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Do You Have a Good Reason to Be Angry?

Jonah 3-4

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We've been singing about the amazing love of God and have shared in communion, which is really a celebration of the grace and mercy of God. But I often wonder if we're as willing to extend favor to others as we are to receive the favor of God? Not just to people who deserve our favor – but to people who don't deserve our favor – because that's grace.

Victor Hugo, years ago, wrote a novel that's become a Broadway musical, *Les Miserables*, which is the story about the life-changing power of grace. It's the story of a man named Jean Valjean, who was arrested and convicted for stealing a loaf of bread in order to keep his sister and her child alive, and was sentenced to 19 years in prison because of that. While in prison, he became an angry, bitter man and was very much the criminal. He was finally released, but in the French system you had to carry a card that identified you as an ex-convict, which meant most employers wouldn't employ you and most innkeepers wouldn't let you stay. Such was the case for Jean Valjean, and after four nights of living on the streets, a kindly bishop led him into his home to spend the night.

In the middle of the night, Jean Valjean steals all of the bishop's silverware and heads out into the night. The police capture him and that morning they bring him back to the bishop, along with the silver. Everyone is expecting the bishop to pass judgment and for the police to then haul Jean Valjean back to prison. But, instead, what he receives is grace. The bishop tells him he can keep everything that he stole, and he even tells him he forgot two silver candlesticks, which he goes and gets and gives to him, as well. The police don't know what to do with that response, and they walk away. And neither does Jean Valjean. He's never experienced grace and he doesn't know how to respond to it. In that moment, the bishop tells him to use this experience to set a different course for his life. And that becomes a life-changing moment for Valjean. The rest of his life is never the same, and he dedicates his life to helping other people.

That is contrasted in the story with a character of Javert, a detective who, for 20 years, relentlessly pursues Jean Valjean for a minor parole violation. Javert doesn't know anything about grace – all he knows is cold, hard justice. He is ultimately going to seek vengeance on Jean Valjean, and he will get him in prison, if it kills him for trying. The revolution is going on during the time of the novel, and the revolutionists capture Javert. They are going to put him to death, but Jean Valjean steps between them and extends grace to Javert in order to spare his life. Javert is released and set free, but the problem is that Javert doesn't know what to do with that. He's never experienced grace – he doesn't understand a world in which grace exists. He even reaches the point where he would rather die, than live in a world of grace. And that's what he does – he jumps from a bridge and plunges to his death in the river.

It seems to me there are a lot of similarities between Javert in that story and the prophet Jonah. Jonah, too, was a man who understood very little about grace. When grace was extended in a world that he could not understand, he determined he would rather be dead than live in such a world. Jonah 3 is one of the most amazing chapters in the Bible. It tells of one of the most incredible revivals, as the most wicked, vile people repent and turn to God. But, as encouraging as chapter 3 is, chapter 4 is as dark and disappointing when Jonah responds in the

most unusual fashion and says to God, “I’d rather be dead than live in a world of such grace and mercy.”

Last week we left Jonah after he had just been vomited up on the beach by the fish, and he now is off to be obedient to God in Jonah 3:1: “Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.’ ” If you were to compare Jonah 1:2 with Jonah 3:2 you would notice they are almost identical. That is not by accident. The writer is telling us that this is Jonah’s opportunity to start anew. This is a second chance. God gave Jonah an assignment. Jonah fled to Tarshish. Now Jonah is getting a second chance at that assignment and he has the opportunity again to be obedient.

I think also, within those words, is the reminder that from Jonah 1:3, all the way through chapter 2, this was an episode in Jonah’s life that was unnecessary. It was a self-inflicted suffering that Jonah did not have to go through. Here we are, right back to where he had been, and the story, in a sense, is going to start all over. What did Jonah gain by all of the pain and suffering that he experienced? In verse 2 it says, “Arise, go...” Verse 3 says, “So Jonah arose and went...” Those are obviously statements of obedience. “So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk.”

