

SE ONLINE

Spring 2023 Bible Reading Plan

Jonah // Annoying Grace

We live in a world where grace seems to be in short supply. In fact, grace isn't even a word we hear or use all that often. Probably the most consistent form of grace in this world comes from the "grace period" our mortgage companies give us. The very idea of getting something we don't deserve stands as an oasis in our "pay for what you get" world. Grace, as the old hymn says, is truly amazing.

It can also be annoying and frustrating and difficult to understand.

You see, grace doesn't just comfort us; it challenges us, as well. You don't just experience grace and stay the same. Encountering God's grace is a transformative experience. The more grace seeps into our souls, the more chance it has to complicate our lives. Grace is marvelous and messy all at once.

Perhaps no biblical character understood this aspect of grace more than the prophet Jonah. His whole story was defined by grace – both by its absence and its presence. Jonah desperately needed grace and yet was desperate to keep others from experiencing it. His journey to Tarshish and beyond shows us how God's people have always had trouble accepting and extending the grace that He gives.

"If Jonah failed to understand the mystery of God's grace, it is most certainly possible for us. Ignorance of the depth of God's grace causes our most severe problems. Until we understand it, we are, like Jonah, just a shadow of what we could be and should be."

- Timothy Keller

Week One: Grace Fool (Jonah 1)

The book of Jonah opens the way we would expect any prophetic account to begin. Jonah recounts his calling to ministry and the specific task God put on his life. Yet, Jonah's story quickly swerves off course when he runs away from his calling. Though called east to Nineveh, Jonah hops on a boat headed west to Tarshish. Though we don't find out why until later in the story (Jonah 4:2), it turns out that Jonah was running from grace. He didn't want to share it with the Ninevites. He didn't want to be an instrument of God's reconciliation. So, he ran.

But Jonah could not escape grace. He found it in the sailors who tried to save his life. He found it in the storm that knocked him off his wayward path. He even found it in the belly of a big fish. The grace he hoped to escape met him at every turn. Grace annoys us because it reminds us that we are not in control. Our lives are not our own. God's plans and purposes are what ultimately matter.

READ: Jonah 1:1-17

NOTES:

- **Jonah 1:1: "The Lord gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai..."**
 - Though Jonah is most well-known for the book that bears his name, he also makes an appearance elsewhere in the Bible.
 - **2 Kings 14:23-25: "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, 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 Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher."**
 - Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam of Israel, who reigned from c. 790-750 B.C. Like all the kings of the Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam II allowed the nation to chase after idols and other false expressions of worship. He did, however, find some measure of political success, with an expansion of Israel's borders and a time of reasonable prosperity in the land.
 - The timeframe of Jonah's life makes him contemporaries with the prophets Hosea and Amos.

- **Jonah 1:2: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."**
 - Jonah's calling is unique among Israel's prophets. While other prophets were given messages directed at foreign nations, only Jonah was told to go and preach to that nation directly.

- Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, the emerging world power of the day. As Jonah will later find out, the city was massive. It represented the pinnacle of power and influence in that day. (More on Nineveh and the Assyrians a little later in our study...)
- Jonah 4:2 will later give us some of the specific reasons why Jonah was unwilling to go to Nineveh in the first place. For now, it's enough to note that both the uniqueness and magnitude of his mission were incredibly overwhelming. Jonah was being asked to go to an unfamiliar city filled with unfamiliar people.
- **Jonah 1:3-4: "But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord."**
 - Jonah's response subverts our expectations. We would anticipate that the prophet would get up and set his path toward Nineveh. Jonah, in nearly every way possible, chooses the opposite path. The nature of his decision is painted in very vivid images in these short verses:
 - Nineveh was located in what is modern-day Iraq. Though the exact location of Tarshish is debated, most speculate that it was located in modern-day Spain. Jonah is literally going to the opposite end of the known world!
 - From Jonah's position in Israel, Nineveh was due east while Tarshish required him to travel west. The imagery here is striking! Rather than traveling in the direction of the sunrise, Jonah turns to head for the sunset. The narrative paints his decision as a walk into darkness rather than light!
 - Jonah's descent is further illustrated by the phrase "**He went down to Joppa.**" The road he travels isn't just geographically south; it is spiritually downhill. His descent will eventually take him down in the belly of ship (1:5) and then the belly of the whale (1:17). Jonah is sinking fast!
 - Notice Jonah's intent in running to Tarshish: "**...to flee from the Lord.**" He's not just running from his mission. He's trying to get away from the One who gave him that mission.
 - Sheldon Blank: *"What is Tarshish? In the story it is anywhere – anywhere but the right place. It is the opposite direction, the direction a person goes when he turns his back on God."*
- **Jonah 1:4-6: "But the Lord hurled a powerful wind..."**
 - Jonah has tried to run from God's control. He's about to discover how impossible that is. The storm Jonah and the sailors find themselves in comes directly from the hands of God. The God Jonah tried to escape has chased him across the sea.
 - Paul David Tripp: *"It is both a comfort and a warning that you can't hide from God."*
 - God's power and sovereignty comes into focus throughout the rest of the book of Jonah. Trying to run away from His presence and purposes is the ultimate act

of futility. In fact, the language here in Jonah 1:4 to describe God “throwing” the storm on the sea will later be used to mirror the ineffectiveness of the sailor’s response:

