

God's people experienced and celebrated God's grace from earliest times. God's grace is at the heart of what God revealed to Moses when God gave him the Ten Commandments for the second time. God passed in front of Moses, speaking glorious words of self-description: *The LORD...the compassionate and gracious God, [is] slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebelliousness and sin* (Ex. 34:6-7). God proclaimed God's grace to Moses immediately after the rebellion in which God's people worshipped a golden calf. The people knew themselves to be sinners in need of God's mercy, and they received that mercy with gladness. By God's actions, the people knew God to be gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Jonah experience God's grace and compassion, and patience and love, and yet *Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry* (4:1). Regarding the Ninevites, Jonah believed God to be too slow to anger, too passive in dealing with evil, so Jonah took up the great affirmation of grace given to Moses, and turned it back to God as a complaint: *O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee 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* (4:2). In Jonah's eyes, God was too nice to Nineveh. Jonah thought there should be some punishment for Nineveh before her salvation.

Nineveh had a long history of wickedness, and Jonah felt sure that the Ninevites would return to type, even if they repented for a time. And Jonah was right! Just forty short years after Jonah's ministry, the Assyrian army attacked and defeated the northern tribes of Israel, destroying the kingdom of Israel. The book of Nahum describes the atrocities of that time: *Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses* (Nah. 3:3). All of this suffering could have been avoided, if only God had destroyed Nineveh in the time of Jonah. The prophet saw this coming and God's mercy made him mad!

It isn't hard to relate to Jonah's problem. If God had wiped out Hitler, or Stalin, or Osama Bin Laden when they were young, God could have saved the world from unspeakable evil and suffering. But God let them live. Why? Because God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. It's hard to accept that "grace" means that God may bless people who have wronged us, people from whose sins we've suffered. Sometimes God seems to bless the wrong people; God's grace seems misdirected. When that happens we ask, "Why doesn't God give them what they deserve?"

The answer to that lies in God's definition of grace. God's grace does not give us what we deserve, but rather gives us what we do not deserve. According to Paul, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). And King David wrote: If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, who could stand?" (Ps. 130:3). What we deserve is death for our sins, for God is a righteous judge and God's Word is absolute. But God does not give us what we deserve. Instead, God sent Jesus to die on the cross, to take away our sins, and to open a pathway to salvation. And that salvation is open to all who hear God's Word and believe and call up on the name of Jesus.

But accepting and affirming God's grace also means that we do not get to choose how or to whom God's extends that grace. In grace, God exercises God's free will to act. God steps into the lives of particular people with the purpose and effect of saving them. For God said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Ex. 33:19; Rom. 9:15). God needs no permission to do this, nor is God under any obligation to do so. God has total freedom, and God uses that freedom to act in ways that are gracious and compassionate.

If God did not act independently, intervening in our lives, none of us would have any hope of being saved, because by nature, we do not seek God. The Bible is very clear about this: *There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God* (Rom. 3:11). The root of our reluctance to seek after God lies in the debilitating effect of sin on the human soul. By nature, scripture says, we do not seek the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4); our hearts are hard toward God (Ezek. 36:26); we love darkness rather than light (John 3:19); we seek the praise of the world more than the affirmation of God (John 5:44); making us prisoners to sin (Rom. 7:23).

When we grasp this biblical teaching about the effects of sin of the human soul, it becomes obvious that grace must involve more than God passively providing the way of salvation. Grace must be about God stepping into and intervening in the lives of individuals to save them. By grace, God opens the door to salvation AND God brings people in.

God went looking for Abraham, when he worshipped idols and knew nothing about God (Josh. 24:2-3). God chose to love the people of Israel for no other reason than that God chose to love them (Deut. 7:7-8). If you are a Christian today, it is because God set God's love on you. God came after you and found you. You came to repentance and faith because God came looking for you *before* you were looking for God. That's what grace is, and it is by that grace – God's grace – that you are saved (Eph. 2:8).

To me, the most obvious demonstration of God's freedom to step uninvited unto human lives is the story of Saul of Tarsus. Saul terrorized the early church. A Pharisee of impeccable lineage, Saul supervised the death of Stephen (the first Christian martyr) and was on his way to Damascus where he planned to eradicate a small community of believers. Saul set out on his journey *breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples* (Acts 9:1). Saul was not a man seeking faith in Jesus Christ, but Jesus stopped Saul cold in his tracks, and with a blinding light and a clear voice asked: "Why do you persecute me?" (9:4). Saul did not go looking for Jesus, but Jesus sought out Saul, and the persecutor of the church became Paul the apostle. It was an amazing transformation. Jesus did not need permission to intervene in Saul's life: Saul would not have given such permission. Jesus swooped into Saul's life uninvited. That's grace, and without it nobody would be saved. Our seeking after God is always the effect of God seeking after us first.

Jonah's anger stemmed from the fact that God went seeking after the Ninevites, and Jonah didn't think that they deserved God's grace. Jonah wanted Nineveh punished for its wicked ways. According to the standards of the world, Jonah would be right; but God's grace does not conform to the world's standards, nor does God need our counsel or permission to decide on whom to bestow God's grace. God seeks after individuals according to God's good pleasure, offering them grace and mercy because God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebelliousness and sin. God's kind of grace doesn't always make sense to us, nor does it always sit well when God offers grace to people we don't like, but God's grace is God's gift to bestow as God sees fit. And if that grace seems unfair to you, well, that's the topic for next week's sermon!

Prayer: Grace-filled God, how very patient you are with us and with our prayers that are more often letting off steam and demanding things we want. Please align our hearts to yours so that even as Jesus prayed with tears, we too might have His compassion, not hardness of heart toward those in need of the Savior. For His Name's sake. Amen.

Source Material:

- Colin Smith, *Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life*. Bell & Bain: Glasgow. 2012.
- Kolodiejchuk, Brian. *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*. New York: Doubleday. 2007.

Affirm God's Grace – Part I

Sunday, July 23, 2017

Jonah 3:10-4:5

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who devoted her life to the poor of India, never doubted for a minute that God worked through her to relieve their pain and suffering. Yet, in her personal life, Mother Teresa felt nothing but loneliness and sadness. She wondered where to find God? She wrote: "Where is my faith? Even deep down...there is nothing but emptiness and darkness...If there be God — please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul."

This is the strange predicament of those who work hardest in the Lord's service. You work hard, but nothing seems to happen. Resentment builds toward God. The more you do for God, the easier it is to feel that God owes you something in return. Jonah experienced this peculiar darkness in his soul. He was a servant of God, a cross-cultural missionary and a preacher of God's Word. He experienced first-hand the saving power and grace of God, and yet when God extended that same saving power and grace to the Ninevites, Jonah grew angry, frustrated and bitter towards God. Jonah wanted explanations from God and demanded justice on his terms. God's grace remained a mystery to Jonah.

Jonah is not alone in this. Asaph, King David's music director, walked with God and led God's people in worship; but, like Jonah, Asaph experienced a dark night in his soul. *My foot had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold* (Ps. 73:2), wrote Asaph. He wondered why God allowed the wicked to prosper, and why God seemed to be kinder to God's enemies than to God's friends. This raised profound questions for Asaph: What is the point of struggling to live a holy life when God takes no action against the wicked? If God allows the wicked to prosper, why should we keep our hearts pure?

The Elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son faced a similar problem. This man worked hard for his father, while his no-good brother left home and wasted the family inheritance on riotous living. Then, when the self-indulgent wretch came home, the Father forgave him and threw a party. Where's the justice in that? Jonah, Asaph, and the elder brother shared the same disorder: God's grace made them angry.