

## **“White Flag—Holier Than Thou”**

Today we're wrapping up this short series on the character and book of the Bible called Jonah. One of the key things we've been looking for in this book and in this Old Testament prophet is where his life intersects with our lives. Jonah was a man who ran from God, and I'm pretty sure that all of us, in some way, have run from God too. Maybe at some point we just abandoned God for some big reason, or no reason at all. Or maybe we've walked away from God because following meant striving to learn God's standards and striving to live up to God's standards and it was just easier to walk away so we could make up our own moral guidelines.

But one of the key things we can draw from Jonah is that **You can run from God, but you can't outrun God.** And a second thing we looked at last week was that, like Jonah, sometimes, we hit bottom. We go down, down, down, and **When we hit bottom we find that God is there.** He doesn't typically take away the consequences of our actions, but he's there to win us back, to bring us back.

Now where we ended last week would have been a great place to end. I mean, Jonah rebels, runs from God, Jonah faces the consequences of his actions, Jonah comes back, Jonah gets a second chance. Happy ending!

But that's only half the story. That's the famous part of the story, but it's not the most important part. Yes, some of us run from God morally, or ethically, or relationally. But there's a bigger purpose. Let's not forget that this whole journey was not about Jonah. God wanted him to deliver a message. **"Go to the great city Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2, TNIV).**

So Jonah's original job, that he ran from, was to warn the people of Nineveh that their wickedness was going to end in their destruction. This wasn't about Jonah. This all started because God wanted to send a message to people who were heading in the wrong direction. The 1<sup>st</sup> time Jonah disobeyed, he ran, and ended up in the belly of the fish. He repents and God asks him a second time to go to Nineveh.

Here's what's happening. **"Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown'" (Jonah 3:3-4).**

When he goes into this gigantic city, he walks into the middle of it, gives a one sentence message without a whole lot of gusto, it seems. "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." No mention about God, or God's character, or sin, or injustice, or repentance, or forgiveness, or mercy. Jonah's doesn't seem to be putting any effort into this at all. He speaks one sentence.

The strangest thing happens. People listen. They begin to respond. Now you think about this from Jonah's perspective. Jonah has not brought his "A" game to this revival, just this lame message. Then people's hearts get broken, and their eyes fill with tears because the Spirit of God has come on them and they are convicted of sin. There is national repentance. All the people of Nineveh repent. From the king down to the poorest and weakest citizen repents, even the animals wore sackcloth.

You ever see an animal repent? Growing up we had a dog named Sweetie Pie. Normally she was this effervescent, happy, loving dog. When she would do a bad thing, I won't go into any more detail than that, but when she would do a bad thing, she would go hide under the stereo. She'd put herself into isolation. She would repent.

Today our family has a cat and sometimes our cat does a bad thing. Do you think the cat ever repents? No, the cat never does. Why not? Cats are evil. It's just the way they are. This is just biblical teaching.

The point of the story is people of Nineveh are overwhelmed by an awareness of their sin. It's not because Jonah gave this eloquent sermon. It's just God. It's just the Spirit of God falling on people. Their hearts are broken, "Oh, God, we've been so far off track. We've been so wrong." They repent the best they know how. Even the animals wear sackcloth.

God looks at these poor miserable people...We're told later on, when he talks about Nineveh that this is a people who do not know their right from their left. That's a way of talking about people who do not know right from wrong, up from down.

God, being God, is filled with compassion. **"When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened" (Jonah 3:10).** The people turn from their evil ways and when God sees this he relents. He has grace. He says, "I

forgive." They have turned away from their violence and their aggression and their sin, and they are repenting. They are receiving grace.

Now, this sounds like something you would find in the New Testament, not the Old Testament. And in fact, if you're a person who really struggles with the whole idea that God of the Old Testament seems like a wrathful, vengeful blood-God and the New Testament seems like the kind, grandfather, good God and how do they work together, remember this scene of grace and forgiveness. It's a beautiful picture of the character of God. And again, the story could end right there. Jonah repents, the people repent. Everybody is happy. Happy ending!

Except... Except Jonah... Now, you would think he'd be thrilled. This is the greatest spiritual achievement of his ministry. It is a whole great city of Assyrians, and they are brought to God through his preaching, and he wasn't even preaching any good; because when God moves it's not about human effort. Jonah's never been used by God like this. Jonah chapter 4, verse 1, **"But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry" (Jonah 4:1).**

Jonah can't take it. Now Jonah can't sleep. This can't happen. He looks at Nineveh repenting and being forgiven by God, and he says, "This is wrong." Not just wrong, VERY wrong. This is crazy! What is great to God, grace to Nineveh...Nineveh being forgiven...is very wrong to Jonah.