- Jonah 1:5: “...[the sailors] threw the cargo overboard.”
 - Jonah 1:12: “**Throw me into the sea...**”
 - Jonah 1:15: “...[the sailors picked Jonah up and threw him into the raging sea.]”
 - The captain’s cry to Job drips with incredible irony: “**How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up and pray to your God!**” This pagan captain cares more about Job than Job cares about him. More than that, Jonah has been given the task to call people back to God. In a great reversal, it’s the godless sailor asking the prophet to pray!
- Jonah 1:7-12: “**Then the crew cast lots to see which of them had offended the gods and caused the terrible storm. When they did this, the lots identified Jonah as the culprit.**”
 - The sailors try to discern the source of their troubles. They decide to use a game of chance to smoke out the perpetrator. Even though they already know Jonah is on the run from God (1:10), they give him the benefit of the doubt. Once again, the “pagans” show more grace than the prophet. Still, the lot falls to Jonah.
 - Once they discover Jonah’s culpability, they ask him some pointed questions. Jonah responds (once again) with a heavy dose of irony: “**I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.**” Jonah claims to worship the God he’s on the run from. More than that, he acknowledges that God is the Lord of the sea – the very place he tried to run!
 - When the sailors ask Jonah what must be done to stop the storm, he tells them to throw him overboard. While this might seem like a chivalrous gesture, it’s also possible that it’s Jonah’s signal that he would rather die at sea than turn back to Nineveh.
- Jonah 1:13-16: “**Instead, the sailors rowed even harder to get the ship to the land...**”
 - The grace the sailors have extended to Jonah far surpasses his own graciousness toward them. He wanted nothing to do with the pagan Ninevites; these pagan sailors have taken an active interest in preserving his life. Though they try to keep from throwing Jonah overboard, the strength of the storm eventually convinces them that this is their only way out.
 - After saying a quick prayer to absolve themselves of guilt (1:14), the sailors throw Jonah overboard. The storm immediately stops, revealing God’s controlling hand over the waters. At this great sign of His power, the fear-stricken sailors begin to praise Jonah’s God (1:16).
 - Jonah’s lack of control again comes to the forefront. He didn’t want to go to preach to the Ninevites. Yet here, he is responsible for the conversion of a boatload of pagan sailors. Jonah may have thought he was running away, but he was really running into exactly what God had wanted him to do.

- God's sovereignty is driven home by the sailor's final words: **"...for you, Lord, have done as you pleased"** is literally, *"As you desire, you do."* God used Jonah to do exactly what He wanted, despite the prophet's protests.
- **Jonah 1:17: "Now the Lord had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights."**
 - Jonah's voyage in the belly of the great fish is undoubtedly the most famous picture in the book of Jonah. God once again proves Himself to be in control over all situations – both on land and on water. Though Jonah surely must have expected to die in the waves, God provided a great fish to get him back on track.

PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Has there ever been a time in your life when you were running away from God? Why were you running? How did you see God's sovereignty in the midst of your running? How did you see His grace?
2. How would you define grace? Write out a one-sentence definition of what grace means to you. (Be prepared to share this definition in your Small Group time.) What ways do you see this definition of grace throughout Jonah 1?
3. Jonah running away from God is presented as a pathway of descent and darkness. In what ways does grace elevate us as human beings? How does it call us to be a better version of ourselves? How has your experience with grace made you a better person?
4. The pagan sailors were continually more gracious towards Jonah than he was towards them. What does a grace-less life look like in today's world? How does this kind of life hurt our Gospel impact? What would it look like for you to be more grace-filled?
5. Every turn of Jonah's story served as a powerful reminder that God was in control. How have you experienced God's sovereignty in your own story? Has He led you down some paths you wouldn't have expected? What are some circumstances where you have seen that His plans were better than yours?
6. The sailor's last words in Jonah 1 are a poignant reminder of God's power: *"As you desire, you do."* How can you make this your prayer throughout the week? What would it look like for you to seek God's purposes in your everyday life?

