

Scandalous Grace – Offensive Mercy

*How Should We Respond When Our Wonderful Merciful Savior
Extends Abundant Mercy and Astonishing Grace to Our Enemies?*

*A Journey through Jonah:
Embracing and Extending God's Scandalous Mercy*

Texts: (Various)

Jonah 1:1-6

¹ Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." ³ But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. ⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶ So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

2 Kings 14:23-27 (ESV)

²³ In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. ²⁴ And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. ²⁵ He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. ²⁶ For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. ²⁷ But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.

Romans 12:1-2 (ESV)

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Luke 6:27-28 (ESV)

²⁷ "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Introduction:

This morning we are embarking on a brief journey through the little book of Jonah. The 48 verses comprising the four chapters of the book are artfully designed, carefully constructed, and packed with hard hitting theological truth designed to paint a very clear and attractive portrait of the graciousness of God's heart, the Spirit-generated responsiveness of the heart of wicked unbelievers, and shocking hard heartedness of God's own people.

Because the section of our bibles where Jonah is located is unfamiliar biblical terrain, it is often misunderstood or assigned spiritual meaning not substantiated by biblical text or context. Jonah is one of twelve minor prophets whose ministries touched both the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel as well as two foreign nations (Obadiah, Jonah, and Nahum). These books containing the inspired content of their preaching and prophetic ministries are called minor due to their brevity and not because of some lesser spiritual value than the ministry and message of the four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel).

Collectively, these twelve men called God's people to turn from their sin and return to God in genuine repentance – *by humbling themselves before the Lord, by coming before Him in prayer, by seeking His face, and by turning from their wicked ways*. When they responded in these ways, God responded by granting them abundant grace and unmeasured mercy (2 Chronicles 7:14). The story of Israel is replete with abundant and at times stunning expressions of God extending grace and undeserved mercy toward His sinning people.

And Jonah is right in the middle of an ocean of that grace and mercy!

Normally, mercy and grace are occasions for gratitude and joy on the part of those praying for such mercy or by those receiving such mercy. However, these four chapters tell a very different story about mercy – they tell the surprising story of a faithful servant of God who was scandalized at

God's grace and offended by God's mercy when it was extended to people Jonah did not believe merited such mercy.

The book of Jonah is the story of God's scandalous grace and offensive mercy being offered to the least likely and most wicked people on the world stage of Jonah's day – the Assyrians.

By the time we get to chapter two, it is evident that the theological storm in Jonah's heart was even greater than the storm threatening to sink the boat carrying him as fast and as far from the command of God as he could possibly go.

However, before we judge Jonah too harshly, if we examine our own hearts, we might find ourselves next to Jonah in our own boat-ride away from somewhere or someone to whom God wants to extend His mercy.

The heart of the book is found at the bottom of the sea where Jonah, in desperate need of grace, calls out to God for mercy by saying, "*Salvation belongs to the Lord*" (2:9).

There is an ocean of theology in that brief statement which God unpacks for Jonah, the Assyrians, and for us in these four chapters. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Let's begin with a question that is central to the message of the book: "*Is God just when He grants mercy to the most wicked sinners on earth?*" Another way of asking this question might be, "*Are there people who should not receive God's mercy if they respond appropriately to God and ask for such mercy?*"

Before you answer this question, let me tell you a story about a man, a sunflower, and a dying soldier.

Simon Wiesenthal was an Austrian Jew who lived through the horrors of imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp during WWII.

One day while returning to camp after a brutal assignment on the Eastern front, the ragged column of men he was with marched by a field filled with the graves of fallen German soldiers who had been killed in battle. Someone had placed a sunflower on each of their graves. Simon later wrote about this experience in a book called *The Sunflower – Exploring the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness.*

I envied the dead soldiers. Each had a sunflower to connect him with the living world, and butterflies to visit his grave. For me there would be no sunflower. I would be buried in a mass grave, where corpses would be piled on top of me. No sunflower would ever bring light into my darkness, and no butterflies would dance above my dreadful tomb.

