

How do you respond to the grace and mercy of God? That's the main question that God asks through the story of the prophet Jonah. Most people think that Jonah is a book about how to survive in the belly of a whale, but although the big fish plays a key role in the narrative, he really only has a cameo appearance in three verses, which is more than the single verse the very hungry caterpillar gets, but less than the shady plant, and just the same as the repenting cows of Nineveh.

But this supporting cast of flora and fauna is really just part of the backdrop to the big themes of justice and mercy. Along the way we're going to learn lessons about the sovereignty of God over the natural world, about what true repentance involves, and about embracing the task of evangelism, but all along we need to be asking how whales and worms and cattle and angry prophets teach us to respond to the grace and mercy of God in the face of sin and wickedness.

Jonah himself has to face that question on the smallest level when he considers the mercy of God in causing shady plants to grow, and on the biggest level when at the end of the book God turns back and doesn't destroy the most wicked nation on the earth. Is mercy just for small disobediences, or does mercy have a place as a response to genocide? Does mercy belong exclusively to God's covenant people, or is there grace for everyone? When I receive mercy from God, am I obligated to show mercy to others? Can God be a God of justice *and* a God of mercy, or do we have to pick sides? How do you respond to the grace and mercy of God?

Although Jonah isn't a parable, this little book does fulfill the function of the parables; it uses a story as the means for exploring these important questions. And so over the next several weeks, as we follow Jonah on his voyage, we're going to exploring what the story of Jonah shows us about the mercy of God, so that we can learn to share the merciful heart of God.

Ultimately, we're going to follow Jonah all the way to the gospel, since Jonah was one of Jesus' favorite examples of His own ministry. And in that sense, we are much better equipped than Jonah was to understand the grace and mercy of God, because we've seen that grace and mercy come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's clearest and most satisfying answer to all our questions about justice and mercy, because it is on the cross where Jesus died as the sin-bearing sacrifice in our place that justice and mercy meet.

As strange as it seems from how his story begins, Jonah is going to lead us to the cross, but as we start this journey, there's a lot of background that we need to know. Let's start with v. 1.

"Now the word of the Lord came" – This is the most common way that God commissions His prophets. This phrase shows up almost 400 times in the OT, and confirms that the book of Jonah belongs among the Minor Prophets, even though a case could be made for classifying this book with the histories of the prophets in Kings or Chronicles, or even as a wisdom book like Job. But because it begins with this prophetic call, the book of Jonah belongs with the other prophets.

Frequently, when the Word of the Lord first comes to a prophet, the prophet talks back to God to tell Him why he wouldn't make a very good messenger – too young, no good at talking, etc. We heard that today in our reading from Jeremiah, and we might think of Moses, as well. The pattern seems to be that God calls, the prophet talks back, God responds by confirming His Word with a sign, and then reissues the commission. And because of that pattern, we might expect *some* pushback from Jonah, just not the kind we're about to see.

So *who* is it that the Lord's Word comes to? "Jonah, the son of Amittai." Now, this name *does* establish a connection with the history books, since Jonah appeared earlier in 2 Kings. [Listen to 2 Kings 14:23-25]. This is where we learn that Jonah is not a fictional parable; Jonah was a well-known prophet who ministered in the first half of the 8th century BC, when Jeroboam II was king of Israel. At this time, God's people are divided into the Northern and Southern kingdom, Judah is still faithful to God; Isaiah is not yet on the scene, but the prophets Hosea and Amos are speaking for God; Syria is the great threat to Israel, and Assyria is a rising power, but not yet an empire.

Jonah himself was from the town of Gath-Hepher, which is located in Zebulun's territory, about three miles away from where Jesus would later grow up in Nazareth. That's our first link to Jesus, and maybe explains why Jesus uses Jonah's ministry as a sign of His own.

We also learn from 2 Kings that Jonah's prophetic message was that God was going to bless Israel by restoring her borders back to their fullest extent, back to where they had been under Solomon. So notice that: Israel is being ruled by a wicked king, but God blesses them anyway. Israel gets mercy instead of judgment. That plays a huge role in understanding the book of Jonah!

And just a quick comment about the names of Jonah and his father: Jonah means “dove”, which is both a *symbol of peace*, since God used a dove to signal that His wrath was over after the flood, and a dove also represents *sacrifice*, as one of the animals that would be offered as a sin offering in Leviticus 5. So I want you to think about what it might mean that God sends a *dove* to Nineveh. Amittai, his father, has a name that comes from the Hebrew word for “truth” or “faithfulness”. In context, that really becomes ironic: When God calls for “a son of faithfulness” to deliver his message, what happens?

God tells Jonah to “Arise, and go to Nineveh, that great city”. Nineveh was one of the cities founded by Nimrod, the grandson of Noah’s wicked son Ham, and the name Nineveh means “residence of Nimrod.” While it was a major city in the Assyrian empire, Nineveh wasn’t yet the capital city, but it does seem to be the city that the people of Israel are most familiar with, because of the record in Genesis 10. And from God’s perspective, it seems to be the center of the wickedness that is emanating from Assyria.