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Read Jonah 1 together as a Group. What was your biggest takeaway from the video teaching? What part of the discussion resonated with you? As you think about Jonah 1, what were some images/ideas that stuck in your mind?
2. In our personal reflection time, we were asked to define the word “grace.” Share your one sentence definition. How have you seen this definition of grace in your own life? How would living out this idea of grace change the way you treat other people?
3. What are some ways people today run away from God? How is their running similar/different to what Jonah did? What are some ways God calls them back to Himself? What are some ways we, as His people, can help point them back to the right path?
4. Grace always elevates. How has God’s grace changed the way you see yourself? How should it change the way we see the people around us? As a Group, make a list of some qualities of a grace-filled life. How would this kind of lifestyle show value to all people?
5. Grace also reminds us that we are not in control. How have you seen this in your own life? In what ways has God’s sovereignty frustrated you? In what ways has it comforted you? As you look back on your life, why can you be grateful for the guiding hand of grace in your life?
6. What’s one area of your life where you need God’s grace to take control? How would grace transform that aspect of your life? What’s one practical step you can take this week to let God’s grace rule in that area?

Week Two: Jonah 2 → Under the Surface

One of the highlights of Jonah's short book is the song he composes in the belly of the big fish. Before the fish could spit him out, Jonah had to spill his own guts before the Lord. In the midst of this song, Jonah speaks of his own need for salvation and rescue. More importantly, he speaks of God's willingness to bring restoration and rescue into any situation. Though he focused on the faults and failings of the Ninevites, Jonah's encounter with the big fish brought him face-to-face with his own inadequacies.

Under the surface of the waves, Jonah discovered what had been lurking under the surface of his own heart. Grace has a way of doing that to us. It reminds us that we have fallen short. It reminds us that we haven't measured up. It reminds us that our only hope is in the God who saves. If we cling to any other idols, we will miss out on the mercy that could be ours (Jonah 2:8).

READ: Jonah 2:1-10

NOTES:

- **Jonah 1:17: "Now the Lord had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights."**
 - When we last saw Jonah, he had been thrown overboard to save the lives of the sailors on the boat. As he sinks below the waves, God sends a huge fish to swallow him up. While we normally view the big fish as an act of punishment, it is actually a miraculous act of deliverance. God uses a big fish to save Jonah's life. More than that, He uses a big fish to save Jonah's soul.
 - J.A. Motyer: *"Jonah's determination to run from the presence of the Lord was a flight to death. By God's mercy, the great fish swallows Jonah, rescuing him from death by drowning – but in its belly, he discovers the God from who he has fled waiting to meet him."*
 - The mention of **"three days and three nights"** is interesting for a couple of reasons. The first is that Jonah was in the belly of the fish. How did he have any concept of how much time had passed? Certainly, those three days must have felt like an eternity.
 - Secondly, the mention of **"three days and three nights"** foreshadows and even greater act of deliverance to come:
 - Matthew 12:38-40: **"Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Jesus, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.' He answered, 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'"**
 - Repeatedly in chapter 2, Jonah will compare the belly of the fish to the land of the dead (2:2; 2:6). Jesus was the greater Jonah, descending into

the grave for three days and three nights. God used Jonah's act of disobedience and death to point towards the ultimate act of obedience and life.

- **Jonah 2:1-3: “From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God.”**
 - Commentators and critics through the years have spilled an incredible amount of ink wondering about the accuracy and historicity of this narrative. Could a fish be so large as to swallow a full-grown man? More importantly, could that man then survive three days inside that fish? How could this possibly happen?
 - Though it's fun to speculate exactly what happened in the belly of that big fish, the text simply doesn't tell us. Perhaps Jonah wasn't too keen to remember or write down the details of exactly what happened. The narrative simply relates that it happened without any embellishment.
 - As Christ-followers, we should have no trouble believing in this miracle. After all, the God who performed the greater miracle of bringing Christ out from the tomb should have no trouble performing the relatively simple miracle of calling Jonah out of the fish!
 - The story doesn't concern itself with the mechanics of the miracle. It's more concerned with what happened in Jonah's heart and mind. Jonah 2 is more about what's going on inside the man than what's going on inside the fish.
 - Jonah's song in the big fish (“**In my distress I called to the Lord...**”) shares much in common with the Psalms of deliverance (like Psalm 40). It recounts both the trouble Jonah experienced and the great power God leveraged to save him.
 - Jonah describes his situation in the starkest possible terms. He was in the “**depths,**” drowning in the “**realm of the dead.**” His life seemed headed toward death. In the midst of this despair, Jonah finally ran toward the God he had been running from.
 - Timothy Keller: *“Now we see why we find grace not at the high points of our lives but in the valleys and depths, at the bottom. No human heart will learn its sinfulness and impotence by being told it is sinful. It will have to be shown – often in brutal experience. No human heart will dare to believe in such free, costly grace unless it is the only hope.”*
 - Jonah ran from Nineveh because he didn't want to show them grace. Here, Jonah comes to understand (however briefly) that he is in need of that very same grace. Encountering God's reckless grace reminds us of our own shortcomings and wrecks any illusion that we might somehow save ourselves.
- **Jonah 2:4-7: “I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.’”**
 - Jonah rightly feels alienated from God's presence. Interestingly, however, he puts all the responsibility for the divide on God. He conveniently forgets his own culpability in running away from God's presence and purpose.

