

## Unit III: Fulfilling Our Obligations to God and Society

# Grace beyond Borders

DEVOTIONAL READING: Revelation 5:1-5

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURES: Jonah 1-4

PRINT PASSAGES: Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5; 4:6-11

### KEY VERSES

Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: and should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle? (Jonah 4:10-11, KJV)

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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. 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?” (Jonah 4:10-11, NIV)

### Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do the following:

- Apply God’s desire to extend grace to Nineveh as a model for divine grace that transcends national boundaries today.
- Examine your own willingness to love others in light of God’s mercy.
- Commit to extending God’s grace to neighbors across all nations.

### \*Key Terms

Arise (Jonah 1:2, KJV)—Hebrew: *qum* (koom): to rise, stand.

Journey (Jonah 3:4)—Hebrew: *mahalak* (mah-hal-awk’): a trip, tour, walk.

Preach (Jonah 3:2)—Hebrew: *qara* (kaw-raw’): to call, speak God’s Word; “proclaim” (NIV).

Presence (Jonah 1:3, KJV)—Hebrew: *paniym* (paw-neem’): face, countenance.

Sackcloth (Jonah 3:5)—Hebrew: *saq* (sak): a symbol of mourning; coarse, loose cloth or sacking (used in mourning and for bagging).

Wickedness (Jonah 1:2)—Hebrew: *ra’* (rah): evil, adversity.

\*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)



## The Biblical Context

The book of Jonah records the ministry of this eighth-century BC prophet of Israel's northern kingdom. Jonah's story is unique because of his reluctance to obey God's call. God commanded him to preach to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians were notorious for cruelty, conquest, and oppression. They exacted tribute, took captives, and spread fear through violent tactics. Their kings claimed divine authority under Ashur, their chief god, whom they considered superior even to Israel's God. Jonah's resistance was not mere stubbornness; it was rooted in politics, history, and deep religious conviction.

Yet, when Jonah finally obeyed, Nineveh repented. The greatest irony is that the prophet who resisted his mission most became the instrument of one of the greatest revivals in Scripture. Still, Jonah struggled with God's mercy. He would rather have seen Nineveh destroyed than delivered. His story reminds us that God's compassion extends far beyond human prejudice, nationalism, or grudges.

## Introduction

In *Confessions of a Transformed Heart*, Nancy Sheppard gives a powerful testimony of ministry in difficult circumstances. She and her husband, Mark, served with Baptist Mid-Missions in Liberia until civil war broke out in 1989. With children at home, they had to leave. Later, they returned to the neighboring Republic of Côte d'Ivoire to minister to Liberian refugees. At first, they worked among English speakers but later had to serve French speakers, which was an entirely new challenge. Then the Ebola crisis struck West Africa, raising the danger even more. Nancy admits that she wondered why God asked her to serve people who were different from her in language, culture, and overwhelming needs. Only when she confessed her fear, depression, and anger did she find peace to minister. Her story mirrors Jonah's—reluctance at first, but transformation by God's call.

## ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

### Disobeying a Direct Order

(Jonah 1:1-3)

#### KJV

**NOW THE** word of the LORD came unto

**Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,**

**2 Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.**

**3 But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.**

#### NIV

**THE WORD** of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:

**2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”**

**3 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.**

The word of the Lord came clearly to Jonah: “Go to Nineveh.” There was nothing ambiguous about this command. God had identified a specific city and issued a direct charge. But Jonah resisted, not by questioning or debating, but by running. He headed in the opposite direction, boarding a ship bound for Tarshish, as if distance could shield him from divine responsibility. His actions remind us that disobedience is rarely passive—it is active, deliberate, and costly.

Why did Jonah run? Nineveh was the Assyrian capital, a place known for brutality, arrogance, and idol worship. Jonah viewed them as enemies undeserving of grace. In his mind, they were beyond redemption. He also may have feared ridicule or even violence if he delivered such a message. Yet, the true problem was deeper—Jonah did not share God’s heart for mercy.

Jonah’s flight reminds us that disobedience often begins when God’s call collides with our prejudices, fears, or preferences. Still, running from God is futile. The God who made heaven, earth, and sea cannot be escaped. He pursues us not to crush us, but to bring us back into alignment with His mission.

