

Jonah, Meet God

If you've got your bibles, go ahead and turn with me to **Jonah 4**. While you're turning there, let me sum up the story of Jonah so far for any of you who might've missed a week or two. In chapter 1, we met Jonah. And Jonah, we said, is the worst prophet you've ever seen—and not exactly a pleasant human being either. When God speaks to him and calls him to go to Nineveh, Jonah decides to run from God, but God won't let him. He gets hurled overboard from a ship during a storm, and a fish swallows him. Then Jonah prays a long, elaborate, self-righteous prayer from inside the fish, and God tells the fish to vomit Jonah up right back to the shore of dry land. Now convinced that God's not going to let him *not* go to Nineveh, Jonah finally does what God asked him to do in the first place, but very reluctantly—only because he doesn't have any other choice. He preaches a very brief, very poorly constructed, apathetic sermon to the Ninevites, and **then the unexpected happens—the entire city, all 120,000-some-odd people repent in an instant. They all turn to God and repent of their evil, cruel practices.**

Now, just so we're clear, that's **impressive**. If you're a prophet and you can get 120,000 to repent after preaching to them once, you're something special. And in many ways, **this was the goal of being a prophet: to get the people you prophesy to, to turn from their sin.** So Jonah just knocked this thing out of the park. You would think Jonah would be absolutely stoked about this. But spoiler alert: he's not. Take a look with me at chapter 4, v. 1 (I'm gonna be reading from the NIV today):

[1] But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.

120,000 people decide to turn to God and cease their evil. And the prophet of God Jonah is...*angry* about this? **Why** in the world would that be his response? Well, it tells us, v. 2:

[2] He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. [3] Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Jonah is angry because God chose to show grace to the Ninevites. Now, remember back to week 1. We mentioned that the **Ninevites were** this ancient cruel, unbelievably brutal city of people. They had habits of torturing and murdering anyone who crossed them. And once you remember that, it does start to make a little more sense at least why Jonah is so upset at the reality of God showing them mercy. In his mind, they deserve what's coming to them.

You might even be tempted to think that the **reason Jonah ran** in the first place, back in ch. 1, is because he was scared to go to Nineveh, afraid that if he preached against them like God wanted, they might turn on him, capture him, torture him, or kill him. But I think it's important to point out: **Jonah's statement in v. 2 makes it clear that that wasn't why he ran. Jonah didn't run because he was nervous that his trip to Nineveh would be unsuccessful—he ran because he was nervous that his trip would be successful.** He had a sneaky feeling that God would find a way to show grace to a group of people that Jonah didn't want him to show grace to. **He didn't run because he thought something bad might happen to him. He ran because he thought something good might happen to Nineveh.**

And here in ch. 4, Jonah takes issue with how *gracious* God chooses to be. He's mad because God shows grace to the Ninevites. Now, that's interesting to me. Because, **generally speaking, the biggest problem people tend to have with God is with not with his grace, but with his judgment.** People say things like "I just can't believe in a God who would send people to hell," or "I can't believe in a God who has wrath, anger towards humanity." But here, in the story, Jonah's problem is exactly the *opposite*. He's not repelled by God's *justice*, but by God's *grace*. And specifically, God's grace towards people Jonah doesn't think deserve it. So Jonah is angry. Apparently, angry enough to want to die.

But look at **how God responds** to Jonah's anger, v. 4:

[4] But the Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

So even in Jonah's unreasonableness, God reasons with him. "Jonah, is it right for you to be angry about this, about me showing grace to the Ninevites?" To which there is no answer. Instead, look at **what Jonah does**:

[5] Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.

