king?*

Q: *How does the genre of Jonah differ from most other prophetic books?*

Jonah is unique among the Minor Prophets. The other books in the Minor Prophets are collections of prophecies and oracles made by those prophets. The book of Jonah, however, recounts a significant episode from the prophet's life. The prophet Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as ministering during the reign of Jeroboam II and predicting that God would allow Israel to regain control over contested lands.

As an historical narrative, Jonah's message is slightly more difficult to ascertain than the other prophets. When reading historical narratives, we are supposed to either learn the same lessons learned by the characters or look for clues concerning the author's main point in writing the story. For the book of Jonah, we cannot be certain whether the prophet ever understood the message of the book that bears his name. The book ends by commanding Jonah to consider the same message it wants us to consider. Is God not free to show mercy to whomever He wishes? We do not know how Jonah would have answered this question, but at the end of his book, he had not yet arrived at the answer God sought.

The key to understanding the book of Jonah is to understand its structure. It is divided evenly into two halves, each highlighting how Jonah responded to God's grace, at first to himself and then to the Ninevites. Jonah was thrilled to receive God's grace, but he was offended when God offered grace to the wicked Ninevites. Jonah's attitude toward God's grace reveals several deficiencies in his understanding of it. Reading the book of Jonah gives us an opportunity to examine our own lives for these deficiencies.

Q: *Why was Jonah offended by God's grace to the Ninevites?*

Q: *What is the key element of God's grace that Jonah either had forgotten or never knew?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jonah's reaction to God's grace reveals that he did not understand it. He believed he was worthy of God's grace but hated the thought of God being gracious to the Ninevites. He deemed them unworthy of God's grace. He believed God's grace was earned by righteous deeds or ethical living. The narrative of his book, however, reveals there is nothing anyone can ever do to earn God's grace. God is free to show grace to whomever He will. This is crucial for Christians to understand. We do not receive God's grace because we were

the most worthy candidates. We can never presume God would refrain from showing grace to those who have failed to meet His holy standard. If we truly understood ourselves, we would understand that we failed to meet this standard.

❏ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The main idea of Jonah is God's freedom to be gracious whenever and to whomever He wills. This theme, and Jonah's resistance to it, occurs throughout the book. This study will consider each chapter of Jonah in light of this theme.

1. MISUNDERSTANDING GRACE RUINS OUR WITNESS TO THE WORLD.
2. WE CAN HAVE RIGHT THEOLOGY AND STILL MISS THE POINT OF GRACE.
3. GOD'S GRACE IS THE FOUNDATION OF MISSIONS.
4. SELF-CENTEREDNESS KEEPS US FROM CELEBRATING GOD'S GRACE.

GOING DEEPER

+This section will go through each of the four points listed above and draw applications from them for living grace-centered lives.

1. MISUNDERSTANDING GRACE RUINS OUR WITNESS TO THE WORLD.

❏ JONAH 1

🔍: *What other prophetic figures resisted God's call? How are they different from Jonah?*

🔍: *How did Jonah's resentment diminish his capabilities as God's prophet?*

The book of Jonah begins like so many other prophecies. The word of the Lord came to the prophet. But then the book takes an unexpected turn. Jonah was told to go and prophesy against Nineveh, but instead, he boarded a ship headed for Tarshish, effectively as far away from Nineveh as possible in the ancient world. Other prophets and leaders resisted God's calling on their lives. Moses didn't believe he could speak well enough to become a leader of God's people (Exodus 3:11–4:17). Gideon didn't think he was strong enough (Judges 6:11–18). Jeremiah thought he was too young (Jeremiah 1:6). Though they resisted for a time, they all eventually submitted to God's call. But not Jonah! Jonah headed out of town, yes, but in the opposite direction of where God had called him. The book that bears his name doesn't even suggest that he debated with God as the others had done.