One day, he was pulled out of a work detail and taken to a dimly lit hospital room. He was shoved into a seat next to a hospital bed. In the bed was a severely wounded Nazi SS officer named Karl – whose face was wrapped in bandages with openings for his mouth, nose, and ears. In a barely audible voice, the dying Nazi officer made a confession to Wiesenthal. He told of a terrible atrocity he had committed. He was with his S.S. unit on the Russian front when they came to a Jewish village. All 300 people in the village were herded into a building - the building was locked and was then set on fire. After setting the house on fire, Karl saw a mother and father, with the father holding their six year old son in his arms. To escape the flames this family jumped from the window. Karl and the soldiers shot them all. (Story adapted from his book)

Wiesenthal tried to leave the room several times while this soldier described what had happened - but each time, the officer begged him to stay. Overcome with emotion, Wiesenthal asked the officer why he was confessing this to him. He said, *“I don’t know who you are. I only know that you’re a Jew and that is enough. I know what I’m asking for is too much for you - **but will you forgive me for all of the terrible things I have done?**”* Wiesenthal sat in silence for a few moments – staring at the floor. Finally, without saying a word,

Wiesenthal stood up and left the room - leaving the soldier in torment - unforgiven.

In his book, Simon asks his reader this question:

Ought I to have forgiven him? Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience of the reader of this episode, just as much as it once challenged my heart and mind. The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness. Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision. You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, "What would I have done?"

This is precisely the question that Jonah wrestles with God about in the book that bears his name – *"Was God right to show mercy and extend grace to moral monsters like the Ninevites (4:1-3)?"* And God answered Jonah with a penetrating rhetorical question of His own: *"Jonah, do you do well to be angry over who I chose to extend mercy?" (4:4)*

The book of Jonah is God's answer to this question – and it comes out of Jonah's mouth at the bottom of the ocean as he receives his own desperately needed mercy – ***"Salvation belongs to the Lord!"***

God says, "Salvation belongs to me! At the heart of any salvation or deliverance I give is my loving grace and unmerited mercy. I give grace and extend mercy to whomever I please. Salvation belongs to me! And so does judgment! I bring judgment and exercise my wrath upon whomever, whenever, and wherever I please."

Salvation, Mercy, and Judgment are God's Sovereign prerogatives, and He grants them or executes them on whoever He pleases, whenever, and however He chooses in order to accomplish His sovereign purposes, fulfill His gracious covenants, and bring glory to His Name.

I. **A Surprising Setting (2 Kings 14:25-27)**

He (Jeroboam II) restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. ²⁶ For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. ²⁷ But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash

The book of Jonah revolves around the prophet Jonah whose earlier ministry was historically located in an interesting spiritual context where you find:

A. Covenant People who Refused to Repent despite Mercy

- God's people were sinning with abandon – they willfully and wantonly sold themselves to idolatry, immorality, and injustice regardless of the repeated warnings God sent through His prophets.
- They rebelled against His Word.
- They refused His warnings.
- They rejected and ruthlessly persecuted His prophets.
- And leading all this rebellion was a horrifically wicked king named Jeroboam II.
- And yet, despite all of this, God sent His prophet Jonah to announce a great mercy and an astonishing grace!
- Instead of judgment, God determined to extend mercy and grace yet again to His people – and so, in His mercy, God used a horrifically wicked king, Jeroboam, to deliver his people from the terrible affliction they were experiencing (vs. 26-27).
- But instead of receiving this mercy from God and returning to Him with grateful hearts, God's people sinned even more wantonly and with even greater wickedness!

B. Pagan People who Eagerly Repent in the face of Judgement

- Contrast this to the eager reception and willing repentance of two non-Israelites when God sent them His word through Elijah and Elisha.
- The Widow from Zarephath (Jezebel's home territory), who responded to God's word by Elijah in obedience and found great mercy and deliverance from famine and death (1 Kings 17:1-24).
- Naman, the Syrian general who obeyed the word God declared to him by Elisha and was healed of leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14).

