

A SCANDALOUS GRACE: Lessons from the book of Jonah

(3) Hard lessons from the school of grace (Jonah 3-4)

Of the many parables that Jesus told during his earthly ministry, it is the parable of the prodigal son – or lost son – that perhaps remains the most famous.

It's found in the gospel of Luke, chapter 15 –

And this simple story remains one of the most powerful depictions of the love and grace of God in the whole of Scripture.

Most of us here are probably familiar with the story...

A man had two sons –

and the younger son wanted his share of the inheritance before his father died, to do with as he chose.

The father agrees to this hurtful request –

And the younger son sets off for a far-away country, where he squanders every penny he has in reckless living.

After he has lost everything, the younger son ends up hiring himself as a pig feeder to try and provide for himself.

Eventually, he comes to his senses and decides to head back to his father and ask for forgiveness and a place among his father's servants.

But while he is still a long way off, his father sees him –

He is filled with compassion for him –

And he runs to meet him!

He throws his arms around him – he kisses him – he refuses to let his son complete his rehearsed request for mercy...!

And he holds a lavish banquet to celebrate the return of his lost son.

Through this story, Jesus describes God's startling love and remarkable willingness to restore and forgive sinners who come to their senses, in a profoundly moving way –

And among others, the artist Rembrandt was so moved by this story that it produced one of his best-known works – *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

Jesus' parable of the lost son is rightly famous.

But it has often been pointed out by commentators on the story that in fact, there is not just *one* lost son in this story –

There are *two*!

Jesus devotes almost half of the parable to *the elder son* –

And it is not a flattering portrait.

When the elder son discovers that his brother has returned home, he doesn't celebrate –

He doesn't share in his father's happiness –

Instead, he stays outside of the party – and *sulks*.

Read Luke 15:28-32

And that's where Jesus' parable ends.

With a loving father – standing outside the banquet he has called to celebrate the return of his lost son –

Pleading with his other son to find it in his heart to join in the celebrations.

Jesus doesn't tell us what happens next...

Does the older brother choose to join in the celebrations of his father –

Or does he remain outside – bitter and resentful of his brother, and the great compassion and grace of his father?

We simply are not told.

I begin with this parable of Jesus' this morning –

Because I believe there are striking similarities between the older brother in Jesus' story –

And the prophet Jonah in Jonah chapter 4.

We come to the end of our series in the book of Jonah this morning –

And I want us to see that, like Jesus' parable, the story of Jonah ends on a *cliffhanger*.

In fact, the book of Jonah ends with a question – God's question of Jonah in chapter 4 and verse 11, concerning Nineveh:

"Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

And we're not told how Jonah answered that question!

Instead, it is left hanging in the air...

Until, that is, it reaches *us*.

We've seen throughout this series that God has important lessons he wants his reluctant prophet Jonah to learn.

And the lessons God wants to teach Jonah –

Are lessons God always has to teach his people throughout history.

They were lessons God wanted to teach the book's original readers – the people of Israel –

And they are lessons God wants to teach Christians today –

Including this community of Christians, who call ourselves Magdalen Road Church.

In chapter 1, the lesson God had to teach us was about *the foolishness and futility of trying to run away from him* –

And about God's commitment to reveal himself *to and through his people, even when their lives appear to be such feeble demonstrations of faithfulness.*

In chapter 2, God taught Jonah a profound lesson about his grace -

It is *miraculous* – it is rooted both in his *holiness and his love* – and if we accept it, it is *life-transforming*.

And in chapters 3 and 4 – the chapters before us this morning – God wants to ask us perhaps the most probing question of all in this book:

What is the state of your heart today?

***How do you genuinely feel about the living God this morning –
What do you honestly think of him?***

God knows the answer to that question, even when those around us can be fooled by outward appearances of spiritual health and life.

But he asks us the question anyway – just as he asked it of the prophet Jonah – to enable us to honestly assess our spiritual state of health –

To expose the state of our hearts –

So that, if necessary, we will recognise our need to encounter God's grace in a fresh and powerful way in our lives –

And so, we can come to God afresh – in repentance and faith – and ask him to change us more into the likeness of his Son, Jesus Christ.

