

## **Growing in God's Grace**

Jonah 4:1-11

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December 15, 2019

Whenever we look at group photos almost all of us automatically try to find ourselves in the photo before looking for anyone else. Humans are instinctively inclined to focus on themselves. In the story of Jonah, we find an example of how someone can be so self-focused and hold so strongly to their own way of thinking, even to the point of blatant disobedience to God. But the main character in this book is not Jonah, but rather God. It's not merely a story of Jonah's disobedience, but God's grace toward Jonah and the Ninevites. God wanted to show grace to the lost Ninevites, but also to help Jonah grow in his understanding of His grace.

In Jonah 1:1 and 3:1 God commanded Jonah to deliver a message warning the Ninevites of impending judgment. The first time God gave the command Jonah fled. But after the storm and being swallowed by the fish, God gave the command a second time and Jonah reluctantly obeyed. This message was not one of judgment, but one of grace. God wanted to warn the Ninevites so that they would repent and be saved. Jonah understood God's intent, and that's why he fled the first time. The second time around, Jonah delivered the message with the fewest words possible. In Hebrew this message in 3:4 is only 5 words. He didn't even mention repentance. Yet within one day all of Nineveh repented. This was probably the most successful mission ever, with such a quick and complete conversion for so little preaching.

This seems like a happy ending, but the story continues. Any prophet in their right mind should be overjoyed if their message had such a great effect. But Jonah wasn't happy about the outcome at all. He was angry enough to die because he saw God's grace as being unjust. He was certain that the Ninevites deserved judgment and destruction. He didn't realize that God's grace shouldn't be an affront to our sense of justice because it's the only hope any of us have to be saved. We, like Jonah, must be continually reminded of the importance of God's grace. We must constantly grow in our understanding and experience of His grace.

Now Jonah knew that grace was a part of God's character (4:2). The phrase "gracious and compassionate" is used 13 times in the Old Testament, always to describe God's character. Israel was used to God being gracious and compassionate towards them. In fact at that time Israel was being disobedient to God, but God out of His grace gave them prosperity. But when God showed this grace towards the Ninevites, it angered Jonah, who had just experienced God's grace for

himself in the belly of the fish. He thought the Ninevites were too wicked to deserve His grace, and that it would be unjust for them to be forgiven. Jonah's entire world view fell apart. To him, if God showed grace to the wicked there would be no distinction between the effects of doing right and wrong. Yet his view was so biased and self-centered that he failed to understand that he too rebelled against God and did not deserve the grace that God showed him.

But God, being slow to anger, did not rebuke Jonah harshly, but simply asked whether Jonah had a right to be angry. Jonah didn't answer, but instead perched himself outside the city watching to see if God would punish Nineveh after all. He was still stubbornly thinking that he was right and God was wrong. God showed grace to him once again, providing a plant for shade. It's strange that Jonah would need more shade since he already built a shelter for himself. But God provided the plant to remind Jonah of His grace. In the Old Testament shade is symbolic of God's grace (see Psalm 121:5-6 and Isaiah 4:5-6). Jonah basks in God's grace, all the while still thinking that the Ninevites had no right to receive the same grace. When God provided the worm to eat the plant and the hot wind, Jonah said that it would be better to die. He thought the withering of the plant was unjust. So God asked once again whether it was right for him to be angry about the plant, which sprang up and withered overnight. Jonah said it was right for him to be angry. But Jonah didn't put any work into tending the plant, nor did he deserve it. God provided the plant out of grace. Yet Jonah thought he had every right to God's grace, to be saved after being so disobedient, even to be made comfortable as he stubbornly defied God. That was perfectly just according to Jonah's self-centered perspective, but he didn't think it was just that God would likewise spare the hundred and twenty thousand Ninevites after they had repented. If God cared about Jonah, why should he also not care about all the Ninevites? It's natural to think we are more deserving of grace than others, but we like Jonah must understand that although others may not deserve God's grace, neither do we. We all depend on His grace for salvation. We shouldn't be upset about others receiving the same grace we received. We must appreciate that God's grace is a part of His character and that He desires to save everyone.