So the author in chapter 4 is portraying Jonah sort of like **a small child**. He gets angry at God, refuses to listen to reason, and then goes somewhere to sit and pout. There's **also this implication** here that Jonah is hoping God will sort of "come to his senses" and change his mind about Nineveh. That God will decide to destroy the city after all, in which case Jonah will be in the perfect spot to watch the fireworks go down. But instead, look at what God does. Look at v. 6:

[6] Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. [7] But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. [8] When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." [9] But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

So **this is God continuing to pursue Jonah**. Even when Jonah goes on this angry rant at God, then refuses to answer God's question and goes to sit and pout, God continues to pursue. Continues to try and expose what's off about Jonah's attitude. And he does it by way of this plant. You've gotta remember we're in the Middle East—it's hot, the sun is beating down on Jonah. And so God graciously provides this plant to give him shade. Which Jonah is incredibly happy about. But this plant was also meant to teach Jonah something. The next day, God causes the plant to wither, and Jonah is right back to wanting to die. And at this point we as the audience are just thinking "okay, this dude is beyond reason." **He's just being so utterly childish and ridiculous you just feel like giving up on him completely.**

But God doesn't give up on his people. Instead, God tries a **second strategy**. Look at v. 10:

[10] But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. [11] And should I not have concern for

the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

So God sees that Jonah is apparently very emotionally concerned about this plant. And God is going “okay, I can work with this.” So he goes “okay Jonah. I can see that you are very concerned with this plant. Now, that’s a little ridiculous, since you did nothing to make the plant grow, and you’ve only been aware of the plant for 24 hours. But let’s just grant you your emotional concern for this plant. **If you are this emotionally concerned for a *plant*, shouldn’t it also be okay for me to be concerned for 120,000 *human beings*?** And also their animals?”

And we never get that answer. With that question, the story just ends. And it leaves us, the readers, just going “well what happens? Does Jonah ever face the truth about himself? Does he ever change his attitude? Does he ever repent?” And we don’t know. We don’t get that answer. But the reason I think we don’t get the answer is that to *get* that answer would be to miss the point. **We’ve been saying this whole series that ultimately the point of this entire narrative is not necessarily to point and laugh or even scoff at Jonah—the point is to see ourselves in him.**

So the story leaves us hanging as a way of posing the question, *how will we respond?* God will continue pursuing—that part is to be sure. **The question is *will we respond?* Specifically, **how will we respond when God loves people that we don’t want him to love?** When he shows grace to people we don’t want him to show grace toward. When he forgives people that we don’t want him to forgive. You see, the problem with Jonah is that he **wants to be the grace gatekeeper.** He wants to be the one deciding who gets grace and who doesn’t. He wants to sit there and say “this person? Sure, God can show them grace. But this person? Are you kidding me? Never. They deserve what’s coming to them.” Jonah wants to be the one who determines who God judges and who God forgives.**

The problem is that it doesn’t work that way. **We don’t get to decide who gets God’s grace and who doesn’t.** That’s *his job*. And the reality is, God has this sneaky little habit of showing grace to people that we don’t want to get it. Like, a lot. We see this so often in **the life of Jesus.** **Jesus shows up on the scene, and seemingly out of nowhere starts showing grace to people who aren’t supposed to get it.** He starts eating and drinking with people that he’s not supposed to eat and drink with. Hanging out with people who are sworn enemies of God and God’s people. Having conversations with people who seem to oppose everything that God is about: prostitutes, tax collectors, Gentiles, Roman officials, you name it: **Jesus extends the grace of friendship to all the “wrong” people—people that don’t seem like they deserve it at all.**

Now, I think some of us today **think of Jesus doing all that** as really cool. We think it’s really awesome and punk-rock that he would do that. “Way to go Jesus, stick it to the man!” But remember, **people didn’t think it was cool back in the day. At least, not most people. People back then thought it was offensive. People thought it was outright wrong that he would hang with that sort of crowd.** They found it offensive, unacceptable, even *criminal*. “Jesus, we don’t eat with those people—we *shun* those people. We ignore them. We write them off. We reject them. We don’t *hang out* with them.”