God's desire for each one of us here this morning – Christian and non-Christian – is that ultimately we become men and women who *love him with everything that we are* –

And that we are formed more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

That is God's desire for the prophet Jonah – in spite of Jonah's sulking and selfishness –
And it shapes the way God treats Jonah in the closing chapters of the book.

And God's desire for us is that we become men and women who become more and more Christ-like as we relate to him –

And that desire will also shape the way he relates to us as a church – and the way he relates to us as individuals.

Uncomfortable as it may be, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of Jonah the sulking prophet here –

So that we can learn hard – but vital – lessons from the God of grace –

So that he can change us into the church and the people he wants us to be!

It was the great American film and theatre director Orson Welles who once observed:

“If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story.”

What sort of ending do we get here to the book of Jonah?

It's worth speculating for a moment –
What if the book of Jonah ended in chapter 2?

We'd be left with the image of Jonah – the repentant sinner – celebrating the saving grace of God on the sea-shore –
And dedicating himself to serving God for the rest of his life.

A pretty good ending, you might agree...!

Or – perhaps a more satisfying ending would be to end the book at chapter 3.

If we did that, Jonah would be hailed in the pages of the Bible as *the most successful prophet in the whole Old Testament!*

A prophet who brought an entire pagan city to repentance and faith in the God of Israel –
A phenomenal achievement that is completely unparalleled in the history of Israel...!

I want to spend most of our time in chapter 4 this morning –
But let's very briefly survey the astonishing events of Jonah chapter 3.

In v.1 of chapter 3, we learn that God's restoration of Jonah is complete, when his word comes to Jonah '*a second time*'.

Jonah has been forgiven by God for running away from him in chapter 1 –
And now God entrusts him again with this vital mission to the Assyrian city of Nineveh.

In v.2, we still aren't told exactly *what* the message God has for Nineveh actually *is*...!
But – v.3 – '*Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh.*'

Finally, Jonah gets the right idea!
His experiences in the storm and in the belly of the fish have *changed* him – and at last, he looks as if he will become the sort of obedient and faithful prophet you could admire...!

And what happens when Jonah arrives in Nineveh in v.3 – is nothing short of *a miracle!*
And we mustn't *miss* that!

- **Nineveh and the miraculous grace of God (3:1-10)**

Across the ancient world, the Assyrians generally – and the city of Nineveh in particular – were famous for their violence and cruelty.

The prophet Nahum – prophesying a little later than the events of Jonah – describes Nineveh in the following way:

*Woe to the city of blood,
full of lies,*

*full of plunder,
never without victims!* (Nahum 3:1)

The people of Nineveh were *not good people!*

If you were here a few weeks ago, you might remember James Greig showing us reliefs from both the Ashmolean and British museums, portraying graphically Assyrian violence and bloodshed.

And yet –

here the people of Nineveh are, in Jonah chapter 3, responding to Jonah's message of judgement from God –

By repenting of their sin and crying to God for mercy!

An *astounding* response to Jonah's message!

From the least in the city – right up to the kings and nobles – a national act of repentance is called for (vv.7-9).

These people didn't know much about Jonah's God –

v.9 – *'Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.'*

But they knew enough to believe Jonah's message and 'call urgently on God' for mercy!

In the New Testament, Jesus holds up the people of Nineveh as one of the greatest examples of a *right response to God*, anywhere in human history –

And from the unlikeliest of cities! From the unlikeliest of nations!

Matthew 12:41 –

"The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here."

In Jonah 3, we're confronted with the *miraculous grace of God!*

It's a sad fact of history that the repentance of Nineveh recorded here was relatively short-lived.

It's impossible to be 100% certain of the dates for Jonah's mission to Nineveh –

But it seems likely that at the time when Jonah visited the city, it was being ruled over by a relatively weak king.

As a result, the Assyrians felt weak –

There had been widespread famine in the land, and even a total solar eclipse in the mid-eighth century BC.

Jonah's message warning of judgement, came to a nervous and receptive audience.

Within a few decades, however, the Ninevites had a stronger king – in the shape of Tiglath-Pileser –

And the people of Assyria were back to their violent ways before long.

Eventually, God judged them for it –

And Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC, never to be rebuilt.

