

A Violent Grace

Jonah 1

August 1, 2010

Introduction:

My favorite passage in the Chronicles of Narnia books is found in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when Mr. & Mrs. Beaver are explaining to the Penvesie children about Aslan. The youngest girl, Lucy, inquires about Aslan asking...

“Is – is he a man?”

“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion – *the* Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh!” said Susan, “I’d thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver; “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King I tell you.”

This comes from the pen of a man named C. S. Lewis who knew firsthand the reality that God is not safe. He wrote about his own experience with God during his conversion to Christianity in his autobiography entitled *Surprised by Joy* saying,

“You must picture me alone in that room... night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England” (ch. 14, p. 266).

Lewis then goes on to write,

“I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?... The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.”

This morning we’ll be talking about “the hardness of God” as C. S. Lewis described it, as we consider God’s unrelenting, violent grace towards sinners. I know the word “violent” is not an adjective normally associated with the word “grace” and perhaps some of you are even offended that I should dare to describe God’s grace in such a manner. If that’s the case, I would ask you to consider if it might not be possible that you imagine God to be far tamer and more domesticated than what he really is. We like to imagine that God is safe

and predictable, like a gentle summer rain; but I do not think that's the portrait Scriptures paints for us. God and his grace towards sinners is neither calm nor predictable; it is more like a raging hurricane. God's grace is violent because it shatters our false idols and uproots our sinful pride without warning. It relentlessly pursues and overcomes sinners even when, like C. S. Lewis, they try to resist it. No, God is not safe, not in spite of grace but precisely because of it. God's violent grace towards sinners demonstrates that of all the many ways we might describe God, "safe" is not an option available to us.

Jonah is a story about the relentless and utterly unsafe grace of God towards sinners and nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the events described in chapter 1. Here we run smack-dab into the reckless, raging fury of God's grace. Those who encounter God's grace in these verses know firsthand it's violent, destructive, yet ultimately saving power and we would each be wise to learn from their experience.

So to that end, open your Bibles with me to the book of Jonah. If you don't have a Bible with you, you can use one of the pew Bibles in front of you. You can find the book of Jonah in the pew Bibles on page 654.

Story

We'll begin by first walking through the narrative and then I'll sum up for you to main idea of the passage, make a few points related to it, and then we'll be done. So let's begin by looking at just the first three verses of Jonah chapter 1. **"Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.' But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD."**

By the time Jonah gets this call from God, he may have been well-known as a successful prophet. Back in 2 Kings 14:25 we're told that Jonah was a prophet during the reign of king Jeroboam. According to that passage, Jonah prophesied that the lands of northern Israel would be restored – and they were! That's a pretty sweet deal if you're a prophet: not only is your message not doom-and-gloom, but it's actually something positive that gets fulfilled in your lifetime! So Jonah is walking tall as the big man on campus when this new message from God comes into his Inbox.

This time the message isn't rainbows and puppy dogs: God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, to preach against it. Now you need to understand what Jonah is up against here: the Assyrians are not nice people. They make the Nazis look like a bunch of Girl Scouts. I'll talk more about the infamous cruelty of the Assyrians in a couple of weeks, but for now let's be clear that the Assyrians were not people you wanted to have a cup of tea with. They were mercilessly cruel and bragged about how they would maim and torture the people they captured. The nation of Israel had directly experienced their oppression and Jonah certainly had no love for them. So God was giving Jonah an assignment that was the equivalent of having Anne Frank march into the middle of Berlin to tell the Nazis to repent or be destroyed.

In Jonah's mind, it's a lose-lose situation. If he goes, one of two things could happen: first, he'll likely be brutally tortured and killed once they're done laughing at him or second, if they actually do repent, then his hated enemies won't get the judgment Jonah believes is justly due them. So Jonah goes for option number three: go as far away from Nineveh as possible. Nineveh is east so Jonah hops on board a ship going west as far away as he could possibly go. The city of Tarshish was on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea on the coast of Spain. Unless the ship's captain was named Christopher Columbus, Jonah couldn't get much further west than where he was going. So instead of rising up and going to Nineveh in obedience to God, Jonah rises up and flees from God.

Well, let's see how well that works out for him by looking in your Bibles at v. 4-6. **“But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the [sailors] were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, ‘What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.’”**

God's response to Jonah's escape plan is to hurl a huge storm at the ship he's on, a storm so violent and turbulent that the ship itself was at risk of being torn apart. In fact, it gets so bad these veteran sailors begin tossing their valuable cargo into the sea in order to keep from sinking. When that doesn't help, they call out to their gods and plea for help, but the storm only continues to rage on. They're at their wits ends when they remember the fellow who booked passage aboard the ship back at port. So the captain rushes down into the hull only to find Jonah fast asleep! At any moment their ship could be ripped to shreds and Jonah is off in dreamland totally oblivious to what's happening.

It's not hard to imagine the incredulous tone of the captain when he tells Jonah to wake up. “Hey buddy! Get up and beg your god for mercy otherwise we're all going die!” So Jonah finally gets up and joins the rest of the crew. Let's see what happens next starting in v. 7. **“And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.’ So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, ‘Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?’ And he said to them, ‘I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’ Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, ‘What is this that you have done!’ For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. Then they said to him, ‘What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?’ For the sea grew [increasingly stormy]. He said to them, ‘Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.’”** Let's stop there.

