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The Book of Jonah
IV. A Gracious and Merciful God
Jonah 4:1-11

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“I knew it! I just knew it!” cries Jonah:

*O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country.
That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are
a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in
steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*

I think this may be the one thing Jonah actually gets right in the whole of his story: he is right about the nature of our God – that our God is, indeed, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That is who our God is, and that is what our God is really like. Do we know that about God? Is that the picture of God that we are carrying around in our heads and hearts – gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love?

I sure hope so, because it is something the Bible declares to us again and again. Adam and Eve, for example, they rebel against God in the Garden – and what does God do? There are consequences for their actions to be sure, but God does not destroy them, does not lay into them like an angry hurricane. Instead, God gives them a second chance, sends them out in the world still under His watchful eye. In fact, God Himself even makes for them the clothes they will need outside the Garden.¹ Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Or how about that time when Israel was found dancing around a golden calf out in the wilderness, instead of bowing down before the God who had just recently delivered them from out of their slavery in Egypt.² There are consequences to be sure, but again God does not destroy them in His anger. He shows mercy – and continues to lead them toward the Promised Land. Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We could multiply examples all morning. The woman caught in adultery, a crowd ready to stone her to death. Jesus appears and makes the crowd disappear. Then He turns to the woman and tells her that He does not condemn her, for her to go on about her life and sin no more.³ Or how about – the supreme example – Jesus upon the cross, crying out, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!”*⁴

Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love – it’s the one thing Jonah gets right in all of his story. And I hope and pray that we are getting that right also, in our heads and in our hearts. That when we think of God, when we talk of God, when we consider what He has done for us in Jesus Christ, that this is what we have come to understand: that He is

gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. This is a testimony from a fellow pastor – which speaks for me and I pray also for you:

Whenever I think about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, whenever I think about the grace involved, and the forgiveness, and the costliness of the love – I don't know what to say. I don't have the words to describe what I feel. All I know is that my life can no longer be the same. I am so grateful. To be loved and forgiven in this way – it's the best news I've ever heard. Nothing I've ever known comes close to this. I have experienced the grace of God in my life.⁵

“Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” But, from that high point on, Jonah – perhaps unsurprisingly at this point – then proceeds to get everything else wrong – really, really wrong. In fact, as we hear Jonah saying this to God, out of his mouth it sounds more like an accusation. Because as many times as we have seen Jonah on the receiving end of God’s grace and mercy, here’s Jonah now furious that God has shown that same grace and mercy to the Assyrians in Nineveh. To the Assyrians – in Jonah’s eyes the most evil people on the face of the earth! Jonah gets the nature of God exactly right – gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love – but then immediately turns around and gets the scope of God’s grace and mercy and love completely wrong. Jonah only wants God’s grace and mercy and love to go to people like him, and not to people like them. Jonah wants to divide up the world into those he thinks should receive God’s mercy and those he thinks should not. And he will be the judge of who’s who. And he certainly doesn’t want the grace and mercy and love of God – which, again, has so freely been given to him through this story – he certainly doesn’t want God’s grace and mercy and love to go to those he considers enemies. He wants God’s grace and mercy and love to play by his rules. Grace for me and mine – but, dear Lord, destroy them!

But God’s grace and mercy and love don’t play by Jonah’s rules, nor by ours. Jonah hates the Assyrians – well, okay, who do we hate? Who makes us mad? Who do we consider to be “them” instead of “us”? Who would we like to see God smite from the heavens? Well, bad news – at least if we are in the habit of dividing up the world that way, if we are in the habit of seeing others through Jonah’s eyes instead of through the eyes of God. Bad news – because, as it turns out, God loves “them” every bit as much as He loves “us.” Every bit as much – no difference. God, as it turns out, loves the Assyrians every bit as much as He loves Jonah. And, as He has again and again shown to Jonah His grace and mercy, so God desires to show that same grace and mercy to the Assyrians in their repentance. The evil Assyrians turn out also to be people whom God loves.

That’s also the message of the little shade tree parable God enacts in order to teach Jonah. God causes the tree to spring up to shelter Jonah sulks in the sun, but the next day the tree is dead. Jonah is all worked up with grief and anger over the destruction of his poor little shade tree, when God brings home to him the moral of the story:

You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a

night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?

God even loves the cattle. And, in spite of all the evil they have done, God loves the Assyrians. They are people He has fashioned and brought into being, just like Jonah. And therefore He loves them just as much as He loves Jonah. For God's love is not dependent upon our deserving, but upon the greatness of His divine heart. And so when the Assyrians repent of their sins, God is only too glad to show them grace and mercy – just as He had been glad to show Jonah mercy when Jonah finally confessed his sin in the belly of the whale.⁶

Now, make no mistake, God hates the evil the Assyrians have done, just as He hates the evil that we do. But God is able to do something we human beings struggle to do – God is able to hate the sin while still loving the sinner. Indeed, God's whole plan of salvation is to deal with His enemies (us included) by converting them into His friends through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. How do you get rid of enemies? Two ways: you either destroy them, or you convert them into friends – and God's plan of salvation clearly favors one over the other. Hating the sin, but loving the sinner – I mean, just listen to how God speaks to Jonah about the Assyrians: “. . . *more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left* . . .” God sees their evil actions, but God can, at the same time, see that the persons doing these things are doing so not because they are evil, so much as because they are lost from Him and need to be found. It is their lostness, their separation from God, of out which their evil is done.

