

Amazing Grace

by Alistair Begg

God's concern for the people of Nineveh is greater than Jonah's concern, and we should prioritize sharing the gospel with those who have not yet heard it.

Duration: 31:04

Topics: "Grace"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the story of Jonah and how God works in his life. The preacher highlights how God provides for Jonah's needs, such as sending a great wind, a great fish, and a worm. Despite God's provision, Jonah's heart is not fully committed to God's purpose. The preacher emphasizes the importance of having a genuine spirit of sacrifice and obedience to God's promptings in our lives.

Transcript

Now, we're going to read together once again, for those of you who were not present this morning, from the book of Jonah and in chapter 4. We're going to pick it up just from verse 5. Jonah went 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. Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head, to ease his discomfort.

And Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm which chewed the vine so that it withered. When 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. But God said to Jonah, Do you have a right to be angry about the vine? I do, he said. I am angry enough to die.

But the Lord said, You've been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well, should I not be concerned about that great city.

Now, before we look just briefly at these concluding verses, before we come around the Lord's table, let us pause and ask God's help. Father, our simple prayer is this. Open our eyes that we may behold wonderful things in your Word.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. So, the sulking prophet takes a seat.

That's what we're told here in verse 5. He went out, and he sat down at a place east of the city. Now, the timing of these things is quite difficult. It's not really possible for us to deduce just exactly how everything is taking place.

My best attempt at it is this, that as soon as it was apparent to Jonah that the Ninevites were responding to his preaching by repenting, and that that in turn, as he understood it, would lead to this expression of God's compassion towards them, then at that point we have the expression of his displeasure and his anger. And as soon as he understands that, the dialogue that ensues in verses 1-3 takes place. When the Lord asks him, Have you any right to be angry? he then shoots off and decides to make a little shelter for himself on this site that is, we're told, east of the city.

He sits down so that he might be able to see--verse 5, at the end, tells us exactly what was going to happen to the city. Now, we might be surprised at this, given that he had assumed that with repentance would come the expression of God's compassion. But we do also know that there are occasions in the Bible when punishment still follows expressions of repentance.

It's not my purpose to go to these, but let me illustrate what I mean by reminding you of the story in 2 Samuel 12, 13-18, where you have the account of David's sin with Bathsheba, and despite his expressions of repentance and coming to God, the child of their union still dies. And therefore, the consequences of sin are not always mitigated as a result of our repentance. And while we may be genuine in our expressions of repentance towards God, the implications of our deeds may yet follow us.

Therefore, there is some justification in Jonah determining that he'll just wait and see what's going to happen. Presumably, he made this little shelter for himself out of stones or mud bricks, and the desire for it would be a very practical one--the heat of the sun making it very, very uncomfortable for him to sit out there in the open air. And what we discover is that God, the God of providence, is continuing to work with his servant according to the purpose of his will.

One of the verses that we've become most familiar with in the New Testament is Romans 8, 28, and in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose. And we see the way in which God is at work here with his servant as he makes provision for him. There is a recurring phrase that you may have noted that comes first in verse 4 of the first chapter, Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, or he provided a great wind.

In verse 17 of the first chapter, the Lord provided a great fish. Here in the sixth verse of chapter 4, the Lord provided a vine in verse 6, and then in verse 7 the Lord provided a worm, and then in verse 8, when the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind. In other words, we are shown here that God the Creator is in control of all that he has made.

And it is an expression of his love and concern for his servant that the little shelter in which he is living, clearly wasn't air-conditioned, is in need of some supplemental assistance. And so God, in his mercy, provides this beautiful and broad-leafed plant, which is not identified by name, which sprouts at an unprecedented rate and is an occasion of great happiness, we're told, for Jonah. You can imagine him as he sits down in his little hut in his sulky condition, wishing that he was dead, and then all of a sudden recognizing that around him is growing this wonderful plant.

And suddenly, the heat of the day beating down on his fabricated shelter is assuaged in part as a result of this broad-leafed plant. And he said to himself, This makes me very, very happy. But his happiness was short-lived, because before he'd really had a chance to enjoy this, we're told in verse 7, at dawn the next day, God decides to provide something else.

And the same God who provided the plant to make him happy now provides the worm. And the worm comes and eats away at the vine, and as a result of that, the vine withers. It's easy for some to say.

The wine withers, or the vine withers. Now, we are not amiss, just in passing, that whether it is a gigantic fish or whether it is a small worm, what we're discovering here is that God is at work directing everything to its appointed end. I can't miss the chance to remind you again of the doctrine of providence, and to quote to you again from the Heidelberg Catechism.