- Jonah sets his sights on God’s Temple (both in 2:4 and again in 2:7). He longs to be back among God’s people and worship in God’s presence. The God he had fled in Joppa was now his greatest longing. No matter how hard he tried to escape God, Jonah could not escape His need for God.
- Jonah composes this song to the Lord while he is still in the belly of the fish. Though he’s not back on dry land, Jonah talks as though his salvation is secure. He knows the God He serves and that God has both the integrity and the authority to bring him back to dry land. Jonah can celebrate in the present because He knows the One who already holds the future.
- **Jonah 2:8: “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them.”** (The NIV84 translates it as: **“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”**)
 - This verse has often been referred to as the central statement in the whole of the book. Jonah reflects on where following idols and false gods ultimately lead. Those who chase after any other god miss out on what only the True God can offer: Grace.
 - The phrase **“worthless idols”** might also be translated as “vaporous lies.” The imagery here is quite stark, showing the utter powerlessness of other so-called gods. The idols and gods created by the human heart are nothing more than a transient mist. Those who grasp for them are literally chasing after smoke. In so doing, they miss out on the concrete and real love of God.
 - Jonah reminds us of the uniqueness of grace. There’s no other god who offers it. There’s no other faith that preaches it. The God of the Bible is the only One who holds out the offer of grace. If we chase after anything else, we will only end up empty-handed.
 - Philip Yancey: *“During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world were discussing whether any one belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. ‘What’s the rumpus about?’ he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. In his forthright manner Lewis responded, ‘Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.’”*
- **Jonah 2:9: “...Salvation comes from the Lord.”**
 - Jonah ends his psalm of praise with a final note of salvation. He knows that God is responsible for his miraculous rescue from the waves. In fact, his final cry here is an acknowledgement that God is the only one who could deliver in such a way. The phrase could literally be translated: *“Rescue belongs to the Lord.”*
 - The Hebrews word for “salvation” used here is a derivative of the word *“Yeshua”* – the name of Jesus. In talking about his temporary salvation, Jonah points us toward an eternal one yet to come.

- Jonah 2:10: **“And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.”**
 - There’s an interesting juxtaposition between Jonah and the fish who swallowed him. God commanded Jonah and he ran in the opposite direction. God commanded the fish and it did exactly what He told it to do. The story of Jonah’s flight from God began with the prophet’s disobedience and ended with the fish’s obedience!
 - The word **“vomited”** captures the force of the Hebrew word here. Jonah is subjected to one final humiliation as God sets him back on the path to Nineveh.

PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Put yourself in Jonah’s place for a minute. What do you think it was like in the belly of the big fish? What do you think he saw/experienced over those three days and three nights? How do you think God used these uncomfortable circumstances to change Jonah’s life?
2. We noted last week that Jonah’s journey away from God was described as a descent. Based on some of the imagery of the poem, how far down did Jonah’s life sink? What did this low point feel like? Have you ever been in a situation similar to Jonah’s? How does God meet us in those low places?
3. Jonah ended up longing for the God he had been running from. What does this show us about the futility of running from God? Why do we always end up turning back to Him? In what ways does our running from Him ultimately reveal our need for Him?
4. What are some other ‘gods’ or ‘idols’ that people chase today? What do these idols promise? How (and why) do they fall short of those promises? Why is it that only grace can fulfill the deepest longings of our hearts?
5. What would your own song of salvation look like? Using Jonah’s song as a template, write your own song of praise to God. How has He delivered you? What has He saved you from? (*Don’t worry – this song is just for you. You don’t have to share it with anyone else!*).
6. In his distress, Jonah looks to the Temple – the place where he could meet God and be with His people. How do the “low places” of our lives reveal our need for community? How should the community of faith encourage each other through these times?