Jonah's reason for fleeing God's call is not immediately clear, but by the end of the book, we discover why. He could not bear the thought of God showing grace to a people he hated (Jonah 4:1–2). His resistance to God's command reveals the main theme of the book. He misunderstood the nature of God's grace. We will discover more about Jonah's misunderstanding as the book progresses, but what is immediately clear is that misunderstanding God's grace ruined Jonah's capacity to be God's witness to the world. This is evident enough in that Jonah fled from the place God had called him to witness. But in the remainder of chapter 1, we see this theme unfolding further.

To thwart Jonah's escape, God sent a life-threatening storm upon the ship he was fleeing in (Jonah 1:4). The sailors were in danger and saw their need for divine intervention, but Jonah was asleep (Jonah 1:5). He was not even awake to plead for the sailors' lives before God. Even when the captain awakened him (Jonah 1:6), he did not offer any prophetic words to the sailors. They had to resort to casting lots to discover that Jonah was the reason for the storm (Jonah 1:7). Old Testament prophets typically confronted others with moral and covenantal failures, but it was the sailors who confronted Jonah's failure to obey God's word (Jonah 1:8–10). As God's prophet, he should have known God's capacity to relent in response to human repentance better than anyone, but it was the captain who suggested the possibility of divine mercy (Jonah 1:6). Perhaps the most shocking element of this episode is the solution Jonah proposed. He told the sailors to throw him overboard to find relief from the storm (Jonah 1:12). He suggested the sailors make a human sacrifice to appease the wrath of God, preferring to die rather than repent of his disobedience. Jonah was a pathetic prophet, and his witness to those who were in need of a word from God was severely compromised because he refused to come to terms with God's grace.

Q: *How can you avoid becoming like Jonah in your witness?*

Q: *Why must God's grace always be central to your testimony?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jonah had nothing to offer the sailors because he did not understand God's grace. Apart from God's grace, we have nothing to offer those who struggle with sin, believers and non-believers alike.

If we are not fixed in God's grace, our testimony will always be laced with legalism, and legalism offers no hope to those who desperately need the grace of God. If, like Jonah, you struggle to understand the importance of God's grace and allow it to remain central in your life, your ministry will always fall short of the gospel. Of course, God is able to work even through your failures, as he did with Jonah and the sailors. But if you are a follower of Christ, you want God to work through your witness, not in spite of it.

2. WE CAN HAVE RIGHT THEOLOGY AND STILL MISS THE POINT OF GRACE.

☐ JONAH 2

🔍: *What did Jonah get right in his prayer inside the fish?*

🔍: *What did Jonah's prayer lack?*

After the sailors threw Jonah overboard, he was swallowed by a great fish. As horrific as this sounds, the fish proved to be an agent of God's grace for Jonah. Regardless of whether it was by natural means or divine intervention, Jonah was kept alive inside the fish, where he recognized his need and prayed to God. His prayer is recorded in Jonah 2.

Jonah's prayer demands careful attention. In his time of need, we see the prophet addressing God and declaring his confidence in God's salvation. And then, God did indeed rescue him! Jonah 2 concludes with the fish vomiting Jonah out on the land. Our instinct is to assume Jonah saw the direness of his situation and prayed to God out of a changed heart, and then God responded to Jonah's prayer and saved his life. It is possible that Jonah thought this too! When God's call to Nineveh came a second time, Jonah obeyed immediately (Jonah 3:1–3). Many people reading Jonah 2 conclude that the prophet had repented, and all was well.

A closer examination of Jonah's prayer, however, reveals some concerning matters. Although Jonah did say some wonderful things in his prayer, what is absent is perhaps most revealing of his heart's true condition. He never explicitly repented for his refusal to go to Nineveh. He never admitted to having done anything wrong at all. He merely acknowledged the direness of his situation and looked to God for salvation. He may have even insinuated that God was to blame for his predicament. "You cast me into the deep ... all your waves and your billows passed over me" (Jonah 2:3). Furthermore, Jonah's prayer reveals continued confidence in the religious structures already in place in his life. He longed to look upon God's temple (Jonah 2:4). The temple remained

central in his hope for deliverance (Jonah 2:7). We should not forget that the temple was in Jerusalem, and the people often regarded it as a sign of God's unwavering commitment to them (Jeremiah 7:4). Finally, Jonah also put down those he saw as unworthy of God's love. He derided the members of other nations as worshippers of "vain idols" who had neglected God's love (Jonah 2:8). Of course, Jonah's words are true, but what do idolaters have to do with Jonah's predicament? He was essentially saying, "Look at me! When I'm in trouble I cry to God! I don't worship idols!" as if to say, "I deserve God's forgiveness because I am not an idolater." This is why he did not want to go to Tarshish in the first place. Those idolaters did not deserve God's grace.