What do you understand by the providence of God is question twenty-seven in the Catechism. The answer comes, Providence is the almighty and ever-present power of God, by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty--all things, in fact--come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand. You remember what we discovered in our studies in Joseph, that we're not being cast about on the sea of chance, we're not held in the grip of some blind, fatalistic force, but our Heavenly Father, who is the Creator of the ends of the earth, is ordering everything from the largest of fish to the tiniest of worms in order that he might achieve his ultimate purpose.

Now, the arrival of the worm is not in order to bring relief, but it is actually to bring destruction. And the plant, we're told, doesn't evaporate in some unnatural way, but simply as a result of the natural processes taking place, as a result of God's divine overruling of human and natural phenomenon. The same is true of what we find in verse 8--a scorching east wind, an account of which the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint.

And as a result of this, he reverts to his previous mood. We might have thought that as a result of the dialogue with God, he would have put away these silly statements, as in verse 3, it would be better for me to die than to live, and yet here we find him, after a little time has elapsed, with the same sad song at the end of verse 8, it would be better for me to die than to live. Now, the reason for this, apparently, is that Jonah feels himself to be victimized by what had happened to him.

He was sure, convinced, that he was right in what he believed should have happened to Nineveh. And he believed, therefore, that God was wrong in what he had done for the city, but he also believed that God was wrong in what had happened to himself the prophet. Now, it is interesting that when he comes back again with this plaintive response, it would be better for me to die than to live, God does not engage him on the basis of his response.

But actually, God, who could have said to him, I'll show you about your right to die, and frankly just taken him out at that point, he asks him again this important question. Do you have a right to be angry about the vine? And what he does is he argues from the lesser to the greater. If, he says, you're concerned about this plant that has come and gone in the space of twenty-four hours--a plant that you've had no part in tending, no part in growing, a plant that has withered--if you are so phenomenally concerned about this, he says, then don't you think that in relationship to the people of Nineveh, I, the living God, have a right to be concerned? Now, Nineveh, as we saw earlier, was a city of some significance.

The picture here of a hundred and twenty thousand who cannot tell the right hand from their left is simply an indication of the state of the city, where there were a great number of people who were unable to reach an informed decision. And God is calling Jonah, and all who follow Jonah, to review his and our scale of priorities. Now, where I found this most challenging was when I asked myself, Is there anything that I am more concerned about in my life than my concern to see unbelieving people become the committed followers of Jesus Christ? As soon as I asked myself that question, I didn't like the answer.

Because it wasn't very quickly a question that went, Is there anything? It very quickly became, How many things? How many things are there in relationship to my time, my finances, my gifts, my freedoms, that frankly give indication not only to my own heart, when I'm prepared to be alert to it, but certainly to those who are around and observe me, that apparently I have a far more pressing concern about issues that are singularly trivial in comparison than I do about the nature of those who as yet have never heard this great message of grace and salvation through Christ? Somebody came up to me, I think, a couple of weeks ago. If they didn't, then I'm imagining things, but that would be nothing new. And they said to me, What was the response of Jonah at the end? How did Jonah respond? Answer? We don't know.

There's no answer to the question with which the book ends. Should I not be concerned about that great city? says God. Now, we hope that Jonah would have said, Yes, you should be concerned, and furthermore, I should be concerned too, and from this day on, I want to be concerned.

But we don't know. We have perhaps an indication of it inasmuch as when Jesus mentions Jonah, he does so in terms that are encouraging and rewarding, but nevertheless, there is no express statement to that end. I think in part it is simply for this reason.

The real question is not how did Jonah respond? Because the emphasis of the book is upon the compassion of God himself. The real question is, how do we, the readers of the book, perceive the grace of God? And does the example of God in showing his compassion to Nineveh here establish the pattern for our concern? Or if you like, taking it forward into the New Testament, does the example of the concern of God our Savior provide the pattern for our concern? 1 Timothy 2. This is good. Verse 3, And pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved, and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Now, for those of you who were wanting immediately to camp on this issue of the sovereignty of grace this morning, and who may be tempted to actually use that as a mechanism for determining who or when you're going to be involved in evangelism, with whom or on what occasions you're going to be involved in evangelism, as if somehow or another the electing love of God would be used by us in our faulty thinking to narrow down the interest of God in humanity, then I want to give you a fairly extensive quote, and then one other quote, and then we're going to conclude. I determined that I must do this from past experience, because there is an inherent danger in the kind of emphasis that I brought this morning, and it does not need very much to fan it into a significant flame in the minds of some of you. And it all has to do with the question of who then can believe and who can be saved.