## **WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

**Have you ever resisted God’s call because it felt too difficult or uncomfortable? What happens when we assume that our judgment is wiser than God’s command?**

## **The God of Another Chance** (*Jonah 3:1-5*)

### **KJV**

**AND THE** word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying,

**2 Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.**

**3 So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days’ journey.**

**4 And Jonah began to enter into the city a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.**

**5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.**

### **NIV**

**THEN THE** word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

**2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”**

**3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.**

**4 Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”**

**5 The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.**

Equally striking is God's grace toward Nineveh. Known throughout the ancient world for violence, cruelty, and oppression, this pagan capital seemed the least likely place to respond to the preaching of a Hebrew prophet. Yet, when Jonah finally obeyed, his reluctant sermon sparked a citywide revival. His message was short and blunt: *In forty days Nineveh shall be overthrown!* It was not a message full of encouragement or promise. Still, it cut deeply into the hearts of the people. From the king down to the poorest citizen, the Ninevites fasted, put on sackcloth, and humbled themselves before God in repentance.

This moment reminds us that God is not bound by our narrow expectations. He can take hesitant messengers, meager words, and even reluctant obedience, and still accomplish His purposes. It also shows us that no people are beyond the reach of divine mercy. Augustine's timeless confession captures it well: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in You." The Ninevites, long restless in idolatry, recognized the truth of God when it finally confronted them.

God is truly the God of another chance—not only for His stubborn prophet, but also for an entire nation mired in sin. His mercy always extends further than our prejudices, revealing His deep desire for all people everywhere to repent, believe, and live.

## **Q WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

**If God gives grace so freely, how should we treat those whom society has already written off?**

## **Get Your Priorities Straight (Jonah 4:6-11)**

### **KJV**

**6 And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd.**

**7 But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.**

**8 And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.**

**9 And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.**

**10 Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:**

**11 And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore**

thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

## **NIV**

**6** Then 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.

**7** But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered.

**8** 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."

**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."

**10** But 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."

**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?"

Jonah was, by any measure, a successful evangelist. His sermon was short and sharp, yet it carried the weight of God's authority. The people of Nineveh, notorious for their cruelty and idolatry, responded with immediate repentance. Whether their motive was fear of destruction or a true desire for God's goodness, their outward response was undeniable. They fasted, clothed themselves in sackcloth, and humbled their hearts before the Lord. Genuine repentance does not always require full understanding, but it does require a sincere turning away from sin and an openness to God's mercy.

Yet, instead of rejoicing in this remarkable revival, Jonah sulked. He sought shelter under a gourd, and when God allowed it to wither, he grew angry and bitter. God used this object lesson to reveal Jonah's misplaced priorities. Jonah cared more about the loss of a plant that brought him temporary comfort than about the eternal destiny of thousands of souls. God reminded him that His compassion extends far beyond Israel to all people—even to Jonah's enemies.

This same challenge confronts the modern church. Too often, congregations focus more on protecting resources or preserving comfort than on meeting urgent human needs. When compassion takes second place to self-interest, we, like Jonah, need God to realign our priorities with His.

## **Q WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

**In your life and church, what reveals whether your priorities align more with Jonah's comfort or with God's concern for people?**

## A Closing Thought

Jonah's story reminds us that God's call may challenge our comfort, our prejudices, and even our theology. Jonah resisted, but God gave him another chance. Nineveh repented, but Jonah still pouted. In the end, God revealed His heart for all people. His concern is not for temporary comforts but for eternal souls.

## Your Life

Have you resisted God's assignment because it felt unreasonable or uncomfortable? What might change if you trusted His wisdom instead of your own fears? Reflect on times when obedience felt costly but later revealed unexpected blessings. Consider how surrendering your own plans could open doors for growth and greater usefulness in God's kingdom.

## Your World!

In today's world, God may call believers to places of conflict, suffering, or difference—whether in global hotspots or local neighborhoods. How can Christians prepare to respond with obedience and compassion, even when the assignment feels risky? Faithful preparation may include prayer, learning from others who serve in challenging environments, and cultivating empathy for people who seem entirely different from you. When Christians embrace God's mission beyond personal comfort, the church becomes a living witness of His mercy to the world.

## Closing Prayer

Dear God, teach us to see others as You see them and to love as You love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## Conclusion

### (Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

What's a good day's work? In preparation for next week's lesson, read Genesis 2:18; Exodus 20:9; John 5:17; 9:4; Acts 20:33-35; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12.

### Home Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY, May 4	"God Ordains Productive Work"	(Genesis 2:4a-10, 15)
TUESDAY, May 5	"Commit Your Work to the Lord"	(Proverbs 16:1-3, 8-9)
WEDNESDAY, May 6	"Caring for the Work of God's Hands"	(Psalm 8)
THURSDAY, May 7	"The Sabbath Is a Perpetual Covenant"	(Exodus 31:12-17)
FRIDAY, May 8	"Working and Healing on the Sabbath"	(John 5:8-11, 16-17)
SATURDAY, May 9	"Supporting Oneself and Others"	(Acts 20:31-35)
SUNDAY, May 10	"Work Quietly and Diligently"	(2 Thessalonians 3:6-12)