Jonah was okay when grace was being given to him, but now it's going to Nineveh. Now Jonah is not okay. Now Jonah is ticked. Now Jonah says, "This is very wrong."

Now for the second time in this story Jonah prays. First he prays when he's desperate, when he's in the fish, in the water, and it looks like he's going to die, and he wants to live. "Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh God, help me. Let me live. Forgive my disobedience." God gives him grace.

Then God also gives grace to Nineveh through Jonah. But then look at what happens...**"Jonah prayed, '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. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live'" (Jonah 4:2-3).**

Jonah admits it! He knew! He knew what God would do! "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love..." Jonah is stating a profound truth. He's saying, "I knew you are a God who does not want to punish unless he absolutely has to, a God whose grace is so big, the circle is so big that people have a very difficult time getting beyond the circle of your grace. I knew that even though the Ninevites were wicked and violent and an enemy of Israel, I knew it—I knew if I gave them an opportunity and they repented, I knew that you would forgive them. I knew it, and I'm so angry with you for not punishing them the way I think they deserve."

If you ever wonder about God's love for you, this is the verse. If you ever wonder if you could get outside of God's grace and his ability to be compassionate towards you, this is the verse. But instead of rejoicing in the character in this truth about God, Jonah is angry. He says, "Just take my life. It's better for me to just die."

Unbelievable prayer! First time Jonah's going to die and he prays, "God, let me live." This time he's in the middle of this amazing triumph of life, he prays, "God, let me die." At this point, he doesn't really want to die. He's being so immature. "God, I want my own way, and I want it to be the destruction of the Ninevites." "Please," he says twice in this verse. And this is not a polite please; this is a two-syllable please. Puh-lease. "Give me a break. You've got to be kidding. Grace to Nineveh?"

God is so patient with Jonah. Jonah goes on this tirade and makes an accusation against God's character, he says, "God this is wrong that you would offer this kind of grace!" And all God says in return is, **"Is it right for you to be angry?"**

This series of messages is about surrender. Jonah's problem was that he had surrendered to God direction, "I'll go where you want me to go," and he'd surrendered to God's plan, "I'll do what you want me to do." But he had NOT surrendered to God's grace, "I will not accept your love for those I hate." Jonah pouts. It says that he goes up on a hillside overlooking Nineveh and sits down to wait and watch, still hoping that God is going to destroy Nineveh.

Then there's this odd little story. If you've ever read through the book, you may have wondered about this. It is such an amazing story. **“Then the LORD God provided a gourd and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the gourd. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the gourd so that it withered. 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.’ But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the gourd?’ ‘It is,’ he said. ‘And I'm so angry I wish I were dead’”** (Jonah 4:6-9).

It's like God's dealing with a five-year-old here. It's a funny thing, Jonah received grace when he hit bottom. Now he's offended by grace when it goes to somebody else.

When Jesus came, the people that Jesus had the hardest time with were not the people that everybody considered the big sinners...not the prostitutes, not the tax collectors, not the people that you'd obviously associate with a place like Nineveh. The people Jesus had the hardest time with were people who considered themselves the spiritually mature. They had these superior, judgmental, unloving hearts.

A guy by the name of George Barna has done a lot of research around faith issues of our day, and consistently has found that some of the main traits people outside the Church associate with those of us who are Christians are judgmental, unloving hearts and attitudes.

Somebody else does something wrong, violates a law, especially if I think that I get hurt by it, then I just want justice. *Man, I hope they get what's coming to them.* But I do something wrong, I violate a rule, that red light's flashing in my rear view mirror, all of a sudden when I'm talking to that law-enforcement person, I'm not crying out for justice. Guess what I'm crying out for? I'd like some grace. I'd like some mercy. I have this Jonah inside me where I think what I want is fairness, but it's not. What I want is grace.

How many times do I forget what Jonah forgot, and I wish I had a more profound sounding way of saying it, but it's just this, **"People matter to God."** Which people? All people. People matter to God. The man who cannot afford a car, and so he rides his bike to work to bus tables at a restaurant. God looks at that man and says, "I love that guy as much as I have ever loved any human being. I wonder if the people eating lunch at that table, the busy people, the people with money, I wonder if they will understand how much I love that guy. I wonder how they'll talk to him. I wonder if they'll even notice that he's there. I wonder if they'll stop to think that he has a life. He has a story. He has a dream. I wonder if they'll look at him the same way they would look at somebody that they would consider big, or important, or has status, or could do something for them. I wonder if they'll have my heart toward that man."