BUT –

This generation of Ninevites responded to God's message of judgement by repenting of their sin!

And – v.10 – God had *compassion* on them!

We need to see from Jonah chapter 3 –

The God of the Bible is a personal God.

He is no impassive 'President of the Immortals', sitting in heaven and playing games with humanity –

Deciding who is judged and who is spared judgement.

No – he is ***a personal God*** –

And our decisions – the responses we make to God in our lives – have real value!

They matter to God!

As Christians, we worship an awe-inspiring, sovereign God –

But there is no place for fatalism in the Christian life!

God invites us to respond to him – to relate to him –

And how we relate to him has a profound effect on the living God!

No matter who you are – no matter what you have done –

If you respond to the God of grace by crying out to him for mercy – by asking him to forgive you –

Then God will have mercy on you!

Just as he had on the people of Nineveh here...!

I've already suggested that Jonah 3:10 would be a fantastic ending to the book of Jonah.

If the book ended here, Jonah could easily be described as *the most successful prophet in the Old Testament* –

'Successful', in the sense that what he prophesied would happen – *didn't happen!*

Jonah succeeded where Hosea – Amos – Isaiah – Jeremiah, and almost every other prophet in Israel or Judah had failed!

When Jonah warned of God's judgement, the people he was preaching to turned from their ways and turned in faith to God!

Neither Israel nor Judah did that in the Old Testament –

So both were eventually sent into exile by God.

Jonah was a successful prophet!

BUT –

The book of Jonah *doesn't* end at 3:10...!

Instead of that happy ending, we have chapter 4 as well –

And here, we get to see Jonah's true attitude towards God – and *it isn't pretty...!*

Read Jonah 4:1-4.

We need to slow down here – and take stock of what Jonah has just said –

Because it reveals his true heart to us.

- **Jonah reveals his heart – and it is ugly (4:1-4)**

Without Jonah's exchanges with God here in chapter 4, we would come away with a completely different view of this prophet.

Jonah looks the part in chapter 3 -

He looks every inch the faithful prophet.

Even better from a human point of view, his is an inspiring story of *second chances...!*

Yes, he messed up by running away in chapter 1 – but just look at him in chapter 3!

Obedying God – proclaiming God's word fearlessly!

Which of us wouldn't *admire* Jonah, if that was the closing picture of him this book left us with?

But instead of a Jonah we can admire –

We're left with a petulant, sulking prophet – who is deeply resentful of the grace of God when it's not directed towards him!

Just who is this prophet?

I want to suggest to all of us this morning...

Jonah – stands for *each and every one of us*.

Any one of us here this morning could share Jonah's attitude towards God here, if we are not constantly on our guard to *humble ourselves before God* –

And to *truly listen to his word to us*.

Jonah is *disgusted* by God's grace towards Nineveh here.

Why is that? What is it that stands behind his disgust?

I believe that at the heart of his disgust here – is what also lies at the very heart of sin itself:

- ***Jonah wants to be God***

Put simply, *Jonah doesn't like God's ways of being God* –

When he personally is not benefitting from it!

In the belly of the fish in chapter 2, Jonah celebrated God's grace –

But in a sense, it is very easy to celebrate God's grace when we see clearly that we have received **good things** from him...!

The challenge for all of us is –

Will we trust God – and even delight in God – when we don't understand what it is he is doing in our lives?

Will we trust God and delight in him – when it seems as if all of his goodness and mercy is being poured out on other people,

And not on us?

That is the question Jesus poses so powerfully to us in the person of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son...!

A true understanding of God and of his grace will lead us to trust him and celebrate his grace – *even when we are not the direct beneficiaries!*

The father in Jesus' parable wanted his elder son to recognise that –

And God wants Jonah to recognise that here!

v.4 – *'Have you any right to be angry?'*

This attitude of deep resentment towards God can be very hard to detect sometimes.

It can remain well-hidden in outward demonstrations of faith in God –

In church-going respectability –

Even in sacrificial service in a local church.

It isn't always expressed in visible disobedience –

After all, Jonah *did* eventually go to Nineveh and deliver God's message –

The elder brother in Jesus' parable *had* served his father faithfully for many years.

