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Dr. Strangegrace

Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Grace of God

Jonah is a hero of Scripture. Jonah is also a wuss. OK, that may be going too far. I should give him his due respect as one of many who helped lay the foundation of Scripture's witness to the Word of God in Christ. As Paul says, the apostles and prophets were crucial to building up the people of God in Jesus (Ephesians 2:19-21). But as prophets go, Jonah is usually a good example of what NOT to do.

To be fair, he submitted to God long enough to effect spiritual change in an entire city-state (which is WAY more than I've done). He faithfully proclaimed the Lord's judgment upon Nineveh and people repented (note the positive effect of God's judgment wrath). Jonah also knew when to stop running and that was commendable. We all make mistakes, but we all don't reverse course upon realization.

Jonah also provides a humorous and fantastic story for kids to enjoy. Young ones love the story of Jonah, because in Pinocchio-like fashion, he was eaten by a giant sea creature (the little boy in me loves how the Bible occasionally turns into a monster movie). Unlike the wooden boy, he cried out to God as the means of his salvation. On the other wooden hand, like Pinocchio this clash with monsters of the deep helps Jonah become what he is meant to be—a real human. Jonah becomes a little more like the human God meant him to be. This reaching out to God from the belly of the beast is the source of many Jonah faith lessons.

Adults usually glean different lessons from the story of Jonah. I like the irony of pagan sailors being the very first people in the story to obey God—even though the Hebrew prophet is the only one who gets his name in the title. This story could have been called, **Jonah: The Guy Who Runs, Repents and Regrets, Making Us Wonder if He Ever Got the Point**, but that would have been an awful title.

Sometimes Jonah is the inspiration for the lesson, "Respond to the Word of God or else." Or one may hear, "Respond to the Word of God, even if begrudgingly." Others notice the people of Nineveh (once again non-Jewish pagans) as quite exemplary in their life-changing repentance toward the true God.

I would like to look more closely at Jonah's understanding of God. More specifically what this prophet thinks about the *character* of YHWH. How do his views on the heart of YHWH motivate his actions? After all, he probably realized he was an unworthy vessel of God's revelation—becoming acutely aware of his fallen humanity in the midst of utter holiness. Like Isaiah he may have cried, "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). These feelings of being "unworthy" may have something to do with how he treats other "unworthy" people... maybe.

I think we may have a hint of why Jonah was already a frustrated prophet when he received the word to go to Nineveh. Notice this brief historical note,

*Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. **He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher...** since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash (from 2 Kings 14:23-27).*

Jonah had a hard job as a prophet. He was the prophet during the reign of a king who "did evil in the eyes of the Lord," while at the same time the Lord "saved them by the hand of" this same king. At least twice in his career, Jonah had see the grace of God be extended to and through unworthy, unfaithful, sinful people. I can understand the frustration.

Another great irony of Jonah's story is that he was so frustrated by unfaithful people being the means and the recipients of grace while he was also one of those unfaithful people. Jonah, the runaway prophet, was also a man who was the recipient of grace and the means by which God brought grace to others—even in his lack of faith. He did not trust God in his Wisdom to know how to extend grace. He didn't seem to even love others enough to want them to receive grace. As harsh as this seems at least the books of the kings give us some context for this frustration.

It seems Jonah is quite aware of the grace of God. He describes the grace of God quite accurately as it seems he's memorized what some call a "little credo" of Israel¹. Moses remembers it this way:

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:5-6 NIV)

This summary of the ways of God with men describes divine word becoming divine action in faithfulness to the divine being. It is the truth of how God is and always will be—as the only consistent, undivided being in all of existence.

We hear its echo in the words of Jonah when he says, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2). Jonah knew about the grace of God, but I am suspicious about how he much he *felt* or *experienced* the grace of God. The burden of delivering the Word of the Lord must have weighed heavily on his shoulders. Then add to this the frustration of delivering the word of Yahweh to people who seemed to be blessed even though they were unfaithful. Then he must go to the conquerors of Israel and see them reap the blessings of grace.

Jonah's response to all this near the end of the book makes me think he had an academic understanding of grace. This is just personal speculation, but I am trying to understand his words and actions. He knew the words given to Moses, but his actions betray a man who has been hardened by experiences rather than softened by grace. His pains and frustrations may have left him unable or unwilling to open himself up to a deeper healing that comes with forgiveness. He needed to forgive Israel's king, the people of Nineveh, and most likely himself. Jonah wanted to see his own sense of God's justice enacted in the lives of Israel and Nineveh because maybe he knew he was a loveless, unforgiving sinful man.

Can we relate to Jonah? I can. When I first read in Paul's letter to the Colossians that the Father had reconciled heaven and earth to himself in the person of Jesus, I hesitated to believe the full implications of this truth. Could it really mean that God is as gracious and loving as that—to take the initiative and embrace humanity and the whole cosmos? I started feeling a bit like Jonah. Jonah seems to be thinking, Why would I want Nineveh—my enemies!—to hear the saving Word of God? They might repent and experience God's grace—I know God is really gracious! I wondered what kind of God it is I serve who reconciles first and then calls people to believe and repent in his grace. What about faith? What about evil? What about justice? What about... All the "what-about's" go through my mind, and then I think I about Jonah.

What if God wants to save all the "Ninevehs" in my head? What if the Triune God desires to save all the people I think are not worthy of God's grace? Am I going to be a Jonah and run away from that kind of a saving Word? Am I going to resent that kind of a gospel? NO! One Jonah is enough. I decided, by the grace of God, to stop worrying and love the grace of God. Let it be shouted from the rooftops that our God—Father, Son, Spirit—loves us so much that heaven and earth, all things, were reconciled in and through Jesus. There is peace on earth and good will toward all people—and his name is Jesus.

~ Benjamin Martinez

1. See Dr. John E. McKenna's The Great Amen of the Great I-AM: God in Covenant With His People in His Creation, Resource Publications: Eugene (2008). He discusses this credo in chap. 3, "The Little Credo of the Great I-AM." He's theological advisor for GCI and all around cool guy.