People matter to God. The jobless guy. The homeless guy. The wealthy and successful guy. They just matter to God. God is not like me. God doesn't look at categories like I do, and think, *People in this category, they're my kind of people. I like these kinds of people. But people in that category over there, I can let go of them without much pain.* People matter to God. Depressed people. Educated people. Divorced people. People with real different politics than yours. They matter to God.

Conservative people and liberal people. Muslims. Atheists. New Age people. Every color of skin. Asian people. Hispanic people. Caucasian people. African American people. Gay people. Old people. People matter to God. Every one of them. When one of them is separated from God by sin, and we are all separated from God by sin, we are all Nineveh, we are all Jonah, it tears God up. It breaks God's heart. He can't sleep at night.

If God loves the violent wicked people of Nineveh, he also loves your neighbor whose dog does bad things on your yard and doesn't repent. He also loves the contractor who ripped you off. He loves the boss who made your life miserable and then fired you. He loves the employee who makes your life miserable but you can't fire. He loves your ex-husband, your ex-wife. He loves the person who seems so out of touch and ignorant to you. He loves the person who interrupts you all the time, who doesn't stop talking. He loves the person whose cell phone goes off in church—but not very much. He loves the person who can't handle her finances, who keeps getting into trouble at school, who keeps disappointing you.

The danger of being a good church person, the danger of being a moral person (even though that's a good thing to be), the danger is that we become so self-absorbed that religion becomes all about us and we forget God's purposes. You can be 100% surrendered to the will of God for your life, and the direction of God for your life, but if you've never surrendered to the grace of God in the world, you simply set yourself up to

become judgmental, to become part of the problem, to actually be—get this—like Jonah, an obstacle to the grace and the love of God in the world.

One more piece of the story, and here's where it gets real personal. This is the way the story ends...if you've read the story, you've noticed this before, and it might have seemed strange to you...God's talking to Jonah. Jonah's ticked off about the plant, the gourd, Nineveh, the whole deal, and God says, **“You have been concerned about this gourd, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city 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?”** Don't you love that last line? There are a lot of animals there. "I'm concerned about the cows too."

Here is what God was saying to Jonah: “Jonah, you're concerned about all the wrong stuff. Jonah, do you know what I'm concerned about? I'm concerned about this generation of people. Jonah, what are you concerned about?” “Gourd. Me. I'm hot. I don't like it here. I didn't want to come here anyway.” “Jonah, I'm concerned about this generation of Ninevites, what are you concerned about?” “Me; because I'm hot, and I'm far away from home, and it's 500 miles away, and I've got to walk all the way back.” “Jonah, I'm concerned about this generation of people; what are you concerned about?” “Jonah.”

“Hey Aaron, I'm concerned about this generation of people; what are you concerned about?” “Um, well, you know, one of the speakers in my surround sound system is blown and I'm not sure which brand I should go with to replace it. It's really on my mind.” Nah nah nah nah nah. “Hey, you and you and you: I'm concerned about this generation of people. I'm concerned about the people you work with. I'm concerned about that lady in your office that everybody talks about and that nobody talks to.”

God says, “I'm concerned about—think about the person that you hate the most—I'm concerned about that person. I'm concerned about your mother-in-law. I'm concerned about this generation of teenagers; I'm concerned about this generation of children; I'm concerned about single moms; I'm concerned about people who have walked away from church. I'm concerned about this generation of people. What are you concerned about?” “Me, gourd, blah, blah, blah.” So, what are you concerned about? Because God is concerned about this generation of people and they ALL matter to him. God says, “Jonah, don't you get it?”

When you're reading, you want to find out what Jonah's going to say? You hope he gets it right. I hope he says, "Oh God, I've been such a fool, I've been so smug and so superior and resentful. God I'm sorry, would you forgive me and make me a vessel of grace, God. Give me a tender heart like yours. Help me get it right." Or...will he just hold onto his arrogance, his self-justified, self-righteous stupid pride?

We never find out! The story just ends with Jonah sitting there. Doesn't that drive you a little crazy? Isn't that a really crummy way to end the story? Why would a writer do that? It's not because God couldn't think up a good ending to the story, by the way. It's because the point of the story is not Jonah had a decision to make. The point of the story is *you* have a decision to make. I have a decision to make. Will you surrender to God's will—what he would have you do? Will you surrender to God's direction—where he would have you go? Will you surrender to his grace—will you accept God's love for those you hate? Jonah's story is our story. What will you say? How will you respond? And for today that is the Good News.

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