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Read Jonah 2:1-10 (use the Message for some fresh eyes on the passage!). What stands out to you as you read Jonah's salvation song? What did you take away from the video teaching time? How does this change the way you view Jonah's story?
2. Jonah found himself in a situation he could not save himself from. How does grace remind us of our faults and failures? How does it force us to recognize our own helplessness before God? Do you often live with an awareness of your own dependence on grace? Why or why not?
3. In your personal reflection time, you listed some of the 'gods' and 'idols' people chase today. What are some of the things you identified? Why do these things ultimately fail us? What do they demand of us? Why can't they offer us grace? Why do we chase after these 'gods' rather than pursuing the One True God?
4. Jonah only recognizes his need for grace when he sinks to the lowest possible place. Why do you think it takes times like these for Him to get our attention? How does God meet us in these low places? How does His grace help pull us out of that pit?
5. Jonah's mention of the Temple is a vivid reminder of how God's presence and His people help us in our suffering. When we suffer, what comfort can we take from the fact that God is with us? How does that help make our trials more bearable? How can the community of faith encourage us through our difficulties? How do we support one another?
6. How does Jonah's story point us toward what Jesus has done for us? How is our salvation story similar to/different from Jonah's story? How has God rescued us? Close your Group in prayer by thanking Him for the miraculous salvation we have in Christ.

Week Three: Jonah 3 → *Discomfort Zone*

Living in a fish's digestive tract sounds pretty uncomfortable. It was nothing compared to what Jonah would experience once he arrived back on dry land. In the city of Nineveh, Jonah would confront some of his greatest fears. He would be in an unfamiliar city in the midst of people who were notoriously inhospitable. Worse, he would be delivering a message of judgment and repentance that he hoped to avoid. As he preached his way through the streets of the city, Jonah would have to confront his own racism and his own sense of justice.

Though grace can be comforting, it often makes us uncomfortable. It takes us to places we don't want to go. It brings us into contact with people we don't want to be around. As Jesus Himself would later prove, lives defined by grace have a way of attracting the "wrong kind of people." If we're comfortable with where we're at, that might be an indicator that our lives aren't as characterized by grace as we'd like to think.

READ: Jonah 3:1-10

NOTES:

- **Jonah 3:1-2: "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time..."**
 - The grace of God is on full display at the beginning of this chapter. When God reaffirms Jonah's call to Nineveh, He doesn't bring up Jonah's previous failure. He doesn't berate the prophet for trying to run and hide in Tarshish. Rather, He simply and gently repeats His original command. Jonah is to go to Nineveh and preach to the people there.
 - In the original command, God told Jonah to go and preach "against" the city (Jonah 1:2). This time, however, the command is to go and preach "to" the people of Nineveh. This subtle shift may anticipate God's purposes in sharing this message with the city. Though there's plenty God has against the Ninevites, He is still calling them toward something else.
 - We have no idea where the big fish left Jonah after vomiting him on the beach. Presumably, he is somewhere on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Assuming Jonah ended up somewhere back around Joppa, he faced a 600-mile journey to get to Nineveh.

- **Jonah 3:3: "Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it."**
 - The phrase "**a very large city**" translates a Hebrew idiom meaning "*a great city to God.*" It might also be taken to mean "*a great city of God's.*" Either way, the implication is that God values the city of Nineveh and its inhabitants, even if Jonah doesn't.
 - As the capital of the powerful Assyrian Empire, Nineveh stood as one of the grandest cities in the ancient world. It was an enormous city with a booming population.

- Archaeologists believe the main city walls had a circumference of at least nine miles. The city, however, sprawled out further along the plain.
 - The population listed of 120,000 could be the literal population of the city or a figurative representation of just how big it was. The number 10,000 in Hebrew was used to denote an overwhelming number, while the number 12 was a number of completion. Listing the population as “12 ten thousands” could have been a way to signify the enormity of the city.
 - Jonah 3:3 mentions that it would take three days to traverse the town. This is likely both a nod to the three days Jonah spent in the belly of the whale and the fact that it would have taken Jonah three days to communicate his message across the entire city.
 - Historically, the Assyrians were a brutal people. They conquered the surrounding nations and obliterated their land and their people. In fact, around 40 years after Jonah preached to Nineveh, the Assyrians would conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel (721 B.C.) and lead its 10 tribes into a captivity from which they would never return.
 - Dan Carlin: *“Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 BCE), one of the most brutal of the Assyrian kings... had this to say about how he handled a rebellion: ‘I built a pillar over the city gate, and I flayed all the chiefs who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skin. Some of them I walled up in the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes. Others I bound to stakes around the pillar. And I cut the limbs off the royal officers who had rebelled.’”*
 - Rabbi Hayyim Lewis: *“The Assyrians were the Nazi stormtroopers of the ancient world. They were the pitiless power-crazed foe. They showed no quarter in battle, uprooting entire people in their fury for conquest... For Jonah, Nineveh, then, was no ordinary city; it carried doom-laden, tragic memories, it stood as a symbol of evil incarnate.”*
 - This certainly had to be one of the reasons why Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh in the first place. They were an enemy of Israel! They were a vicious and cruel people! They were the scourge of the world! Why would anyone want to see a people like this come to repentance? Though Jonah understood God’s grace, he struggled with its limits. He couldn’t see how Nineveh deserved a second chance.
- **Jonah 3:4-5: “Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.’”**
 - Jonah’s continued lack of interest in his mission is revealed in the brevity of his message. It may seem short in English, but it’s even shorter in Hebrew, clocking in at a measly five words. Jonah seems to have no interest in doing anything but the bare minimum in preaching to the Ninevites.
 - The word “overthrown” is interesting here for a couple of reasons:
 - It is the word used to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:21-29.

