

¹⁰When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

¹But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD, "Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

⁴But the LORD replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?" ⁵Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. ⁷But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." ⁹But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

"It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead." ¹⁰But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

GOD'S AMAZING GRACE IS FOR ALL

Let's play a little word association game. I'll say a biblical person and you tell me the first thing that comes to your mind: Samson (Strength) Noah (Ark) Jonah (Fish). Whenever we think of the Jonah of the Bible, we think of a big fish. But the story of Jonah is not so much a story of a big fish as it's a story of a big God. It's a story of a big God with a big heart, a heart overflowing with what we can only call amazing grace.

Maybe we need to clarify what we mean by grace. To some, grace is a woman's name. To others, grace is what you see in a ballerina. And to still others, grace is what you say before eating your meal. But when we are talking about grace today we are talking about something very different. We're talking about something that fills God's heart, we're talking about something so profound, so powerful, so persistent, so passionate, so amazing that when you see it in action about all you can do is sit back and say, "Wow!"

God's Amazing Grace for the Ninevites

Let me show you what I mean with how God acted on behalf of the citizens of Nineveh. Nineveh was not a friendly place. It was a city filled with unbelievably cruel people. History says that once they defeated a city, they would take the survivors and impale them on stakes by the front gate. After a battle they'd pile up the skulls of their enemies and erect pillars out of them as monuments. In the course of history, this is the nation that would invade and destroy most of Israel, the people God was using to provide the human ancestry for the Savior of the world.

Of course, God knew the wickedness of the Ninevites. He was aware of every one of their atrocities, but what does God do to these torturers? God called a prophet named Jonah to Nineveh. God sends Jonah to Nineveh so his message might bring repentance and salvation. But Jonah doesn't go. Instead Jonah boards a ship and heads the other direction. But God's grace is persistent. In amazing love for Nineveh, God has Jonah thrown overboard. In amazing love for Nineveh, God has a fish preserve Jonah by swallowing him whole and spitting him up on shore. In amazing love for Nineveh God re-commissions Jonah to go to their city and call them to repentance.

When you read this story, when you think of how persistently and passionately God pursues his goal of winning these half-million cruel, godless people to saving faith, don't you have to say, "Wow! That's amazing grace!"? If we put it in today's context it would be like going to those people who planned and carried out every terrorist act against our country or Christianity and saying to them, "There is hope for you! Realize how wrong you have been and turn to the true God for forgiveness and salvation. He sent Jesus for you too!" This is how God reached out to the people of Nineveh, but it doesn't even stop there. In grace God caused his Word to work in their hearts. The entire city of over a half million people were spared not only from earthly destruction but eternal destruction as well. Wow!

God's Amazing Grace for Jonah

Now let's talk about Jonah. The Bible tells us what happened to the city of Nineveh because of God's amazing grace really irked Jonah. Jonah wanted these people destroyed. We're told, *'Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in the shade and waited to see*

what would happen to this city.” Can you visualize that? It’s almost as if Jonah is getting ready for a fireworks show.

Think of Jonah’s attitude for a minute. The Bible says that all the angels of heaven rejoice over the repentance of one single sinner. Here over a half million people repent, a miracle a couple hundred times greater than the ones the disciples witnessed on Pentecost and Jonah is angry. We’re not talking about some hard-hearted unbeliever here. We’re talking about a man who should have known better, a prophet of God, one whose very purpose is to relate and reflect God’s love.

Think of what God could have done to Jonah for having a heart so contrary to the attitude of his own heart. God could have let Jonah sink to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. He could have let Jonah bake in the sun and die of heat stroke. He could have let Jonah die with his holier than the Ninevites attitude in his heart and have him spend eternity in hell. But God doesn’t do that. Instead God patiently walks Jonah through the various steps he needs to go through until he finally gets it that God is a God of amazing grace.

First, God gets Jonah’s attention by making him happy. He causes a vine to grow up to give Jonah additional shade. Living in Arizona we all appreciate the value of shade. As Jonah was waiting and watching for God’s judgment to strike Nineveh it was like he went from the bleachers to the sky box. But God is just starting with Jonah. Next God sends a worm. This worm is sent to chomp away on the vine. As the hot sun rises the vine dies. It withers away in the hot desert heat. Then the Lord sends a desert wind which felt like a hairdryer in his face. In more ways than one Jonah is boiling. In anger he utters, “I’d rather die than live!” So God comes to him and says, *“Jonah do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”* And Jonah says, *“I do. I am angry enough to die.”* Imagine talking to God that way.

But notice Jonah’s anger failed to deter God’s love for him. God patiently and persistently reached out to Jonah with his amazing grace. To paraphrase a bit God is offering Jonah a little perspective. He’s asking, “How attached could you be to this plant?” It showed up yesterday and is gone today. You enjoyed it because of your self-interest, not because you loved it. You were never devoted to it like a gardener. Now, Jonah, think about Nineveh. Those are people that I have made and that I cherish. From all eternity I planned for their salvation. *‘Should I not be concerned about that great city?’* Those are the last words of the book. We never hear Jonah’s response. But maybe that is the point. The book ends with us getting a glimpse of God’s heart, full of amazing grace for Nineveh and for Jonah.

God’s Amazing Grace for Us

Let me ask you a question. Whom do we identify with in this lesson? Most people tend to identify themselves with Jonah, the unwilling missionary. But aren’t we also like the Ninevites? Is there any of us who don’t need to be called to repentance? We tend to grade sins, don’t we? There are the big ones and the little ones, the ones that cause us to say, “Oh, my gosh!” and the one to which we say, “Oh, well.” But God doesn’t look at sin that way. In God’s sight one sin is just as serious and damnable as another. We know that, don’t we? In more ways than we care to admit, we’re like those Ninevites. But now, marvel at this, God says of you and me what he said about those Ninevites, “Should I not be concerned about them?” The God of heaven and earth is concerned about you and me. No matter what we have done, no matter who we are, he wants us in heaven with him. That’s why he sent Jesus, not just as a prophet to speak the good news to us, but also lay down his life as a complete sacrifice for the full forgiveness of our whole lot of sins and guilt. That’s grace, amazing grace.

Of course we are like Jonah too. It’s so easy to get wrapped up in the little vines in life that make us happy that we forget about the big picture of what is really needed in our world. We want happy homes and healthy hearts. We want flexible jobs with fat salaries and yet when our marriage has some serious down times, when our children or parents frustrate us, when our health fails us and our congregation discourages us, when we don’t get what we pray for how easy it is for us to shake our fist at God and complain about what’s not fair. Those are our vines. But how much thought have we given to the masses of humanity that are still without Christ. Maybe we are not so different than Jonah.

Isn’t it amazing that God keeps putting up with us? Isn’t it amazing that God still loves us? Isn’t it amazing that God keeps calling us to repentance and offers to us the forgiveness of sins? Isn’t it amazing that he keeps using those little setbacks, like the worm in Jonah’s vine, to teach us that our happiness does not lie in the things of this world, but in him? And isn’t it amazing that he keeping putting his arm around us to walk with him to the foot of the cross to show us just how concerned he was and is for us. It’s there that we see his love. It’s there that we shake our heads and say, “Wow, that is amazing grace.” Amen.