



The Book of Jonah brings to us an important message about a gracious and compassionate God, never mind whether the great sea creature was a fish or whale or something else.

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.” – Jonah 1:1-2

The Assyrian capital of Nineveh was a notoriously brutal heathen nation and a huge threat to Israel. Yet, God was not too ready to abandon it straightaway. Instead, God extended His grace to the city by sending a missionary (Jonah) to preach to the wicked people and give them (Israel’s enemy) a chance to accept God’s forgiveness.

By being sent to prophesy to the city of Nineveh, Jonah was actually being called to be the first prophet to the nations. Could he evade a divine mission? Well, he tried.

Was it because Jonah was fearful of the wicked Ninevites that he decided to disobey God? Or was it because he was afraid of being branded a traitor by his own people if he were to go to Israel’s great enemy to preach God’s compassion?

In our own experience, we are familiar with situations when God's instruction to us directly challenge our human fear of consequences or go against our selfish emotions. God tells us to go one place to preach, but we go another place to hide from our missionary duty out of trepidation or aversion. In the case of Jonah, however, it might not simply be fear that drove his defiance of God. Obviously, as Israel's extreme patriot (with a measure of xenophobic nationalism – see *Jonah 1:9*), Jonah was not willing that Israel's enemy (Nineveh) should receive God's grace and forgiveness. From chapter 4 of the Book, we know that he would have liked it better if God was quick to anger and less abounding in love towards the Ninevites. He would have rejoiced if God had sent a calamity to wipe the Ninevites out instead of sending him to preach God's compassion.

God asked Jonah pointedly, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

Imagine that one day we are called to preach to an arch-enemy we wish to see dead instead. Delivering compassion to an enemy is hard to be anyone's cup of tea; but when we ourselves are in need of compassion from God for our own sinfulness, we would be intense in pleadings and supplications for forgiveness.

For disobeying God, Jonah received his just desserts by being held captive in the stomach of a great sea creature for 3 days and 3 nights. From inside the sea creature, Jonah prayed fervently. (*Jonah 2*)

The God who expressed compassion to the deeply sinful Ninevites was also the God of compassion who gave Jonah a second chance. With the second chance, Jonah was wise to obey. The Ninevites gave up their evil ways and repented. It was a win-win for Jonah and the Ninevites. Both were at the receiving end of God's grace. Jonah was forgiven for his original disobedience and Nineveh was not overthrown. Both outcomes (Jonah's survival in the belly of the sea creature and Nine-

veh's prompt repentance) would seem impossible by man's ordinary reckoning. **Nevertheless, the blessed outcomes bring us good news that God's grace is not only for the Hebrews but for all nations.**

God's grace is to be cherished by man, for by grace we are saved. In other words, without grace, we would all fail to claim our salvation. Yet, grace is not unregimented; and grace does not stand alone in determining our salvation. With grace, we still need faith for we are saved by grace through faith; and faith implies belief and belief must imply our willingness to obey God. **The story of Jonah tells us that despite grace, God also hands out discipline out of love.**



There was the storm because of Jonah's disobedience. By analogy, are the storms in our life the result of man's disobedience? People are naturally frightened when life's tempests blow, and they pray to their gods like the sailors on Jonah's boat did to no avail. Prayers won't help if the prayers are directed wrongly. Prayers may also be less effective if people pray without dealing with the crux of the problem as God may direct one to it. Do people try to escape from the storm in life simply by jumping overboard like Jonah persuading the sailors to throw him into the sea, wrongly assuming that it would be the end of all problems – his own problem and the resulting problem caused to others (the sailors) around him?

The escapism of Jonah – firstly, running away instead of going to Nineveh; and secondly, attempting self-destruction by asking to be thrown into the raging sea – was not a choice that a compassionate God would grant permission. In handing out the mission to Jonah in the first place, God knew that the mission would be accomplished. In handing out discipline, God knew His purpose to let Jonah learn His lesson and come out a better person in obedience to Him and fulfilling the assigned mission. Therefore, instead of letting Jonah disappear into the raging sea as he wanted, the great sea creature came along with the

effect of saving him while at the same time delivering him the lesson that God wanted him to receive.

The grace of God that Jonah and the great city of Nineveh received did not seem to be appreciated by Jonah. Jonah was angry and would rather that God had taken his life. Obviously, he buried himself only in his own thoughts and feelings for himself and his own people (the Hebrews) and was not supportive of God's will to bless others. God in his grace did not abandon Jonah to his own emotions, but gave him a further lesson by using the example of a plant that made him happy with the comfort of shade and then made him faint under the hot sun when the plant got chewed off by a worm. (Jonah 4)

*"For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people."
– Titus 2:11*

The grace of God belongs to all mankind. God calls the shots, man just obeys. Everything is subordinated to God and only faithful obedience is required of us. Man's passivity does not rule over God's activeness in the operating of His will. An individual's selfish heart (like Jonah's) will never prevail over God's sovereign determination. God, in His compassion, is patient to teach and prepare us for His mission. We may face discipline, but if we sincerely repent, God will forgive us.

Let us approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb. 4:16)

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