But Jonah chapter 4 shows us –

Ultimately, God isn't impressed by our outward shows of obedience and faithfulness

–

God is concerned with what is going on in our hearts!

Put simply, God doesn't just want our obedience –

He wants **us!**

Every single part of us!

Sin – in the Bible – is not ultimately a matter of the things we *do* or *don't do* –

It is a problem of ***the heart*** –

And a vital part of God's grace towards us is his desire to ***transform our hearts!***

***To remove my heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh –
That loves him!
That loves our neighbour!***

A heart that obeys him, not out of *duty* –
But out of ***delight in who God is – and what he has done for us!***

That is a high calling –
But I believe it is the calling God is making of us through this book of Jonah this morning!

The way Jonah expressed his desire to be God – was in his desire to *exclude Nineveh from the grace of God.*

- ***Jonah wants to limit God's grace to himself and to his own people***

And this desire is a huge struggle for every individual Christian –
And for every church.

Jonah here acts like a huge warning sign to us all!

A constant danger that faces every church is the tendency we have to *turn in on ourselves –
And limit God's grace and God's activity to what he is doing here – with us.*

This manifests itself in many ways:

We might snipe at other churches or other church traditions –
or, just as bad, we might be *completely uninterested* in what God is doing elsewhere in this country and around the world.

God had to teach Jonah here that his grace was not limited to the people of Israel –
And we need to see this morning:

God's grace is not limited to east Oxford! God's grace is not limited to what he is doing in your life at the moment!

In v.3 of chapter 4, Jonah grumpily quotes God's revelation of himself to Moses in Exodus chapter 34 –

"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." (Exodus 34:6-7)

A chapter earlier in Exodus, God described his character to Moses in a way that Jonah had conveniently forgotten in his anger with God.

Exodus 33:19 –

'I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.'

We don't get to call the shots and decide where God should be working –
Who God should reveal himself to –
Who God should show mercy to.

That right – belongs to God, and God alone.

Instead of desiring that right for ourselves, we need to learn to trust that God will do what is ***right*** –

Both in our world – and in our lives as individuals.

If Jonah just looked up from his grumblings, he would have seen just what glorious news God's compassion and grace towards Nineveh really *was...!*

And that it was precisely God's compassion and grace that had saved him from death back in chapter 1.

In fact, Jonah's complaint about God in v.2 unwittingly paves the way for God's revelation of himself that takes up the rest of the chapter.

- **God reveals his heart – and it is patient and loving (4:4-9)**

In vv.4-9, God chooses to treat Jonah with the very grace and compassion that Jonah is disgusted by in vv.1-3.

It's a striking irony here that *what Jonah hates about God* –

Is actually his only hope of ever progressing beyond bitterness and resentment.

God demonstrates astonishing *patience and love* towards Jonah in these verses.

That doesn't mean God is all sweetness and light towards his prophet, though...!

God has *hard lessons* for Jonah to learn here –

Lessons designed to bring him to his senses!

God sends a vine to provide Jonah with some comfort from the sun, as he sulkily waits for Nineveh to be destroyed (v.6) –

But then he sends a worm to destroy the vine (v.7).

Worse than that, God sends 'a scorching east wind' (v.8) – and the sun blazes on Jonah's head to the point where he wants to die.

All of these things are designed to help Jonah recognise that God's grace and concern for foolish, sinful people –

is actually *praiseworthy and wonderful!*

But the lessons are nonetheless painful ones...

I entitled this sermon, '*Hard lessons from the school of grace*' –

And you might be thinking that the 'school of grace' God sends Jonah to in these verses – could well be described as 'the school of hard knocks'.

I don't want to be glib about this – but I do want to be faithful to the testimony of Scripture –

And to the experiences of individual Christians and Christian communities down the centuries.

So often, the lessons from God that really *grow* us –
That *mature* us – are also the lessons that can *hurt us*.

The experiences of God's hand at work that actually deepen our relationship with him –
That increase our dependence on him -
That really enable us to help others around us –

Are experiences that – in the short term, at least – we would not have chosen for ourselves.