And thus the solution God seeks is not to destroy them for their evil, but to find them with His grace and mercy – to find us with His grace and mercy. And so to cut off the source of evil at the root. And so to turn enemies into friends. And so to turn those who are lost into those who are found. Remember the father of the prodigal son in that parable Jesus told – the son coming home after having squandered the family fortune, and his father nevertheless crying out to all, “*My son who was lost, is now found!*”⁷ Remember Jesus speaking from the cross, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing*”⁸ – they don't know their right hand from their left. In God's eyes, it is not so much that we sin, and so separate ourselves from God. It is that we are separated from God, and therefore we sin. And so God's solution to this problem of Jonah, Nineveh, the whole wide world – including you and me – is not to punish, nor to destroy. But to seek out and to find, to rescue and to return home:

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*⁹

“*Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*” Jonah gets that part right, but his attempt to limit God's work of grace and mercy just to himself and those like him is a huge case of “getting it really wrong.” Which leads then to a second huge mistake – namely, his misunderstanding of his proper place in the working out of God's plan. His proper response to the grace and mercy and love which God has shown to him. It is God's intention, not just that we should be saved by His grace and mercy and love – but also that those so saved shall

themselves become gracious, merciful, and loving in their own deeds and attitudes. In order that we should also then become God's helpers and servants in His great plan of worldwide, no-lines-drawn redemption. Having received God's mercy, God intends that we also should become merciful towards all others. Having received God's grace, God intends that we also should become gracious towards all others. Having received God's love, God intends that we also should become loving towards all others. This is what God is doing in His plan of salvation – He is not just saving us, but recreating us that we should become ambassadors of His salvation. Precisely what Paul is getting at when he writes to the Corinthians – that fractured, unfriendly, inwardly fighting congregation – when he writes:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.¹⁰

“God making his appeal through us.” But there sits Jonah under his wilted little shade tree, hatred in his heart. Jonah may have preached to the city as required by God, but Jonah clearly has refused to care one bit about that city and its inhabitants. Big mistake number two – to be unmerciful, ungracious, and unloving to others when God has been so merciful, gracious, and loving towards us. Jonah is like that parable Jesus told about the servant who was forgiven by the king for a fortune in debt, only to then turn around and refuse to forgive someone who owed him a few pennies.¹¹ Ungracious, unmerciful, and unloving – nothing could be worse for the cause of God than for God's own people to show such a Jonah face to the world God is trying to save. Nothing could be worse – for it is not just failing to serve God's purpose of redemption in this world, it is in fact to actively oppose the working out of God's grace and mercy and love through our scornful attitudes and unkind actions towards those still outside the fold.

For God not only seeks to save us, but also deeply desires that we should become for Him, and for the sake of this world He loves, His “ambassadors for Christ.”¹² “Do you do well to be angry?” God asks of Jonah sulking. And Jonah shouts back, “You bet I do!” Wrong, Jonah – really, really wrong. For what this last chapter of Jonah would have us to understand – like a shot across the bow of this world's current spirit of anger, tribalism, and division – is that “the mark of those who have been immersed in the grace of God is compassion and love, not contempt, [even] for people who aren't like them.”¹³

But is Jonah convinced? Does Jonah have a change of heart, like the Grinch on top of Who Mountain? The story of Jonah ends with that question still hanging in the air. Maybe so that we would each have to find and live out the answer for ourselves. For the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, can indeed not only save us, but change us. Indeed, will change us, and make us gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love – if only we will let Him.

The Korean pastor Paul Yongi Cho, who died just a few years ago, was pastor of the largest church in the world – over 830,000 members. Back when his ministry was starting to become international in scope, he told God, *“I will go anywhere to preach the gospel – except Japan.”* He hated the Japanese with fervent hatred because of what they had done to members of his family and to the Korean people as a whole during World War II. But through a prolonged inner struggle and several urgent invitations, Cho eventually found himself on his way to preach at a conference of Japanese pastors – a thousand Japanese pastors were gathering to hear him. Cho stood up to speak, but all that came out of his mouth was this, *“I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.”* And then he broke down and wept.

Then one, then another, then soon the entire group of one thousand Ninevites, I mean Japanese pastors, stood up. And one by one they walked up to Cho, knelt at his feet and asked forgiveness for what they and their people had done to him and his people. And as this went on, the hatred simply melted away in Cho’s heart. And the Lord put a new word in his mouth. He said to them, *“I love you. I love you. I love you.”*¹⁴

“Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” – the way and the nature of the God who has made us and redeemed us. But also to become the way and nature of those who are now called by His name. And God can and will make it happen in us. And that, finally, is what the book of Jonah is all about. *“Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”* For in this way, and in this way only, shall God’s Kingdom come on earth.

¹ Genesis 3:21.

² Exodus 32:1-35.

³ John 8:2-11.

⁴ Luke 23:34.

⁵ Douglas J. Brouwer, Remembering the Faith (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), p. 92.

⁶ Jonah 2:1-10.

⁷ Luke 15:24.

⁸ Luke 23:34.

⁹ John 3:16-17.

¹⁰ II Corinthians 5:17-20.

¹¹ Matthew 18:21-35.

¹² II Corinthians 5:20.

¹³ Timothy Keller, Rediscovering Jonah: The Secret of God’s Mercy (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), p. 224.

¹⁴ Mark Buchanan, Your God Is Too Safe (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), p. 47.