

Jonah 3:10 – 4:11**Grace for all**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The overwhelming theme in today's readings is that God's grace is for everyone. I'm sure we all understand that this is what the scriptures teach, and we do believe this at a surface level. But how often are we like Jonah? How often do we write people off because they are surely beyond God's redemptive reach? Some people we encounter or hear about are simply too evil. The thought that they might receive forgiveness just as we do doesn't sit right with us. Ultimately, we want to be the ones who decide who is worthy of God's grace. But this is a ridiculous thought to start with, because, by definition, no one is worthy of grace. If you are worthy of it, it's not grace, but a just reward.

So, whenever we do this, whenever we deem someone beyond God's salvation, what we're actually doing is desiring to be like God. We want to be the one's making the decision. This is basically the sin that Adam and Eve fell into in the Garden of Eden. The desire to be like God is the first and greatest sin. Contrast that to the first and greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37, NIV). And, of course, this naturally flows into the second: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39, NIV). This great summary of the law by Jesus reminds us that God is all about relationships. Our relationship to him as our God who is worthy of all praise and glory. And our relationship to one another as we serve our neighbour in love.

We were created to exist in relationship. When we go back to the creation account, and look closely at the when, why, what, and how, we see that everything is created in relationship with everything else. That is, what God created next was created because of what God had created before it. Because what God created next would need what God created before it, in order for that created thing to fully function in its God-given purpose. The simplest example is that God created fish after he created the seas they swim in. Perhaps this explains why the enemy uses relationships as one of his strongest weapons in his effort to destroy our witness of God's saving love.

Such was the case with Jonah. Jonah had no interest in being in relationship with the Ninevites. Their wellbeing was the least of his concerns. And he makes this quite clear to God. "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity," he says. (Jonah 4:2, NIV).

Jonah, in his relationship with God, was well acquainted with God's will and God's desire. However, this knowledge did not create within Jonah a desire to strengthen his own relationship with God by aiding the Ninevites in strengthening theirs. Instead, this knowledge created a bitterness within Jonah's heart and mind that caused him not only to long for Nineveh's demise, but even for his own death.

But, he had, begrudgingly, proclaimed God's word in the city, and indeed the people repented and turned back to God. When he did finally arrive in Nineveh, Jonah follows God's orders and begins his walk through the great city, one that normally takes three days to walk from one end to the other. The text indicates that Jonah makes it through only one-third of the city – one day's walk – and the Ninevites put on sackcloth and ashes and begin to repent. Jonah doesn't even have to confront the king directly. The word spreads quickly, and once the king hears the message, he immediately sets out a decree of fasting and repentance for the entire city. Even the animals must put on sackcloth and fast.

This response is unheard of. Usually, the people don't listen to the prophets in the biblical stories, at least not at first. And Jonah is as un-prophetic as one could possibly be. Not only does Jonah lack the experience needed, he has no interest in, no passion for, and no demonstrated potential to be a prophet of God. Occasionally the prophets will come up with excuses. "Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy," cries Jeremiah. "Who am I to go to the great Pharaoh in Egypt in order to rescue the Israelites?" says Moses. Jonah, however, doesn't even bother with excuses. Instead, he runs in the opposite direction, hopping aboard a Tarshish-bound ship and hoping to get as far away from both Nineveh and God as he can.

By every human measure, the Ninevites deserved destruction. Whether you talk the law, or morality, or political convenience, or even just survival of the fittest, they were not worth it. Jonah was right. Yet there was one who saw something different, something more, something of great worth. The God of mercy and grace saw a hope and future for this city.

And in the midst of this city finding salvation, we have this odd little episode where Jonah sits outside the city watching to see what God would do to it, and God grows a leafy plant to give him shade, and then takes it away from him. Jonah receives comfort and protection, provided directly by God. And rather than looking upon the Ninevites with the same kindness that God had looked upon him, Jonah still sat and expected God's wrath. This was a time in the life of the Ninevites when they needed God most, but Jonah just can't see that. He cared more for the plant that shrivelled and died than for the people of the city.

But how much more valuable is humanity, with all our faults, failures, and flaws, than a fast-growing weed that is here today and gone tomorrow? By the grace of God, the Ninevites were able to see their wickedness and repent. But Jonah never discerned the wrong attitudes of his own heart. He never questioned how he could find compassion for a plant, but not people.

This is the position we can find ourselves in too. Whenever we decide that someone is beyond God's saving reach, we have placed ourselves in God's shoes, breaking the first commandment. We have committed that first sin of wanting to be like God. And the truth is, that puts us in the same category as the Ninevites. By every measure, we deserve nothing but wrath. And yet God looks upon us with kindness. God is gracious and merciful to us, calling us to repent, to turn back to him. And by God's grace, we are indeed restored to him. Forgiven, redeemed, set free from our need to be the ones in control. And called to proclaim this forgiveness, this redemption, this freedom, to everyone.

So, I pray that you would indeed comprehend the depth of God's grace and mercy to you. And that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may share this grace with all whom you meet, regardless of any apparent unworthiness. And in that way, all the earth will praise the Lord God, who is our creator and redeemer, and who is certainly worthy of all praise. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.