message Jonah preached to the people elicited a genuine response in the people, to which God responded in kind.

- The last few verses of chapter 3 set up a conflict that will define Jonah's final chapter. After hearing the message of destruction, the king of Assyria changed his mind. After hearing of the Ninevites' repentance, God changed His mind. The question now becomes: Will Jonah change his mind? He didn't want to preach to Nineveh. He didn't want the Assyrians to come to repentance. He didn't want to share grace. Now that grace is on the loose, how will Jonah respond? Will he change his mind?

PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. When God called Jonah a second time, He didn't revisit Jonah's mistakes and failures. What does this teach us about how God responds to our shortcomings? How does it make you feel to know that God, in His grace, can still call you to mission despite your past?
2. If you were in Jonah's place, what are some reasons you would have given for not going to Nineveh? What would have kept you from wanting to share God's message with them? What elements of his own comfort did Jonah have to sacrifice to go to Nineveh?
3. Jonah shows us that grace can lead us into places we don't want to go. It sends us to "those people" who we don't think deserve the Gospel. What are some modern-day equivalents to Nineveh (the places we don't want to go)? What keeps us from sharing the Gospel in those places and with those people?
4. One of the main themes in Jonah is how much more generous in grace God is than we are. If you were being honest with yourself, what are the limits of your grace? In your mind, who are the people who don't deserve grace? Who are the people you have refused to forgive? How does the scope of your grace compare to God's grace?
5. Repentance is more than a feeling; it's an action. What are some areas of your life where you need to practice true, biblical repentance? How do you need to change your actions? How do you need to change your heart? Pray that God would show you those areas of your life where you still need to turn towards Him.
6. At the end of Jonah 3, God has shown grace to the people of Nineveh. How scandalous do you think this would have seemed to the Israelites? What kind of reaction would something like this elicit in the church today? In what ways is grace scandalous? How does it push and challenge our view of things?

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Read Jonah 3:1-10. What resonates with you in this passage? What were some of your big takeaways from the video teaching time and the weekly study guide? How does Jonah 3 change the way you view God's compassion and grace?
2. In your personal reflection time, you listed some of the places that we would see as a modern-day Nineveh. Where are some of the places we wouldn't want to share the Gospel? Who are some of "those people" we would try to avoid? What keeps us from taking the Gospel to those places and those people? How do we overcome this?
3. God's grace is certainly wider and deeper than ours. How did the depths of God's grace challenge Jonah? Why do you think Jonah was unwilling to share grace even though he had been shown incredible grace? How do we fall into that same trap? In what ways have you been shown grace? How should this motivate you to live grace?
4. What does the Ninevites' reaction show us about the true nature of repentance? How should we respond when we hear a message from God and His Word? Can you think of a time in your life when you responded in this way? What was that like and how did it transform your life?
5. How scandalous is the message of God's grace? How does it stretch and challenge our ideas of what is right and fair? What would it look like for us to be grace-bringers in our world? How would true, unadulterated grace change your home? Your workplace? Your community? What's one practical way you can bring grace into those environments this week?
6. Sometimes, it can be hard for us to show grace to someone. Is there someone in your life you have chosen not to forgive? Without naming names, what are some things that have kept you in that place of unforgiveness? In what ways does God's grace challenge you to be more gracious toward them? Pray that God would give you a heart of grace and forgiveness towards that person.

Week Four: Jonah 4 → *Not for Prophet*

Jonah 4 gives us one of the most ridiculous pictures in a book filled with some incredible sights. Though Jonah has just preached a message that brought about national revival, the prophet is depressed and angry at what his words have accomplished. He didn't want the Assyrians to repent. He certainly didn't want to see them spared. He wanted justice. He wanted what he thought was right.