II. A Sovereign Savior. (Jonah 1:1)

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,

- The same sovereign God who decided to send Elijah with a word of deliverance for a pagan widow who worshiped Jezebel's gods. This is the same God who decided to send a word of salvation through Elisha to a pagan general who worshiped idols has made another sovereign decision.
- This time the word He has decided to send is to be delivered by yet another of His chosen, appointed prophetic servants – the prophet Jonah.
- The people to whom God decided to send this word were sinning in ways that appeared to be horrifically worse than any of the sins of Israel; than the ignorant idolatry of a pagan widow; or even the sinful idolatry of a pagan Syrian general.
- These people put wickedness on the global stage! God sovereignly decided to send a word through Jonah to the Assyrian nation whose leaders resided in the massive city of Nineveh!
- And one day, centuries later, this same God decided to send someone with a word of mercy from His heart for you and me!
- But not everyone was excited about what God had decided!

III. A Struggling Servant. (Jonah 1.1; 2 Kings 14:25)

A. His Historical Identity

- Jonah was a real prophet living among real people with a real ministry who was going through a real personal struggle.
- In other words, Jonah is a real historical person and so is everything else you read in the book that bears his name.
- He lived during the final decades of the Northern kingdom about 60 years before they were destroyed and deported by the Assyrian armies in 722 BC.
- He lived during the reign of Jeroboam II – a wicked and idolatrous king who nevertheless enjoyed great military, political, and economic success by the uncommon grace of God!

B. His Spiritual Calling

- Jonah had been called by God, anointed by God's Spirit, and recognized by God's people to be a prophet sent by the Lord.
- As such, he stood in a line of powerful, humble prophets like Elijah and Elisha before him.
- According to Jewish tradition, Jonah was the son of the widow woman at Zarephath who was raised back to life by the prophet Elijah and then entered the school of prophets to be trained by Elijah and later, Elisha.
- Another Jewish tradition identifies Jonah as the unnamed young prophet in training that Elijah sent to anoint Jehu to be king of Israel in Ahab's place (2 Kings 9:13).
- As a prophet in Israel, he was God's appointed spokesperson – and his message revolved around God's covenant and God's blessing.

C. His Theological Mission

- Jonah was commissioned to call God's people to obey the Covenant God had given to them through Moses.
- Jonah also reminded God's people of the future blessing they had in the Covenant God had given them through Abraham.

- And now God was calling Jonah to take the blessing of His gracious mercy to the gentile nation of Assyria!
- This is exactly what God told Abraham He intended to do – that through Abraham the blessing of God would go to all the families/nations of the earth (Genesis 12:3).
- And Jonah had been called to take this blessing to Nineveh!

D. His Personal Resistance (1:3)

- Up to this point in Jonah's life and ministry, there are no indications of him resisting God, rebelling against His commands, or refusing to deliver any message God told him to speak or proclaim to His people.
- However, for the first time in his long life and ministry, Jonah struggles with what God has willed to do.
- For the first time in his ministry, the good and perfect will of God did not seem so good or perfect to Jonah.
- And because the acceptable will of God was not acceptable to him, Jonah arose and fled from the land God had given His people and where God had established His visible presence on earth in the glorious temple Solomon built.
- What was it about God's assignment that was so theologically distasteful to Jonah that he fled from everything he held dear – his land, his family, his people, and God's temple?

IV. An Uncomfortable Commission (Jonah 1.2)

*"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."³
But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD*

A. Mercy for the Enemies of God

- This mercy that Jonah knew God would extend to Nineveh (4:1-3) would have disastrous consequences for Jonah's own people (his sons and grandsons) 60 years later!