Okay, so **to help feel more** what they have felt back then, let’s bring it into the 21st century for a second. Let’s say Jesus is walking the earth today, and you go to meet him one day, and as you walk up, he’s sitting there with a crew of known ISIS-members, ISIS-sympathizers—just kickin’ it with them. Let’s say

you walk up, and Jesus is just hanging out, shootin' the breeze with a crew of white supremacists. Let's say you walk up and he's just sitting down, talking with a group of convicted sex offenders, just hanging out, getting to know them. **Now—let me be very clear—Jesus would *not* be on any of those people's *team*.** The bible makes it clear that he would categorically condemn the actions of every single one of those groups. But let's say, even so, that you see him spending time with them. **What would be the first emotion you feel when you see that? Is it not, kind of like Jonah, to say “this is very *wrong*”?** “Jesus, we don't talk to these people. We don't associate with these people. You shouldn't be here, you shouldn't be with this kind of crowd.” Are you starting to see why a lot of people weren't big fans of Jesus? **Back then, more often than not, it wasn't Jesus' teachings on hell or judgment or justice that turned people off. It was that he had the unrelenting tendency to accept into relationship groups of people that other people *hated*.** And people thought that was unacceptable.

I got a picture of this in a documentary I watched recently on Netflix. There's a documentary called **Accidental Courtesy**, and it's about a guy named Daryl Davis. Davis is this brilliant, talented black blues musician. And at some point in his life, Daryl started this habit of grabbing dinner, hanging out with known members of the KKK, and other white supremacist groups. And when he sits down with them, it's not first to yell at them or tell them how wrong they are (even though he firmly believes they're wrong)—he does it first simply to get to know them. He asks them about how they came to believe what they believe, asks them questions about what exactly they believe and why. And when he hears something that's logically inconsistent or incoherent, he points it out. But it's never in an antagonistic way, not angry, not self-righteous—just “hey do you see how that's a little inconsistent?” And here's what has happened over the years that he's done this. Over two dozen members of the KKK and white supremacists have left those organizations, in large part because of their friendship with Daryl. In his garage, Daryl has probably hundreds of KKK robes and patches and memorabilia that people he's converted have handed over to him, since they don't need them anymore.

Now, as amazing as that is, **here's the reason** I bring it up. You would think that because of what he does, he would garner tons of support from others who want to do something about racial tensions in our country. You would think that other people fighting against racial injustice would be so happy about what Daryl does. But you know what? Many of them aren't happy about it *at all*. In the documentary, Daryl sits down with two leaders of another activist movement fighting for racial equality, and they are *furious* about what he's doing. They sit down with him and end up so angry that they get up and leave. They tell Daryl he's wasting his time. Daryl also sits down with a lawyer whose job it is to prosecute hate groups like the KKK and shut them down, and this lawyer just seems so bothered, so confused by what Daryl does. Yet all that Daryl is doing is offering grace, offering compassion, offering friendship to people that disagree with him. And there are a whole lot of people that hate him for it. And here's why: **because they feel like those people shouldn't get compassion, shouldn't get friendship. They're too far gone. They're too hateful to be given good things like that.**

And you've gotta wonder if **that's the type of sentiment** going through Jonah's heart when God decides to forgive people that *Jonah* thinks are too far gone. Too hateful. Too awful to deserve God's grace. And just like Jonah, there are probably people that we feel like that about. We don't want to see them turn around, we don't want to see them get better, we don't want to see good things happen to them. We'd rather see them get what they deserve. And that's the way of the world. **But it's not the way of the kingdom of God. God instead calls his people to be strikingly different. Not only does God love his enemies, but he calls us to do the same.** Take a look at **Matthew 5:**

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

As a **reflection of God's love** for his enemies, we are called to love ours too. Just like God, who causes the sun to rise on the evil *and* the good, provides rain for the righteous *and* the unrighteous, we are called to respond in kind.