Commentators argue about whether it was three days around the city or three days through the city. Either way, it’s not all that important, but rather the statement “a three days’ walk” is talking about the size of the city. The words “great city” mean that it was an extremely large city – a metropolitan area. We previously talked about the fact that Nineveh was an extremely wicked city, and it had become incredibly violent and vile. If you imagine the worst city with the worst atrocities in the world, it probably would not come close to what was going on in Nineveh. It’s also helpful to understand that Nineveh would have been about 500 miles from where Jonah started his journey in Israel. Jonah would have probably traveled about 30 days to get to Nineveh – it wasn’t like going next door. So the lengthy, difficult journey gave him lots of time to think and to process what was going on.

Verse 4: “Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk; and he cried out and said, ‘Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.’ ” It’s a very intense message because the word *overthrown* could be translated *destroyed* – it’s the same word that was used to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. So Jonah is proclaiming this warning that they were about to be destroyed if they didn’t heed the message.

In thinking about the wickedness of this city and where these people were at, it’s hard to believe what happens next in verses 5-9. If you were to ask me which I find more difficult to believe is true – what is recorded in chapter 2 where Jonah is swallowed and lives inside the belly of a fish, or this great revival in chapter 3 – I’d tell you it’s harder to believe chapter 3, because that’s the greater miracle. Look at what happens:

v. 5: Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes. And he issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on

God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?”

That’s really an amazing response to the message of Jonah. As these people repented of their sin, they brought forth the fruit of their repentance. From the king, all the way down even to the animals, there was repentance, in hopes that God would not pour out His judgment, but rather that they somehow would receive His grace and mercy.

God was not obligated to pour out grace to them. God would have been very just in pouring out His judgment and His wrath. But we know from chapter 1 that was not God’s heart. The whole idea of sending a prophet shows God’s desire for them to hear the warning, heed the warning and repent of their sins, so that they would experience His grace and mercy and compassion, rather than His judgment. Judgment is not what God wanted – He never would have sent a prophet in the first place. In verse 10 God responds with great compassion. Even though these people were deserving of judgment, that was not what they were going to receive because of their repentance:

v. 10: When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared he would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

Verse 10 offers one of those difficult situations of trying to resolve, or work out, the sovereignty of God with the will of mankind {the will of men and women}. We talked about the sovereignty of God earlier in this study. How does a sovereign God work within the framework of people made in His image who have the will to choose? How can those choices somehow change the ultimate plan of God? My grand conclusion to that dilemma was, “I don’t know.” But it is important to understand that it does work that way. If we go too far to the sovereignty side, we become fatalists. We basically say that God has His plan, and He is going to do what He has to do, and we can’t alter or change that. That view would lead us to conclude, “So why pray? Why worry about our decisions?”

We’re reminded in the story of Jonah that view isn’t true. We can choose to make choices and it does affect God, and how that works with a sovereign God, I don’t know. But I do know that it keeps me from becoming a fatalist. I understand that I make choices of my will, and somehow it does affect the sovereign plan of God. That’s clearly what is happening in this text.

I also find it interesting to think about the content of Jonah’s message. Jonah was sent to the streets of Nineveh as a prophet to give a very hard message. The message was a warning concerning God’s judgment, and it was a message against sin and rebellion. It was a message about the reality of the wrath and judgment of God if something didn’t change. What I find interesting is that message would be so politically incorrect in today’s culture. In fact, a lot of churches won’t even talk about that any more. They’ll talk about the love, grace, and forgiveness of God, but they don’t want to talk about the wrath and the judgment of God. They don’t want to address the fact that there is an eternal hell and a place of fire.

The reason those things are talked about in Scripture is not because that is what God wants for you and me. They are talked about in Scripture because God is warning us of the consequences if we do not repent and experience Jesus Christ as our Savior. What is often disguised as compassion in our culture isn’t compassion at all – it is selfishness. Imagine what

would have happened if Jonah had walked through the streets of Nineveh and would have said, “All roads lead to God. I think I’m OK – you’re OK – let’s just everybody have a group hug. God is love. Let’s not worry about it.” That message would have condemned those people to an eternal punishment – to experience the wrath of God. That isn’t compassion. That isn’t love. That is nothing but pure, unadulterated selfishness.

Some time ago I came upon an article in the *Lincoln Journal Star* that mentions a “new, improved Bible”:

As the Christian world prepares to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, an award-winning journalist has compiled what he calls the first improvement to the Bible in 2000 years. Kenneth Winston Caine has compiled an abbreviated Bible that strings together only the positive, inspiring verses from Genesis to Revelation. “This,” he said in a news release, “is an inspirational Bible, an introductory Bible, a 21st century Bible, a soundbite Bible. It’s just the good stuff and nothing else.”