As Jonah sat and stewed on the outskirts of the city, God provided a plant to provide some shade for His steaming prophet. Yet, the plant died as quickly as it had sprouted up. When Jonah protested this development, God used the opportunity to speak into Jonah's selfishness. The prophet was more concerned with his own temporary contentment than he was with the eternal fate of a city. When we hoard up grace, we reveal the selfishness of our own hearts. Grace may be great to get, but it's tough to give.

READ: Jonah 4:1-11

NOTES:

- Jonah 4:1: **“But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry...”**
 - Jonah's response here is telling. He has just preached one of the most successful missionary messages of all time. An entire city repented. The king even commanded that the livestock repent before the Lord. Jonah has literally brought revival to a city's people and their pets! And yet, despite his incredible success, Jonah is a bitter and angry man. He can't believe that God responded to Nineveh with compassion and mercy.
 - The phrase **“this seemed very wrong”** isn't quite strong enough. In the original Hebrew, the phrase means something like *“the thing was very evil for Jonah.”* The irony here is thick. The Ninevites have turned from their evil, something that Jonah ought to see as a good thing. Yet, his mind is so twisted against Nineveh that he sees their repentance as an “evil” thing.
 - Notice the emotional rollercoaster this puts Jonah on. He becomes **“angry,”** a word that might better be translated as “furious.” Rather than celebrating God's grace, his reaction is violent and visceral.
 - David Seamands: *“Many years ago, I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people... We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live.”*

- Jonah 4:2-4: **“He prayed to the Lord...”**
 - Finally, we come to understand the real reason why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. It wasn't because the city was too far away. It wasn't

because the task was too big. Jonah didn't want to go because He knew that God was a **"gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love."** He didn't want the people of Nineveh to experience God's love!

- Notice how Jonah puts the blame squarely on God and His nature. Rather than admitting his own culpability, Jonah attempts to use God's own character against Him. In so doing, he quotes one of the most famous OT passages about who God is:
 - Exodus 34:6-7: **"And [the Lord] passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.'"**
 - Jonah (like many of us) struggled to reconcile God's grace with His justice. He didn't quite understand how God could be both compassionate and righteous. His struggle to truly grasp God's grace brought him to an incredibly depressing place: **"Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."**
 - In response, God asks Jonah a question that will be repeated in this chapter: **"Is it right for you to be angry?"** The question is designed not just to make Jonah think, but to engage the reader in the same thought process. If God wants to be gracious to His creation, what right do any of us have to be mad at Him?
- Jonah 4:5-6: **"Jonah 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."**
 - Jonah sits on a hillside to the east of Nineveh, presumably waiting to see if God will reverse course and strike the city down in judgment. His response is a warped version of how the King of Nineveh responded. Nineveh's king sat in sackcloth and hoped for God's mercy. God's prophet sits on a hillside and hopes for judgment.
 - If Jonah wanted to wait for Assyria to fall, he was going to have to wait for a long time. About 140 years after Jonah delivered his message to Nineveh, the city was overturned and destroyed by Babylon. Its destruction was so complete that the ruins of the city were unrecognizable for years. When the Greek general Xenophon came across the ruins of the Nineveh 200 years after its fall, locals were unsure of what they had once been. The destruction of Nineveh was so complete, in fact, that the city has never been rebuilt.
 - God causes a plant to grow over Jonah to shield him from the sun. Though the account seems peculiar to us, this is God's way of trying to get through to Jonah. In His graciousness, God is giving Jonah an object lesson in grace. There's a real note of God's lovingkindness in these verses. He will not let His prophet sit in the hardness of his own heart.

- Jonah 4:7-8: **“But at dawn the next day God provided a worm...”**
 - The plant God provided for Jonah withered as quickly as it had sprouted. Jonah is incensed by this development. Though he did nothing to make the plant appear and bloom, he loses his mind over its death. In fact, the death of his shade plant makes Jonah long for his own death, a fact the text focuses on with repetition: **“He wanted to die, and said, ‘It would be better for me to die than to live.’”**
 - Throughout this narrative, Jonah has shown little to no regard for the people of Nineveh. He didn’t want to go to the city. He didn’t want to preach to its citizens. Yet, here on a hillside overlooking the city, Jonah weeps and wails over the death of this vine. He cares more about one temporary plant than he does about the thousands of eternal souls in the city below. Something is incredibly wrong in the prophet’s heart.

