

# Wrestling With God 6) To Comprehend his Grace

Jonah 4:5-11 • 2020-10-04 • Wrestling with God Series



One could argue that few believers have wrestled with God more than Jonah. At the end of his account Jonah is terribly angry. And it appears his anger is directed at God.

He even argues with God and tells God why he is so angry. It all boiled down to Jonah's failure to comprehend and appreciate God's grace for sinners. Today we will wrap up our six-part series on "wrestling with God." We will look at the closing portion of the book of Jonah and see how the Lord led him to better understand his working in grace for sinners. And we'll grow in appreciation of his marvelous grace for all.

Jonah's anger appears to have started a long while beforehand. God revealed to his prophet that he had seen the people and their ways in Nineveh. This was a foreign city that was hundreds of miles away from Israel. Yet their power and strength had grown so that reports had no doubt reached Jonah. The people of Nineveh, the Assyrians, were a ruthless people. We still have today the remains of pictures and carvings from their time. It depicts the Assyrian people performing horrible acts of torture on the people they conquered. They subdued surrounding nations and treated them most cruelly without mercy.

Jonah's frustration began when God told him to go and preach against the Ninevites. He knew exactly what God had in mind by sending him hundreds of miles to preach. It is the same reason he sends preachers to every part of the world. God wanted to call them to repent so that he could display his mercy to them.

That was not at all what Jonah wanted. Many are familiar with the way Jonah's jolted in response to God's calling. He fled from the presence of the Lord and embarked on a ship headed directly away from Nineveh. After his shipmates discovered his rebellion, they threw him overboard into the raging sea. But God provided a great fish to rescue Jonah. On the third day it vomited him on dry ground. Finally, Jonah realized he must go and preach to the Ninevites.

But something miraculous -even more miraculous than being vomited alive on shore by the great fish- happened. Jonah went to the city and preached. In response the godless and wicked people in Nineveh took to heart Jonah's message! And they repented! Everyone in the city from the king to the lowliest showed humility and turned from their evil! The city was enormous by standards of an ancient city. Yet all had repented! This was an incredible miracle. Jonah had found success like no other preacher in recorded history. Hundreds of thousands of people turned from evil to the mercy of the Lord. And then God relented from the disaster threatened against Nineveh. He showed them his mercy.

That's where we pick things up today. The mission was a success in that it brought so many to repentance. But Jonah was far from happy. *"But to Jonah all this seemed very bad, and he became very angry."* (Jonah 4:1) He then attacked God in his anger, *"That is why I previously fled to Tarshish, because I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and you relent from sending disaster."* (4:2) He is saying, "God I knew you'd show them mercy! I knew that's what you had in mind with sending me. That's why I didn't want to go." And in saying this is revealing his attitude towards God's allotment of his grace. "Don't spare them. You're too quick to forgive!"

Jonah thought he had the right ideas on who deserved God's grace. He had walked among the people of Nineveh for a few days and no doubt saw the mess of humanity. He no doubt saw the greed of the rich devouring the downtrodden, heard the tongues of the vulgar, was stunned by the indulgent drinking, shocked at boastful mouths, and offended by the violent aggression of their hands. He had heard about it and no doubt hated Nineveh all the more after walking in it. They deserved destruction.

Jonah didn't want to marvel at the miracle God had worked in mercy. He wanted to witness the juicy judgments God threatened to carry out in his justice. He had a very shallow understanding of what the grace of God meant.

Could you picture a person preaching against the sins of an urban American neighborhood and getting upset when they actually listened to him and repent? Is that fair? What if a preacher today got hundreds of thousands of sinners to repent so quickly? Would we say that those people should all be forgiven quickly? How do you suppose many American Christians felt about a place like Japan in the 1950s? Many of them had lost family members who fought in the war against Japan. They heard stories of how cruelly some prisoners of war were treated by the Japanese. They heard how the soldiers of Imperial Japan had raped and killed the people of China and Korea and many other nations. They found out the horrors of how American soldiers were subjected to scientific experiments like lab rats. How do you think they felt when they heard church bodies like ours were establishing missions in 1957 to reach them with the message of repentance and faith in Jesus? I don't know, but I'm guessing some thought it less pressing than other mission work. How did the pastors who were first sent to preach in Apache land here in the southwest find their work was received? They faithfully shared the gospel over 125 years ago and found success as they led many Apache people to hear of the Lord, the Creator of all, who came to redeem them from the grave. Many Apache's came to faith. Those pastors served faithfully with deep love for those people they reached. But records indicate that 125 years ago some of their peers back east regarded those men as inferior pastors. Why? Were the people they were reaching not also under God's plan of grace? Some failed to comprehend God's plan of grace for all.