This isn't the only time Jonah said wonderful, true things about God, but we have to wonder if he truly realized what he was saying. When the sailors asked Jonah about his God, he responded, "I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9). What wonderful theology! But the man saying it had fled to the sea to get away from his God! When asked why he was angry, Jonah said, "Because I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Jonah 4:2). What wonderful theology! But these qualities of God made Jonah angry? They certainly did not make him angry while he was in the fish. Jonah is a man we expect good theology from, but we might wonder if he really believed everything he said.

❓: *How can someone have good theology without understanding God's grace?*

❓: *How can you ensure that good theology leads to understanding God's grace more fully?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jonah shows us it is possible to have good theology and say all the right things about God but still miss the point of His grace. This is a tragedy we don't want to be true of our own lives. We don't avoid it by disdaining good theology. We should want to think rightly about God. We should want to know as much as we can about Him. The key is, however, to ensure we always keep God's grace at the center of what we know and think and believe about Him. We can never make the mistake of thinking our good theology is what is most important or what will save us. Only God's grace, mediated to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, can do that.

3. GOD'S GRACE IS THE FOUNDATION OF MISSIONS.

■ JONAH 3

Q: *What is the content of Jonah's message in Nineveh?*

Q: *Would you expect this message to have much impact? Why or why not?*

When God told Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh, he obeyed. He visited about a third of the city, and declared “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4). Jonah’s message was hardly eloquent. It is only five words in the original Hebrew. Nor was his message aimed at repentance. But the sparseness of the message did not hinder the Ninevites’ response. They heard Jonah’s warning and turned from their evil ways. One of the main points of Jonah 3 is to capture the extent of the people’s response. They repented universally. Everyone from the lowest peasant to the king repented of the evil they had done. Their repentance was both ritual and ethical. All the people and even the animals donned sackcloth, a garment for people in spiritual and emotional turmoil (Jonah 3:8). They also turned from their evil ways (Jonah 3:8, 10). The third chapter of Jonah concludes by saying that when God saw the people’s response, He relented of the disaster He intended to do. Nineveh, at least for the moment, was spared God’s judgement. This does not mean the Ninevites were saved or that they converted to Yahweh-ism. There is no evidence for this, but whatever the scope of their response, it was enough for God to delay His judgment of the city. The Ninevites turning from their evil ways was enough to find God’s temporary grace.

Q: *How can your church maintain a balance between strategically engaging in local and foreign missions and recognizing that the success of those missional endeavors rests in God's hands?*

Q: *How is it comforting to know that God's mission does not ultimately rest in our hands?*

APPLICATION POINT – Missions is a central concern for all Christians and will be until Christ returns. Although Jonah was no missionary, the book of Jonah does reveal God’s concern for those outside of His covenant people. The sailors and the Ninevites appealed to God’s grace for salvation from their situations. Again, we cannot be certain they became believing converts to Yahweh. This seems unlikely. But God sparing them from the calamity they were facing anticipates the way God will draw followers of Christ from all nations (Matthew 28:19; Revelation 5:9). The book of Jonah reveals that God’s actions on behalf of the nations ultimately rests in His grace. Jonah’s message could hardly have warranted such a response from the Ninevites, and as we will see clearly in chapter

4, he certainly didn't want it to. But the Ninevites responded to his message anyway, hoping for God's grace, and God gave His grace in response to the Ninevites turning away from their evil deeds.

