

Dear friends in Christ Jesus:

What are you doing, God? Why are you showing grace to those people?” These are the words of God’s own prophet—God’s prophet who has spent the last three days preaching repentance to a foreign people lost in sin—who saw this foreign people repent in sackcloth and ashes—who witnessed arguably the greatest mass conversion ever. What a shocking scene as God’s prophet is angry at God. But how did he get here? How could the ambassador of God be upset at such a display of grace?

“So the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Get up. Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach against it, for its people’s evil ways have come up before me’” (Jonah 1:1). God calls Jonah. His response? “You want me to preach to those people? No way!” So he flees to Tarshish. His ship gets caught in a storm. He’s thrown overboard. Next thing he knows he’s in the belly of a fish sent by God. Jonah repents. After getting vomited up, he preaches to Nineveh. Nineveh repents. God relents from his anger. Everything’s good, right? Jonah can go back to Israel and tell everyone about the wonders of God’s amazing grace.

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, **“Lord, wasn’t this exactly what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I previously fled to Tarshish.”** Jonah doesn’t want Nineveh to be saved. This is why he didn’t want to go preach to them. **“What are you doing, God? Why do you want to show grace to those people? They’re not your chosen people. Haven’t you seen their brutality? They impale their enemies on poles. Those people don’t deserve your grace! If you don’t destroy them, they could destroy us, your chosen people! What are you doing, God?”**

It’s shocking how God’s own prophet is essentially calling out God for his grace: **I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and you relent from sending disaster.** Jonah is scolding God for being who he is! Jonah is just like the workers in the vineyard who called out the landowner for his generosity because they thought he was being unfair (Matthew 20:11-12). And just like the workers in the vineyard Jonah loses sight of the fact that he himself had been a recipient of God’s grace.

What could cause God’s own prophet to have such an exclusive attitude? How could a believer who only a couple chapters before in the belly of a fish acknowledged that his **“salvation belongs to the Lord”** (2:9) become so self-righteous? Jonah’s behavior seems so confusing. But if we look at our own lives, is our behavior any less confusing?

Do we ever think God is being unfair by showing people grace? When we see rulers in other parts of the world causing hardships and killing innocent people, do we almost think that God owes it to the good of everyone else on earth to zap those rulers dead on the spot? **“What are you doing, God? Why do you let them get away with their evil? Just kill them now! They don’t deserve your grace.”** Have we ever hesitated to share the gospel with stubborn unbelievers? “There’s no point in sharing the gospel with them, they’ll just reject it anyways.” Has that one person defiantly living in sin and opposing Christianity ever caused us to think heaven would be a better place if they weren’t there? Deep down in our sinful nature lies the attitude that thinks that somehow we deserve God’s grace more than others.

And it’s this attitude that deepens its hold on Jonah. **So now, Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.** Jonah is fed up with God’s grace. “God, if this is a world where you show grace to those people, then this is a world I don’t want to live in.” We see Jonah continue in his spiritual degeneration. When God asks him if he has any right to be angry, Jonah doesn’t answer. Deep down he knows he has no right to be angry, but he still wants to see Nineveh destroyed. **Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city. He made himself a shelter for himself there and sat in the shade, waiting to see what would happen in the city.**

Jonah is truly confused about God’s grace. So God provides one more opportunity to show Jonah just how deep his grace is. **Then the Lord God provided a plant and made it grow up over Jonah to provide shade over his head, to relieve him from his discomfort. So Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, and it attacked the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, so he said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”** Jonah said, **“I do have a right to be angry—angry enough to die!”** So the Lord

said, “You have been concerned about this plant. You did not work for it or make it grow. It grew up in one night and perished after one night. So should I not be concerned for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know the difference between their right hand and their left—and also many animals?”

God was using this plant as an object lesson to illustrate his grace to Jonah. Jonah is happy about the plant because it gives him shade and he is mad when it dies because now he is hot. Even though he did not make it grow or cause it to die, he is still concerned about it, enough to get angry to the point of death. God’s lesson is this: “Jonah, if you’re so concerned about this plant that you had nothing to do with, how much more should I be concerned about the people of Nineveh? I created those people. And they’re lost in sin. Over 120,000 people are going to go to hell if I don’t save them. It doesn’t matter if they’re not my “chosen people,” I created them and I want to save them! I am a **gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and [I] relent from sending disaster**. This is who I am!”

And with that the book ends. Does Jonah finally get it? Does he repent for his anger and self-righteousness? The fact that he ends this book with this embarrassing personal account that magnifies God’s grace would suggest that he does get it. I can’t help but image that when Jonah hears these words and sees how deep God’s grace is, his jaw is on the ground. God’s grace really is bigger than anything he can imagine.

If God took Jonah aside at this point and showed Jonah a “replay screen” of the past few chapters of his life, what would Jonah see? When he looks and sees himself run away from God, he would see God run after him. When he sees himself in the fish he would remember God’s salvation. In the face of his forgetfulness, self-righteousness, and offense at God’s grace, he would see God’s patience. When he asks God to take his life twice, he would see God spare his life and lovingly provide a painful rebuke in the form of an object lesson to teach him about grace. When Jonah sees the Almighty Lord of history displaying patience upon patience with him—a pouting child—what would he say? What could he say except, “**What are you doing, God?** Why do you keep showing grace to me? I’ve done nothing to deserve your grace; in fact I’ve done everything possible to not deserve your grace!”

And what would God say? Maybe something like this: “I know, Jonah. I remember all the times you called me out for my grace, all the times you thought you knew better than I did, all the times you forgot how I was gracious to you. But I am **gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and [I] relent from sending disaster**. I am a gracious God to the Ninevites, and I am a gracious God to you.”

Why did Jonah end the book this way? Maybe because he wanted to let God have the first and last words. The book starts with God calling Jonah to preach repentance to Nineveh and it ends with God describing his grace. From start to finish we see that God is a compassionate and gracious God.

What if we could see a replay of our own lives? In a way we can in the Bible. When we look at the “replay screen” of God’s Word, what do we see? Well, we see all the times we failed to take God’s grace to heart. We see all the times we accused God of being unfair with his grace. We see our sinful nature wanting God to show his grace to us, but not other people. But as we look, another image comes on screen. We see a humble man reaching out to tax-collectors and sinners. We see a Jew spreading the gospel to Gentiles, Greeks, and foreigners. We see this man preaching to hardened sinners, praying for those who would betray him, and asking God to forgive his enemies as he hangs dying on a cross. We see Jesus, the Son of God, showing love to those we think don’t deserve it. And then we see Jesus showing love to us. And when we see this, what can we say except, “**What are you doing, God?** Why are you showing grace to me? I don’t deserve it!”

And it’s at that moment that Jesus comes to us in his Word and points us to his cross. “I know you don’t deserve it,” he says. “And that’s exactly why I died on that cross. I took the punishment you deserved. Believe in me! You are forgiven!” And suddenly we go from saying, “**What are you doing, God?**” to, “Thank you for what you have done, God!” Because while God’s word—the “replay screen” of our life—shows us how much we don’t deserve God’s love, it also shows us the magnitude of God’s grace, and it shows us that this grace is for us through the work of Jesus.

And when we take to heart how gracious God has been to us then we can in turn be gracious to others. The ending of this book invites us to think about God’s grace and how we can share it with others. God’s last words, “**Should I not be concerned for Nineveh, the great city?**” resonate in our ears. God is gracious and wants all people to be saved. So should we. May we come to humbly appreciate God’s grace, thank God for his love, and share his grace with others, even those we think don’t deserve it. Amen.