Is God ever too quick to forgive? The mindset of Jonah has always plagued the Church. Early Christians were criticized along with Christ for accepting sinners. Is God's grace meant for the tax-collectors and prostitutes? Even the apostle Peter at one time struggled to see God's plan to spread his grace to all people. The Church without sight of God's plan of grace for sinners can begin to function like a business for the wealthy rather than a hospital for the poor. When businesses set out to build a new store or start a new marketing strategy, they first consider their target. They determine if the neighborhood will buy their products. And whether we might like it or not they also look at how wealthy their target neighborhood is. They want to sell to the best market. Tons of research goes into building new stores. But is that the way the Church is supposed to operate? Is it ever good for us to say, "Let's do mission work there because they will be the richest and easiest people to reach.?" There are hard, dark, poor, sinful places too.

Ethnicity, location, lifestyle, and economic status don't matter at all when it comes to the grace of God. He wants his grace to be known to all. We know this is true, but do we always fully reflect it and appreciate that truth? Consider your first response when you encounter someone who holds an anti-Christian worldview. Think of some of those you know who have no idea what the gift of human sexuality is and who treat the human body like an idol. Do you write them off as too lost to receive God's grace? When someone is given to alcoholism or drug abuse, or a neighborhood is entrenched in drug dealings, do you write them off as, "undeserving of God's grace?" What about someone in prison, guilty of crimes and abuse? Maybe you don't directly say they matter less. But do you make them the chief goal of your efforts to share the gospel? Or would you feel more comfortable sharing the gospel with those who are in a heterosexual marriage, who don't struggle with substance abuse, or who haven't been convicted of a crime?

Let Jonah's account stand as a powerful testimony. Firstly, we know that even those lost in the darkness of sin will listen to preaching. They too will repent and will receive mercy. But let his account stand even more powerfully as the reminder how the Lord desires they receive mercy.

Here's the thing about grace which we can struggle to fully comprehend: *No one deserves it!* God says to Jonah, "*Do you have a right to be angry* (that I am showing others my mercy and grace?)" Jonah didn't even deserve to be alive! He had directly rebelled against God by fleeing from his call to preach. He deserved to be drowned in the depths of the sea. It didn't matter that he had kept the laws of God and had been a circumcised worshipper of the true God. He was still guilty of his own great sins. He was rejecting God's call, refusing to serve God, rejecting God's grace. Jonah was in great danger! Jonah deserved punishment, not love. But in grace God showed him love and compassion. So it is with everyone who has experienced the grace of God. Nobody deserves it. The people of Nineveh didn't deserve it. But neither did the prophet Jonah. The people in Japan in 1957 didn't deserve it, but neither did the missionaries our church body sent. The people in Apache land didn't deserve God's grace at the end of the 1900s, but neither did the men sent to them. Your racist neighbors, your sexually immoral friends, your Republican or Democrat coworkers, your drunken, drug-abusing neighbors down the road, and all the people in prison today don't deserve God's grace. But neither do you or I deserve it. That's what makes it grace and what makes God so great!

Out of concern for a world filled with sinners the Lord planned our rescue. Jesus, like Jonah came to bring the message of God's judgment on sin. He came preaching a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Though he had to leave his throne in heaven to preach it, he did not shy away from his task for a moment. As the true, one and only Son of God he shared in his Father's grace for sinners. And instead of sitting up a booth in the shade to watch us all be destroyed he came with deep concern for us all. But make no mistake. God doesn't just tolerate sin. And he isn't quick to just let go of sin. That would truly be unjust and ungodly. Jonah was right in part: a holy God doesn't simply dismiss sin. He pours out his just wrath and punishes it. Sin cannot just be tolerated. Yet the Lord does deal with it in mercy, he covers it and pays the price for it himself. Because of his sin Jonah faced the depths of the sea and the scorching of the hot dry sun. Jesus was sinless. But for all the sins of the world, faced the cross and the wrath of God. And just as Jonah was in the fish for three days, Jesus was in the grave. He came alive on the third day. In his great mercy he sends us to share his message of forgiveness to all people.

God wants his people to comprehend and share his grace. To teach Jonah a lesson he provided a plant to give him some shade. The only time we see Jonah happy is when this plant grows to offer shade. "God must care about me as I sit here waiting and watching for Nineveh to be destroyed." But no destruction came on the city. Instead God provided a worm to kill the plant and a scorching east wind to beat against Jonah. God then tells him, "Are you upset about this mere plant? Jonah, shouldn't I be concerned about this large city and all who are in it?"

We have no response recorded from Jonah. He lost the wrestling match as he was confronted with the incomprehensible grace of God for sinners -him and all people. God had him record this account for us to learn: The Lord is a merciful God. He wants us to fully comprehend the measure of his mercy for all. It's no wonder Jonah and all of us struggle to comprehend such a great abundance of grace. He's "*a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in mercy.*" Jonah wrestled to fully appreciate and comprehend it. May we not wrestle but fully see it today and make it known to all.