This informs our missional endeavors today. Churches should plan to strategically engage their communities and the world. We should develop methods of evangelism and intentionally engage the lost around us with the gospel. We should send missionaries to foreign countries where the work of God is either absent or impeded, and believers remaining here should give generously to these efforts. But we should never think the mission of God rests on our efforts. We are the means by which God accomplishes His mission, but the mission rests on the grace He gives to all who trust in Jesus Christ as Savior. We can pursue our role in God's mission knowing that the results ultimately depend on Him, not us. We are only called to be faithful.

4. SELF-CENTEREDNESS KEEPS US FROM CELEBRATING GOD'S GRACE.

■ JONAH 4

Q: *Why did Jonah wish to die?*

Q: *What lesson was God trying to teach Jonah with the fig tree?*

If you are unfamiliar with the story, Jonah's reaction to Nineveh's repentance and God's grace must come as a shock. We should think Jonah, of all people, should rejoice at God's grace toward those who opposed His will. He was God's prophet, after all. Jonah certainly pleaded for grace and rejoiced at the idea of receiving it in the belly of the fish, but God's grace upon the Ninevites drew his resentment instead of his joy. He had hoped Nineveh would be obliterated in forty days, as he had warned. There was no room for God's grace to the Ninevites in Jonah's world.

After expressing his discontent with God's mercy on the Ninevites, Jonah sat down outside the city to see what would become of it (Jonah 4:5). Perhaps he held out hope that the city's new attitude would be short-lived, and God would, in fact, bring about the city's sudden destruction. This provided an opportunity for God to reveal what was wrong with Jonah's attitude about grace.

The climate of the arid ancient Near East could turn harsh quickly and become unpleasant and even dangerous to anyone who could not find shelter. Jonah was in a precarious situation outside of Nineveh. To help shield him from the harsh midday heat, God appointed a plant to grow over him for shade. The plant made Jonah glad (Jonah 4:6). He was happy to have relief from the heat of the sun, just as he was happy to have been delivered from drowning in the sea and from the fish. God then appointed a worm to eat and kill the plant and a “scorching east wind” to overwhelm Jonah (Jonah 4:7–8). Jonah was angry that God’s protection had been removed from him. The object lesson with the plant and the scorching wind illustrates that Jonah had not objected to God’s grace when he was the recipient but only when it was given to those he thought did not deserve it. It also reveals Jonah’s inconsistent view of God’s grace. He didn’t do anything to make the plant grow (Jonah 4:10). He did not deserve that grace, but he was happy for it and angry when it was removed. His response shows how self-centered he was and how callous his heart was toward Nineveh. Jonah cared more about the desert plant he had nothing to do with than human beings created in God’s image.

❓: *Why does self-centeredness keep you from finding joy in God’s grace in the lives of others?*

❓: *Why does the book of Jonah end with a question? What impact does the question have on us?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jonah’s self-centeredness kept him from celebrating God’s grace. When our focus is only on ourselves and the slightest deviation from what we want turns us into a tailspin, we cannot appreciate God’s grace in the lives of others. In fact, we will resent God’s grace for others because we think we are more deserving of it than anyone else. Your reaction to God’s grace in the lives of others is a good indication of the condition of your heart. If you resent God’s grace rather than celebrate it, you, like Jonah, have replaced God as the center of existence.

We also must be prepared to ask the question with which Jonah concluded the book. “Shall I not pity Nineveh, that great city?” (Jonah 4:11). God did not ask this question because He needed an answer. It is rhetorical. It is meant to say that since God pities the nations, so should we. Just as God left Jonah to ponder this question, He leaves us to ponder it as well.

NEXT STEPS

Identify an area of your life in which you need to practice more self-control. What do you always say yes to when the opportunity arrives? How is this lack of self-control disrupting your walk of faith? What steps do you need to take to say no when the next opportunity arrives? Saying no to yourself is extremely hard at first. You are battling years of unrestraint. But every time you show self-control, the easier it becomes. In God's grace your life can be defined by self-control and an unrestrained love for His glory.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

-God, help me to love you more than anything else in this world. Make it easy for me to say no to the things that used to tempt me. Give me more self-control

-Jesus, thank you for being the ultimate example of self-control.

-Father, show me where I need to practice more self-control.

-God, help me to prioritize your glory over my personal comfort.