If God is sovereign in his grace and electing in his love, then does this somehow or another restrict our freedom to present the gospel universally to men and women? Well, the answer, of course, is no, if we understand the Bible correctly. And here comes this fairly extensive quote. It comes from a Scottish theologian by the name of Macleod.

I hope you won't hold the fact against him that he happens to be from Scotland. Now, listen carefully, will you? Who has the right to believe? Who has the right to come to Christ? That question has been

discussed very thoroughly in Reformed theology, and the answer has been unambiguous. Every human being, without exception whatsoever, is entitled to come to Christ and to take him as his own Savior.

Every man as a man, every sinner as a sinner--the foulest, the vilest, the most vicious, it was put in the strongest possible terms--had the right to come. This was based on certain clear emphases of the Word of God itself. For example, God commands every human being to believe.

No one is exempt from that command. We have the right to come to Christ, whoever we are, because God commands us to come to Christ. We have the right, secondly, because of God's offer and invitation to come to Christ.

Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth. Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Let the wicked forsake his way, and let him return to the Lord.

The offer was absolutely universal. Thirdly, there is a universal divine promise. If we believe, we shall be saved.

That is God's promise. Now, it is a conditional promise. The reward is conditional upon our believing.

But God's promise is made categorically. If we turn to God in Christ, we shall be saved. Alternatively, it can be put in these terms.

The warrant is universal, because it arises from the fact that the Bible explicitly states that there is no price to be paid. This salvation is utterly gratuitous. We receive the water of life freely.

We take it without money and without price. Some Reformed preachers went to great lengths to express this fact, that every human being, no matter how sinful, has the right to come and take Christ as his Savior. They were predestinarians of the deepest dye--men like Thomas Boston, John Duncan, and Martin Luther.

But they believed equally firmly in the free, universal offer of the gospel. John Duncan put it most succinctly, Sin is the handle by which I get Christ. He went on, I don't read anywhere in God's Word that Christ came to save John Duncan.

But I read this. He came to save sinners. And John Duncan is a sinner.

And that means he came to save John Duncan. Luther argued in the same way. He said to the devil, Thou sayest, I am a sinner, and I will take thine own weapon, and with it I will slay thee, and with thine own sword I will cut thy throat, because sin ought to drive us not away from Christ but towards Christ.

The Bible and Reformed theology have taught us to come just as we are. Just as I am, and waiting not To rid my soul of one dark blot, To thee whose blood can cleanse each spot, O Lamb of God, I come. Now, it may be that in Reformed theology there is no theological answer to the question, how can it be simultaneously true that only the predestined are saved, and that God commands all men to believe? All we can say is that both horns of the dilemma are equally valid.

For the moment our concern is with only one aspect of the truth--every human being is warranted to come to Christ. The great thing here is that the universal becomes particular. If all are warranted, each is warranted.

If each is warranted, I am warranted. This is supremely important in relation to those who are tempted to spiritual despair--the backslidden, those who were once bright, shining Christians, but from whose lives the glory has gone and who feel that for them there is no hope. Wherever we stand, we have the warrant to believe.

Now, I hope that is unsettling to not a few of you, because those who embrace this doctrine of God's electing love most vehemently do so to a great degree in absence of any ability to articulate what I've just read to you. And it is the missing leg on the chair. And as a result of it, you and I, to the extent that we're prepared to move in that direction, will always find ourselves leaning--and leaning, ultimately, in a way that is unhelpful and in a way that will limit our desires to see unbelieving people become the committed followers of Jesus.

And so God looks down upon our scene tonight, and I believe with very real concern would be prepared to utter the same question regarding the city of Cleveland. Should I not be concerned about that great city? Now, my final quote is from George Verwer, who I hope will one day come and preach for us here at Parkside. Some of you will know him as a result of the work of Operation Mobilization.

He just sent me his latest book--sent me a number of them, actually. I'll give them to any friends I have left. But I just want to give you two little pictures from it.

He's quoting from Missionary Monthly in March 1996, which said, Possibly 80 percent of all missionaries are being sent to areas of the world where the church already is planted. Eighty percent going to places in the world where the church is already planted. The urgent need is for a majority of new missionaries to be sent to areas where the gospel has not yet been preached--at least where the need is greater than where the church already exists.