Now, let's talk about that practically for a second. Because **most of us in the room today don't really have enemies**. At least not in the sense that Jonah did in the Ninevites. At least not in the sense that Daryl Davis has in the KKK. Most of us in the room don't have people who are out to get us, out to intentionally make our lives difficult. I say most of us because there are those of us in the room, especially those that are racial and sexual minorities, and you guys honestly probably *do* have enemies. You have people that hate you for no sane reason. And if that's you, if you're in those groups where people hate you for no reason, **we want you to know that we're not okay with that, and we are committed to being a church that stands on the frontlines with you, as peacemakers, to see that change about our city and our world**. Because some of you really do have real-life, flesh-and-blood enemies. But that being said, *most* of us in the room probably don't have that. For most of us, the closest we'll get to an enemy is just someone who we don't really like. Someone who annoys us. A so-called "hater." Someone who occasionally unintentionally makes life harder for us. Someone who sinned against us a time or two. That's the closest most of us get to an enemy.

But whether they're actual enemies, or just people who make life difficult for us, **we tend to respond to them the same way Jonah does: we want them to get what they deserve**. Now, maybe we want *God* to do it: we secretly want something bad to happen to them, we want God to settle the score. Or maybe we want to do it: we want retaliation, we want retribution, we want to gossip about them like they gossiped about us. We want to make life hard for them like they've made life hard for us. These types of things are usually the most natural responses for us.

And so **here's what most of us do**: we take that person in our minds—that enemy, that annoying person, that person who sinned against us. And we start to fixate on that thing that they did, that annoying thing about them. And we boil them all the way down to that one thing. So **let's say I have a friend who told a lie** about me. Well, the longer I stew over it, the more they are no longer a friend that told a lie about me, they're "*that person*" that person who told a lie about me. And then, that turns into they're "the liar." And then eventually, they *are* the lie. All I can see when I see them or think about them is that one lie that they told. And I've dehumanized a person with a story and a soul and a heart that needs rescue into that one thing that they did. Or, let's go a little broader. Let's say I have **a friend who disagrees with me on politics**. We just don't see eye to eye on the political world. Well, left unchecked, they go from being "the friend who disagrees with me on politics" to "that person with that wrong political belief" to eventually, they're just that bleeding heart liberal, that snobby-nosed conservative, and all of a sudden, they are just the embodiment of that wrong political belief. All I can think about when I see them or mention them is that one wrong thing they believe. I've dehumanized them all the way down to that one thing. And this is what we do as human beings.

And when we do that, **we tend to remove all of that person's complex humanity and issues and hurts and scars from the picture.** And we forget that they, like us, are a mixed bag. We forget in that moment that they too have a story, that they too have been sinned against, they too have been hurt and scarred by the world. And none of that is to excuse what they do—it's just to say there is more to them than that one thing. People don't just behave in screwed-up ways for no reason. But in our anger, we forget all that. **They just become that one thing to us.**

And what's worse is that usually as we do that, **we paint ourselves as the polar opposite of everything they are.** They become the person who did that thing, and we become the person who would never do that thing. We're the hero, they're the villain, and whatever it takes, whatever happens, they must get what they deserve. **And before you know it, you've become Jonah in chapter 4. Where you have so fixated on the other person's evil that you have actually become completely oblivious to the evil taking root and growing inside your own soul. You've so convinced yourself that you're the hero that you don't even see the parts of you becoming the villain.**

And **this cycle plays itself out over and over again across all humanity.** We continue to be hurt and hurt others, to be annoyed at others and annoy others, to be wronged and to wrong. And unfortunately this happens far too often with people who claim to follow Jesus too. **But if there's one place where that whole cycle should stop, it stops with the people of Jesus.** The community of Jesus-followers, who have received grace through Jesus and now get to turn and offer it to others, even those who we know don't deserve it. And here's what enables us to do that: **Colossians 1 tells us that we, all of us, were once enemies of God. And that though we were God's enemies, while we were his enemies, he offered us grace.** Now maybe to you that sounds too strong. Maybe in your mind you don't feel like you were an enemy of God—you just feel like you were *uninterested in God*, like you were *far from God*, like you needed God to help you get in a *better place*. **But the truth of the gospel is that we were all enemies of God. We were directly opposed to him, his authority, his influence, his power in our life.** We sinned against him, we misrepresented him. We were *opposed* to him. And while we were in that predicament, he showed us his grace.