B. Judgment Upon God's Chosen People

- The nation to whom God is sending Jonah and upon whom He intends to show mercy, is the very nation that will come against

Israel, destroy the capital city of Samaria, and carry the entire nation into captivity from which they have yet to return!

- ***This theological conflict is at the heart of Jonah's struggle.***
- He does not struggle with God showing mercy.
- He does not struggle with God repenting – in fact, that truth is at the core of his message to Israel as a prophet.
- He does not run out of great fear of the infamous cruelty of the Assyrians against their enemies.
- He does not harbor prejudice or antipathy to non-Israelites as seen by his care and concern of other pagans like the sailors on the boat he found passage to Tarshish.
- He doesn't even have a problem with God extending mercy to rebels – so long as they are his own rebels and not rebels as wicked as Nineveh.
- ***Jonah's issue was with God and not Nineveh. "God, how can you show mercy to a people more wicked than your own disobedient people?"***
- *"And more than that, how can you turn around and use them to judge and destroy your own people (and mine)?"*
- *"God, you are being unjust! Covenant loyalty demands that if you are going to show mercy to anyone, it should be to your covenant people. And Justice demands that if you are going to judge anyone, it should be Nineveh!"*
- *"And since one of us has to be just in this matter; and since you obviously do not seem remotely interested in being just and fair about this, I am going to have to be the one who acts justly and righteously in this matter – which is why, with all due respect, **I am not about to go to Nineveh!**"*

V. **A Sobering Sermon. (Jonah 4.3, 9)**

Do you do well to be angry?

- The book of Jonah is a powerful sermon that God preached first to Jonah, and then through Jonah to His people both ancient and modern.
- This sermon has relevance to our own hearts as recipients of God's mercy who, like Jonah, have been commissioned to announce this wonderful mercy to the Ninevites of our day.
- The message of Jonah confronts us with sobering questions:
 - A. ***Am I willing to let God be sovereign or do I limit God's sovereignty by my own standards of what I believe is just, fair, and right in my life, my family, or my nation?***
 - B. ***Am I internally frustrated with God over something He has decided to do that has affected me or those I love in ways that are uncomfortable or even painful?***
 - C. ***Am I justifying some disobedience before God on the grounds that I am being more righteous than God in this particular matter? – When God does not seem to be just or fair in some matter that touches me, am I taking matters into my own hands and doing what I think is just or right or fair even if it means disobeying Him in some way?***
 - D. ***Am I resisting the will of God in some area of my life because His will is not good in my eyes or acceptable to my heart?***
 - E. ***Am I harboring anger toward God because I am offended at the mercy He has shown and the grace He has extended to someone who has hurt, offended, or even sinned against me?***

Conclusion: Lessons for Life from Jonah!

How Should We Respond? What are we to do when the good and perfect will of God is not acceptable to us?

1. Rest in the Omniscient Wisdom of God! (Romans 11:28-36)

- Paul told the Roman Christians that God has chosen to use the disobedience of His Covenant nation, Israel to bring His mercy, salvation, and blessings to gentiles like them (and like us).
- This is not a new idea. Jonah is the story of how God used a disobedient Hebrew prophet to bring salvation to a pagan people.
- If God can use a disobedient prophet and a disobedient nation to bring mercy and grace to the world – think of what He can do through us when we go in obedience to His command!

2. Trust in the Righteous Character of God! (Romans 3:21-31)

- God's mercy never comes at the expense of God's righteousness or in violation of His justice.
- He sent another prophet like Jonah to preach mercy and extend grace to people bound up in sin and given over to wickedness.
- That prophet was Jesus – and when Jesus went to the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, God's justice was fully satisfied for the Ninevites, for Jonah, and for you and me!

3. Rejoice in the Rich Mercy you have received from God! (Eph. 2:4-7)

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

When you don't understand the work of God,
trust His Wisdom, obey His Word, and do His will!

When all is said and done – you will rejoice when you finally see what our wonderful, merciful Savior has been up to, and you will be glad He allowed you to have a part in it!