I think what he means by “good stuff” is that he wants to take just the parts that talk about God’s love, compassion and mercy and not talk about the other side of God – a God of judgment, a God of justice, a God of wrath. But what he’s talking about isn’t a message of compassion. It isn’t a message of love. It is a message that ultimately will condemn people to an eternal punishment. Compassion is telling people the truth. Compassion is declaring the full counsel of God in helping people understand that God didn’t reveal this in His Word as a negative thing, but rather God revealed this in His Word that we might listen to His warning, repent of sin, and experience His grace and mercy. People need to know and understand that.

Jonah 3 is a remarkable chapter. It gives us hope that nobody is beyond the grace and mercy of God. It reminds us that revival can break out anywhere – there is always hope. It would be wonderful to close our Bibles and say, “What an amazing, positive story. Let’s sing a song and go home.” The problem is that there is one more chapter in Jonah, and the opening of chapter 4 absolutely stuns us. It says, “But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry.” The anger of God was relented – which is what stirred the anger of Jonah. He tells us why in verse 2:

And he prayed to the LORD and said, “Please, LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.”

That’s the first time in the text that we actually learn why Jonah ran. We could have speculated in chapter 1, and most of the speculation would have been that Jonah was somehow fearful that he might be captured or tortured or put to death. But what we learn in chapter 4 is that wasn’t it at all. The reason Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh was because he feared that the people would hear the message and they would repent and not experience God’s wrath. What Jonah wanted was for these people to be punished, because they were his enemy.

The words of Jonah 4:2 come right out of Exodus 34, and Jonah was very familiar with those words. Jonah clearly knew about God, but Jonah didn’t know God. He knew what God was like, but he didn’t really know God. To know God means that there is intimacy – that God starts to put His heart in our heart and we begin to see people the way God sees people. Certainly Jonah doesn’t reflect any of those things. But Jonah did know about God and he’s fearful that God will pour out mercy and grace to them.

That's exactly what God did, and that made Jonah very angry to the point where he says in verse 3, "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." Jonah was the recipient of God's favor in the belly of the fish. Jonah did not get what he deserved, but instead he was given mercy and grace. Jonah was fine with that, as long as he was the one receiving. But when God turned around and poured out His grace and mercy on his enemies, Jonah said, "God, I'd rather be dead than live in a world like that."

As I read through this text this week, I asked myself the question, "Who would be the Ninevites to me? Who would be those people I would rather see experiencing the judgment of God, rather than the grace of God?" Is it possible that we are very happy to receive the grace of God, but often very slow to then mediate out that grace to someone else? It's easy in my mind to think, "Yeah, but you don't know...." That's the point. What we're trying to say is that those people don't deserve that favor. But isn't that the definition of grace? Isn't grace the fact that they don't deserve favor? We didn't deserve it, and we've received it in abundance.

What if you found out that the person next to you was a homosexual? Would they receive grace from you – or would they receive condemnation? You might say, "But they don't deserve it." We don't deserve it either. What if the person next to you was an abortionist doctor, or an adulterer, or a white supremacist? Or what if it was the person who "knifed you in the back" – that person who is "on your list" and you cannot forgive them? Do you ever stop and think about the fact that, over this past week, you offended God far more than any sinner has ever possibly offended you? There is a radical difference between one sinner offending another sinner and the slightest sin in the face of a pure and holy God. The offense we've committed against God is far greater than any offense anyone has ever committed against you or me. Yet, every day He gives us grace. Every day He gives us mercy. Who is there in your life, at your school or your workplace, or maybe even in your own family, that you are not willing to pour out favor to, as you have received favor?

Verse 4: And the LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" That's a good question – "Jonah, do you really have a right to be angry? Do you have a right to have this attitude of picking and choosing who you think ought to be blessed and who ought to be cursed?" God is going to teach Jonah a little lesson here.

v5: Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. So the LORD God appointed *{watch for this word "appointed" here, because it is a reference to God's sovereignty, just like he appointed a fish}* plant and it grew up over Jonah to be shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day, and it attacked the plant and it withered. And it came about when the sun came up that God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life." Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."