Which means that **the reality that God loves his enemies shouldn't be bad news to us, it shouldn't make us angry like Jonah—it should be good news.** Because if God loves his enemies, that means **he loves us!** Me. *I was* his enemy, and he loved *me*. Which means I've got no ground to stand on to decide who God does and doesn't get to show grace to. I've got no basis on which to be a grace gatekeeper. God showed grace his enemies, and that includes me! And now I get to do the same in response.

Let me try and show you one example of how this works itself out. Back last summer I believe, one of our LifeGroup leaders named **Casey** ran into some issues with his next-door neighbor. They both lived on a cul-de-sac, and every time the LifeGroup came over to his house for group night, this neighbor would just get furious about all the cars parked in the cul-de-sac. Now, they were always very careful to not block her driveway, not block her mailbox, all of that—but still, she just couldn't stand it. She would yell at Casey, tell him she was going to have cars towed without warning, all of that. So he went and talked to her and just asked what the problem was, and she said she just didn't like people parking on her side of the cul-de-sac. So he agreed to tell the whole LifeGroup to park on the other side of the cul-de-sac, even though it made it way worse for them and the other neighbors, just as a way to show courtesy to her. So

then the next week came, and she wasn't any happier. She told him again that she wasn't happy about it, and told him she was gonna have to start towing cars.

Now, I remember, on this particular week, **we had just talked about that passage** in Matthew 5, where it talks about loving your enemy. So this LifeGroup brainstormed what it might look like to reflect God's character to this neighbor. What it would look like to put on display how God "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good" in response. So Casey mentioned that when he first moved in, there was a patch of grass that belonged to his neighbor, but was much easier for him to get to and cut because of where it was. And since she was an older lady, he just started offering to cut it for her when he would cut his grass. And he said in the middle of this whole process, his temptation was to stop cutting that patch of grass, since it wasn't his and he didn't have to, especially since she was being so rude to him and his LifeGroup about the parking situation. But the LifeGroup talked about how instead, he should just keep offering to cut the grass regardless, without making a big deal out of it. So he did.

A couple months later, **she asked Casey to come over** to her front porch on one of the LifeGroup nights. He walked over, expecting to get his weekly chewing out about the cars parked in the cul-de-sac. Instead, she gave him a vase of flowers, and started tearing up a little. She proceeded to tell him that she once had a son, and that son had once gotten in a car accident when he was right at Casey's age. And she said "I think part of the reason I get so angry about the cars is because every time I see people your age getting out of those cars, it's a reminder that I don't have my son anymore, and I hate it, so I get really angry at you guys in response." And she apologized to Casey for being so mean about the parking situation.

Do you see what happened there? **In response to her making life difficult for him**, Casey had the option to make her life difficult in return. But **because Casey understands that he was once an enemy of God, and that God showed him grace, Casey knew he had the ability to show grace in return.** And because of that grace, the whole cycle of hurt got short-circuited. And God even used it to help this neighbor see something about herself.

Now, **let's just be real honest**—as great as that story is, **most of the time it doesn't end like that.** It's far more likely that most of the time, when you show grace to people who aren't easy to show grace to, they will just take it for granted, not even notice it, and not change at all as a result of it. At least not in any way that we get to see. We don't always get to see the outcome we want. But we're called to it regardless. Because we don't do it for results, we do it as a response to what's been done for us. And we might just learn something about ourselves in the process. We might guard ourselves from becoming like Jonah. **It may simply serve as a reminder to stand in amazement at the grace Jesus offers us through the cross, and by doing that begin to turn and offer grace to the people we think least deserve it. Because we're discovering over and over again that we're actually one of them.**

Let's pray.