Each local congregation can help to direct missionary resources by setting the goal of helping to send and support missionaries assigned to pioneer areas of the world. Some may be sent as tentmakers, obtaining technical or professional employment in closed countries as a means of personal witness. As he draws his book to a close, and he talks about his prayer for 200,000 new missionaries in the next five years across the world--200,000 new missionaries--he says, hand in hand with the goal of raising large numbers of new workers, a number of things are imperative.

First, we need a greater renewal and reality in the churches. By this I mean Christians moving on from a superficial walk with God to one which accepts the challenges which God is putting before us today. I also mean an honest and open attempt to break down barriers between different visions and different emphases in the church and working for a Holy Spirit marriage of them.

Secondly, it is so important that there should be a grace awakening. By this I mean a renewed emphasis on the kind of love which 1 Corinthians speaks about. I believe that unless we have more of that big-heartedness towards one another--individuals and organizations-- our grand visions for large numbers of new workers will not become a reality.

We need every member of the body of Christ. Thirdly, a greater discipline is needed in prayer, in studying the Word of God, and in giving. These basic godly activities cannot be separated from other visions that God has given us.

Finally, we must beware of allowing negative thinking to kill our creativity or vision--the kind of negative thinking that builds a little shelter and sits in it and says, Oh, I think I'd be better if I was dead. The history of the church shows that often God is working in the midst of what looks to us like a mess. Often what we think is a casualty is not a casualty with God.

Forty-three years of ministry across the globe and involvement with thousands of people has confirmed my view that while we must work for the highest standards of professionalism in all we do, God often achieves tremendous things through the most unlikely people, organizations, and situations. Let us not expect that the raising up by the church of 200,000 new missionaries will be a neat and tidy process. Now, with all of this on my heart and in my mind, as I made my way from upstairs, downstairs, I just encountered one individual.

And I won't embarrass them at all. Just one fellow sitting there. How are you? I said.

Fine, he said. Great. He said, I'm ready for world mission.

I said, You're on. You're on. So now we only have, what, 199,999 to contribute to the enlisting of.

Grace means that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and grace means that there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. And don't you think it's just wonderful that without knowing that we would be confronted by this challenge of setting other things like vines and shelters and dreams and schemes up before the reaching of the city for Christ? Somebody would have said, I think what we ought to have after the message is the song All I Once Held Dear Built My Life Upon. Because that's the song we're going to sing.

And we're going to pause for a moment of prayer before we do so. And between you and God and I and God, we'll just tell him that we want to be able to sing and to proceed with communion in a genuine spirit of sacrifice, to the extent that we understand his promptings in our lives. Let's pause for a moment as we pray together.

Father, I look at Jonah running away, and I see myself. I think many of us would be prepared to admit that--running away from the opportunities of tomorrow in the routine of our lives, back in the Nineveh to which you've sent us, looking for boats, planes, trains, anything that will get us off to some place where we don't have to do that to which you've called us. And we're tempted to sidestep the sleeping prophet underneath the deck, but it looks a lot like he's a picture of the church, asleep while the world rants and raves and wonders how it's going to stop itself from capsizing.

The church asleep, awakened by the world. How can you sleep at a time like this? Don't you have a role to play? And then, with embarrassment and shame, he's cast over the side. We can certainly identify with him as he screams out from the fish, as he endeavors to make amends and to renew his commitment.

We walk with him back into the city as he does now what he's been asked to do, and yet we're staggered to realize that although he goes the right place and says the right thing, his heart is really not in it. And again, we see our faces, attending services, preaching sermons, giving the right clichéd answers, and all a thin veneer for a heart that is increasingly distanced from your heart of compassion, Lord Jesus Christ. Hearts that have failed to look at the lonely people and to say, Where do they all come from? Hearts that have grown cold.

Minds that have retreated into our theological shibboleths, using our theology as a means of retreat from ever getting our hands dirty, from ever putting ourselves in the place of vulnerability, for asking people to come to us and forgetting that it was Jesus who said, Come to me. And he said that we should go to them. But we thank you that you are a God of compassion, that you don't cast off your servants, that you provide the plants to make us comfortable and happy, you provide the worms so that we wouldn't depend on your secondary benefits but in order that we might be cast afresh upon you.

Forgive us, Lord, to the extent that we have set up little idols of our own, things that really prevent us from going all out for you--whatever all out would mean. But whatever it means, we pray that we might be able to say from our hearts tonight that knowing you, Jesus, is really, frankly, the greatest thing, and we would love for others to come to know you as well. So receive our offerings and receive our lives.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. That concludes this message.

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