That verse (v9) shows us how deluded Jonah had become. Jonah had reached the point where he could rationalize that his anger was somehow justified. But God was saying, "Jonah, you were angry because I did not destroy a city filled with men, women and children. But now you're angry because I did destroy a little, bitty plant that's grown for 24 hours. Jonah, do you really have a right to be angry?" In Jonah's mind, he was justified in his behavior and he said, "Yes, I do have a right." God is going to nail Jonah between the eyes in verses 10-11:

Then the LORD said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?”

Some people think that the words “120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand” refers to children. God is saying, “These people – men, women, children, even these animals – are creatures I have given life to.” God created these people in His image, cared about them, and would ultimately send His Son to die for them. These are the people Jonah has no compassion for, and He even wants to see them put to death. Yet Jonah has compassion for a small plant that grows and gives him a little shade. God is saying, “Jonah, you are selfish to the core. As long as it’s good for you, you appreciate grace. But if it goes outside your little box and goes to somebody you don’t like, then you can’t handle that.” Jonah was so selfish that he had more compassion on a plant, because it shaded him, than he had on thousands of men, women and children made in the image of God.

Have you ever thought about the fact that the person you have labeled as your enemy is a person God loves and wants to have compassion on and gave His Son to die for, that they might have life? Do we make people our enemies, while God desires to pour out compassion and grace upon them? If so, it’s a root of selfishness deep within our hearts.

It’s interesting the way this story ends. The book of Jonah ends, but the story does not. It’s an abrupt ending and we find ourselves wondering, “What’s the rest of the story? What is the end?” Instead, it just stops. I found myself wondering why it is written this way. Why does the author stop and end the book there? Maybe it’s because the story of Jonah really isn’t over. Maybe it’s because the story of Jonah is lived out in the life of every one of God’s people.

All of us, like Jonah, are recipients of God’s grace and mercy. We have received so much favor that we absolutely do not deserve. The question is whether or not we’re going to be like Jonah and have the heart of Jonah. Or whether we’ll be more like God and have the heart of Jesus, realizing that while we were yet sinners, He died for us. We’re not talking about a message of tolerance. We’re not talking about overlooking sin – God doesn’t do that. We’re not talking about pretending that sin isn’t sin. Like Jonah, we know there’s a message about sin that needs to be proclaimed. We’re talking about a difference in motivation. There’s a big difference between seeing people as enemies we want to see condemned, or seeing them as people made in the image of God – people we want to see experience the grace, mercy, and compassion of God.

Maybe you remember in 1992 an incident that happened right here in Lincoln, which is recorded in one of Philip Yancey’s books. The incident between a Jewish cantor and a KKK leader could teach all of us something about grace. Yancey relates:

A member of the Ku Klux Klan, the Grand Dragon Larry Trapp of Lincoln, Nebraska, made national headlines in 1992 when he renounced his hatred, tore down his Nazi flags, and destroyed his many cartons of hate literature. As Kathryn Watterson recounts in the book, *Not by the Sword*, Trapp has been won over by the forgiving love of the Jewish cantor and his family. Though Trapp had sent them vile pamphlets mocking big-nosed Jews and denying the Holocaust, though he had threatened violence in phone calls made to their homes, though he had targeted their synagogue for bombings, the cantor’s family

consistently responded with compassion and concern. Diabetic since childhood, Trapp was confined to a wheelchair and rapidly was going blind. The cantor's family invited Trapp into their home to care for him. "They showed me so much love that I couldn't help but love them back," Trapp later said. He spent his last months of life seeking forgiveness from Jewish groups, the NAACP, and many individuals he had hated.

- from the book, *What's So Amazing About Grace* by Philip Yancey

Do we really understand the message of grace? Do we understand that grace is a favor passed on to people who don't deserve it? That's what we've received. Do we understand the need for compassion and mercy and grace upon the people God loves?

The story of Jonah continues to be written in your heart. The question is: Will you have the selfish heart of Jonah that wants God to bless him and his friends and his people, but wants God to condemn those people he doesn't like? Or will you have the heart of Jesus? Will you have a heart of compassion for others, that while we were enemies, Christ died for all of us? How will that story be finished in your heart?

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