- Jonah 4:9: **“But 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.’”**
 - God confronts Jonah about his attitude. What right does he have to be angry over a temporary vine? It wasn’t his. He didn’t do any of the work to make it thrive. It was only God’s grace that gave him the shade he enjoyed. Jonah fails to recognize that his life is just as reliant on the grace of God as the Ninevites. Without God’s compassionate love, Jonah would have nothing.
 - J.A. Motyer: *“The focus is clear. Jonah could not accept that the law of grace should work in favor of his enemies, but neither could he accept life without grace. God’s graciousness to Nineveh was unacceptable. God’s withdrawal of grace to Jonah was also unacceptable. He longed for a God who was partial like himself, instead of a God who was gracious, merciful and responsive to the cries of all creation. He wanted his own personal God rather than the God who made heaven and earth, the sea and the dry land.”*

- Jonah 4:10-11: **“...And 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?”**
 - The book of Jonah ends with a final pointed question from God to His prophet. Shouldn’t God be concerned with the people of Nineveh? Shouldn’t he care about the fates of 120,000 people in the city? Isn’t it right for the Creator to care about the people He created?
 - The imagery God uses to describe the people of Nineveh is stark: **“...who cannot tell their right hand from their left.”** The phrase hints at the spiritual ignorance and moral bankruptcy of the people in the city. They can no more tell right from wrong than a toddler can tell right from left. Nineveh has wandered so far away from the truth that only a direct word from the Lord could bring them back.
 - This final question goes unanswered in the book of Jonah. We don’t know how Jonah responded. We don’t know where he went after he left the hillside. One

hint to Jonah's response, however, can be found in the existence of this book. If Jonah hadn't repented, would he have bothered to write this story down? The fact that the book of Jonah exists at all gives us hope that the prophet finally overcame his prejudice and callousness.

- The book of Jonah is intentionally left open-ended so that we would consider our own response. What would we think in this moment? How would we treat the people of Nineveh? We walk away from the book with God's final question ringing in our ears: **"Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?"** If God is concerned for the city and its people, shouldn't we be, too?

PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. David Seamands said that our two greatest issues are our inability to accept grace and our failure to extend grace to others. What effect can a refusal to accept grace have on a person? What spiritual/emotional damage can that do? How can an inability to extend grace affect a person? What effects can that have on their relationships, life, etc.?
2. In your opinion, was Jonah right to struggle with sharing grace with the Ninevites? Why or why not? How had Jonah shown himself just as dependent on the same grace he would deny the Ninevites? Why is it so difficult for us to share grace with other people even though we know our own need for it?
3. Jonah was more concerned with his own comfort than he was with the lives of the Ninevites. Why do we prioritize our temporary needs over the eternal needs of the people around us? What are some ways you do this in your own life? What are some practices that can help you take the focus off yourself?
4. History tells us that Nineveh was eventually destroyed. What does this teach us about their repentance? What does it teach us about God's ultimate justice? How does knowing God's justice and righteousness help us to share grace with people today?
5. The book of Jonah ends with that final question: **"Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?"** The question forces us to think of our own response. How concerned are you for people who don't know God's grace? If you were being honest, are they a priority in your life? What needs to change for you to prioritize them?
6. As we wrap up the book of Jonah, what's been the biggest lesson you've learned? What has surprised you about Jonah? What has challenged you? What's one practical change you are going to make because of what you have learned in this study? Pray that God would show you those areas of your life where you need to be more grace-filled.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Read Jonah 4:1-11 as a group. What do you find interesting in this text? What was something that really spoke to you in the video teaching time? In what ways can you relate to Jonah's attitude in this passage?
2. Jonah's lack of grace has an incredible impact on his emotions. How does a lack of grace impact the way we feel? How does it change our attitudes/emotions towards other people? On the flipside of that, how could living a more gracious lifestyle impact our emotions? What would grace-filled relationships look like?
3. Jonah got hung up on his own comfort. What are some things that make us comfortable? What are some of the things we hold onto because they make us feel good? How can we leverage those things for the Gospel? What are some ways we can remind ourselves that sharing the Gospel is more important than our comforts?
4. God said that Nineveh couldn't differentiate their right from their left. How do we see spiritual ignorance and moral confusion in our time? What are some symptoms of these issues in our own culture? Based on Jonah, how should we respond to these things? What does it look like to reach out to our culture with both grace and truth?
5. **"Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?"** What does this question show us about God's heart for those far from Him? Why didn't Jonah share God's concern for the city of Nineveh? In what ways are we guilty of falling into the same apathy that Jonah had? How would your life be different if you lived with more of an emphasis on those far from God?
6. In your personal reflection time, you were asked to think of your biggest takeaway from Jonah. What has resonated with you from this study? What changes do you need to make after reading Jonah? How can we be praying for each other to keep these commitments in the weeks and months ahead?