What God wants Jonah to do is to *call out against* Nineveh, as the ESV has it. Other translations say things like “condemn” or “warn”, all giving the sense of a negative message, a word of judgment, which is often the content of God’s prophetic words, but this one is different. Usually, when God speaks against the nations, He’s talking to Israel about those other nations, warning Israel not to follow their lead, because they will fall under God’s judgment. But this time, for the first time in the Bible, God sends His prophet outside of Israel’s borders. Jonah’s message isn’t about Nineveh; it’s *for* Nineveh.

And it’s important to see that by sending Jonah to Nineveh, God is claiming authority over Nineveh. Israel is God’s chosen people, but unlike all other regional gods, Yahweh is the Lord over all the earth, and He’s exercising that lordship through this rebuke.

“Nineveh’s evil has come up before me” God says, using a phrase similar to the one He used before sending the flood and before destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. A certain level of wickedness has been reached that causes God to respond; sort of the counterpart to the phrase used in other places like Gen. 15:16, “The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” God is aware of all iniquity and evil, but He waits to respond until a certain point.

Nineveh has reached that point. History records that Assyria was one of the most brutal

and bloodthirsty nations on the face of the earth, known for beheadings, flaying, dismemberment, and all sorts of cruelty to young and old alike. Artists would record these horrific actions, and place them in the palaces of the Assyrian kings in order to honor and celebrate these vicious evils. If ever a nation needed to be condemned by God, it was Assyria. And so God called Jonah to go and speak in His name.

God told Jonah to arise and go, and as we get to verse 3, Jonah did arise, but instead of *obeying* like a faithful prophet, or even *arguing* with God like a normal prophet, Jonah *flees from before the face of the Lord*. God had said to go *east* to Nineveh, one of the easternmost points of Israel's known world, and Jonah fled to Tarshish, the *westernmost* point that he knew of.

Like I said, it's not unusual for God and His prophets to have different opinions at the time of their commissioning, but usually these disagreements are resolved through conversation and a divine sign of confirmation. Jonah has chosen the hard way, disobedience instead of discussion, and so his sign of confirmation will be like nothing any prophet before him had ever seen. And our first hints of this are found in v. 3, which describes Jonah's running away from God not just as going west, but going *down*. Jonah goes *down* to Joppa, and then goes *down* into a ship, and he has a lot farther down left to go, as we will see next week, Lord willing.

And I want to comment on Jonah's efforts to flee "away from the presence of the Lord", a phrase that verse 3 uses twice. Many people have pointed out the folly in trying to hide from God, especially in light of Psalm 139:7-10: "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me." You can't get away from God!

Of course, Jonah knows this. He's not trying to avoid God's omnipresence; he's running away from God's special presence. If he simply wanted to disobey God, he could have stayed where he was; he didn't need to flee. But he wanted to leave God's special presence, probably the temple and Jerusalem, but certainly God's promised land. He wanted to go somewhere where God was not active, and even later in Isaiah's day, Tarshish is mentioned in Isaiah 66:18-19 as a place that hasn't heard Yahweh's fame or seen His glory. Tarshish is as far from the presence of God as Jonah can possibly get.

A modern-day equivalent would be if someone stopped going to Church, reading their Bible and praying. You know you can't hide from God, but you do everything you can so that you don't encounter Him. That's what Jonah was doing, and it's actually a pretty common response when one of God's people chooses to disobey God. We try to get as far away from Him as we can. Just like in the garden of Eden, sin doesn't just break a law; it breaks a *relationship*, and sinners are no longer welcome or at peace in God's presence.

Jonah's actions raise a question that our text today doesn't answer: *Why?* Why does Jonah flee from God and His call? You can skip to chapter 4 and find the answer, but the author leaves that information out of chapter 1. Maybe we're supposed to think about for a while, and maybe the answers we come up with will tell us something about our hearts, and how comfortable we are with what God asks us to do. Don't we have a call like Jonah's? Aren't we supposed to spread the Word of the Lord? Of course, Jonah's message was a message of condemnation; ours is a message of salvation. But are we speaking for God, or are we running the other way?

This brings us to another key moment when it comes to understanding God's mercy, this time, from God's perspective: how does *God* respond to our sin? What is God going to do about Jonah? We'll see the answer next week, but for now I want us to use Jonah as a springboard to Jesus, because Jesus is God's answer to our disobedience and sin. When we run away from God, God does not abandon us or allow us to get away with our sin. God comes for us. This is His foundational act of mercy towards sinners, because if God did not come for you, you would never come back to God.

But when the wickedness of the world came up before God, He called for His Son Jesus, and told Him to go into our wicked world with a message of salvation, and not just a message. God sent Jesus to come after us, to atone for our sins by shedding His own blood on the cross, so that we might be brought back and reconciled to God. Aren't you glad that Jesus is a better prophet than Jonah? All the same, God's not finished with Jonah, and we'll find out more next time.

But for today, the charge is this: don't run away from God! You've been given a glorious gospel to take far outside the borders of the Church, a message of salvation through Jesus Christ that overcomes all evil. So rise up, and speak for God.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*