Jonah must have felt the victim of some cosmic joke in these verses, what with vines and worms and scorching east winds –

But the result of all that is at least the *hope* that he will have encountered the God of grace and been changed by him by the end of it...!

God does sometimes give his people hard lessons in their walk with him.

This is not a sign of his cruelty – in fact, it is a sign of his *great love for us*.

God loved Jonah too much to leave him to his sulking and bitterness –

And God loves us too much to leave us as we are, when there is so much more of him to experience –

When there are so many areas of our lives where we still want to be 'little gods' over.

Jonah might not have liked the lessons God had to teach him –

But they were evidence of God's patience with him and great love for him.

Jonah might have wanted to 'be God' himself, when it came to judging the people of Nineveh

–

But when it came to dealing with his own sin and foolishness, only the real God – the living God, 'warts and all' – had the power to change him.

God was determined that Jonah should see that truth –

And he is equally determined that *we* should see that, this morning...!

And so, we come to the end of the book of Jonah this morning –

What are we to make of it?

In fact, that question is pretty much what the writer does leave us with at the end of chapter 4

–

What are we to make of the lessons God has had to teach Jonah about his character and his salvation?

Put another way –

What are we going to make of the God of Jonah? How will we respond to him?

- **The final word: What is the state of your heart? (4:10-11)**

The book of Jonah ends with a question from God –

'Should I not be concerned about that great city [of Nineveh]?' (v.11)

And we aren't told how Jonah answered that question...!

Did he go on stubbornly rejecting God's right to have compassion on who he chooses to have compassion?

Or did he come to his senses – and worship God for showing his mercy, even to Jonah's greatest enemies?

We simply aren't told...

But that means the question shifts from Jonah here – and on to each one of us this morning.

What is the state of your heart?

Have you slowly – imperceptibly even, begun to resent God's right to be God over your life?

Do you relate to God more on the basis of your obedience – your religious observance – your acts of service –

Rather than on the basis of his grace towards you, shown in sending his Son Jesus to die for you?

Do you ever resent God's grace and goodness towards others?

Do you struggle to praise God for what he is doing in the lives of others and around the world?

Do you only ever praise him when you personally are the beneficiary of his grace?

The lessons God had to teach Jonah about his grace –

Are lessons we all need to learn – and go on learning – as we relate to God as fallen people, in a fallen world.

The living God isn't ultimately interested in our outward obedience –

He is interested in ***our hearts.***

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ doesn't just want our service of him –

He wants ***us! Every single part of us!***

How can we avoid falling into the trap of Jonah?

How can we avoid Jonah's brand of cold-hearted obedience, that simply masks the true state of our heart from everyone except God?

Well,

We *don't* avoid it by *trying harder or working harder or redoubling our efforts* in the Christian life...!

Just look at Jonah in chapter 3 to see that that is not a solution!

Just think back to the elder brother in Jesus' parable – faithfully serving his father for years while secretly resenting him...

No –

The only way we can avoid Jonah's trap of cold-hearted obedience – is by

- *depending on God daily to transform our hearts by his Spirit*
- *so that they are more in keeping with God's heart.*

How can that happen?

ASK GOD TO OPEN YOUR EYES TO WHO HE REALLY IS –

The God who has mercy on a violent city like Nineveh –

The Father who runs out to meet and welcome home every prodigal son and daughter

AND ASK HIM TO CHANGE YOU AS YOU ENCOUNTER HIM!

That can only happen by God's Spirit working in us –

It's not something we do ourselves.

But we can *pray* for God to change us!

We can pray that for ourselves – and we can pray that for our church!

And we can draw near to the living God – as he reveals himself through his Son Jesus and through the gospel of his grace –

So that we cannot help but be changed by that encounter!

The Puritan Richard Sibbes put it like this in the seventeenth-century:

“And when we feel ourselves cold in affection and duty, the best way is to warm ourselves at this fire of his love and mercy in giving himself for us. [...] Our disposition must be changed. We must be new creatures. They seek for heaven in hell that seek for spiritual love in an unchanged heart.” (The Bruised Reed)

We need to pray that God would change us, as we warm ourselves at the fire of his love and mercy towards us.

Let's pray that for *ourselves* –

Let's pray that for *our church*.