So the sailors cast lots and discover that Jonah is the one responsible for royally angering his God and putting all of their lives in danger. They quickly ask him some questions and learn that he's a Hebrew who is fleeing his god Yahweh, who Jonah describes as the God

“who made the sea and the dry land.” The sailors reply to this in v. 10 asking, **“What is that that you have done?”** which I take as the shorthand way of saying, “So let me get this right: your god is the God who made the sea and you are trying to flee from him by sailing on a boat? Really? What possibly made you think this was a good idea?”

But at least at this point they’ve identified the guilty party: now all they need to do is figure out how to appease Jonah’s God. So they ask him, “What do we need to do to get your God to stop this storm?” Jonah gives them a simple solution, **“Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you.”** If I was the captain, I would have said, “See ya; wouldn’t want to be ya!” and tossed him overboard. But look what they do instead starting in v. 13. **“Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea [was becoming even stormier] against them. Therefore they called out to the LORD, ‘O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.’ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”**

These sailors find themselves in between a rock and a hard place, don’t they? They fear if they take Jonah’s life they’ll only anger Yahweh even more, but with every second they delay, the sea grows worse. So they make a desperate attempt to row back to land only to find the sea rage even worse against them. At this point, the only option they have left is the Hail Mary pass, so they make a quick prayer to Yahweh asking for his forgiveness, grab Jonah, and hurl him into the raging sea. No sooner does Jonah’s body disappear under the waves, the seas calm down and returns to normal and Jonah begins a three day vacation inside the belly of a fish.

Now that’s quite a story so far and I wish I had the time to get into some of the various interesting details of the passage up to this point, but we need to move on and try to understand what this first chapter in Jonah has to teach us about God’s grace. So to that end, let me summarize the main idea I believe God would have us understand from this exciting passage of Scripture, which is just this...

Main idea: God’s grace will go to violent measures to save sinners.

There’s nothing gentle or safe about what takes place in this opening chapter of Jonah. God’s response to Jonah’s sin is to hurl a violent storm to slam into the ship he’s on, which nearly kills him and everyone else on board. That storm was an expression of the violent grace of God. It was grace, because it was meant to save unworthy sinners, but also violent because it was an unexpected and unwelcomed intrusion. Jonah was fleeing God’s presence and the sailors weren’t looking for it, but it was thrust upon them anyway. The reality is God’s grace is not safe; he will resort to violent measures if need be to grab the attention of sinners and bring them to himself. So let’s consider how that affects the lives of those in our story. First, let’s talk about...

1. God's violent grace towards Jonah

If there's one individual who understands God's violence grace, it's Jonah. The guy begins the chapter as a successful prophet and ends the chapter being hurled into a raging ocean where he nearly drowns but is instead swallowed by a fish, in which he manages to survive for three days in a pitch dark, cramped, incredibly smelly, and most certainly acidic stomach. This is not the kind of day you're going to write about in your family's yearly Christmas letter. If it might borrow from a famous children's book, this was Jonah's "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day."

Yet, this was a day of grace. It was God's grace that he hurled a violent storm that nearly tore the ship apart. It was God's grace that the sailors in desperation threw Jonah overboard to what all expected was certain death. It was God's grace that instead of drowning, Jonah ended up bruised and bloodied, gasping for air, inside the most inhospitable location imaginable. And the reason all of this was God's grace is because Jonah deserved death. He said "no" to a direct command of God. When we tell God "no," the Bible calls that "sin." And Scripture says "the wages of sin is death." Jonah had earned death; God in his grace allowed him to live, and not only to live, but to have an opportunity to repent and obey once again. As violent and horrible as this experience must have been for Jonah, it was all an act of grace to get his attention and bring him back to God.

C. S. Lewis once said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Pain and suffering is not necessarily evil; oftentimes it's the means God employs to rouse us from our sin-induced slumber. It is what God needed to use to get Jonah's attention. Remember, Jonah was a successful prophet of God. He knew the Scriptures and even had God speak directly to him. He had every reason to know better than to try to run from God, yet he disobeyed anyway. If God couldn't get Jonah's attention by speaking to him directly or through the written Word of Scripture, God would use the brutal violence of creation to snap Jonah out of his sinful stupor.

It's easy to poke fun at Jonah for his foolish decision, but Jonah didn't do anything different than what you and I do every time we sin. God has clearly told us what he expects us to do in Scripture and yet how often do we run the other way by disobeying him? Jonah's story is in a sense the story of all of humanity, starting with Adam and Eve. This is just one more chapter of the long on-going story of mankind running from God. Yet every time we sin and God doesn't immediately strike us dead, that's grace. And even when we face the painful consequences of our sin – such as sickness or disease, loss of a job or money or family or friends or reputation, strict fines or even imprisonment – those are God's grace to us. The painful consequences of our sin are God's megaphone calling us to repent and turn from sin while there is still time. For those of us going through it, it is full of pain and misery, but it is no less God's grace because he is using them to get our attention and bring us back to him. God did it for Jonah and he does it still for his people today.

But Jonah is not the only recipient of God's violent grace in this passage: the unnamed sailors get caught up in the raging storm of God's grace as well. So for our second point, let's consider...

2. God's violent grace towards the sailors

We're not told a lot of background information about these men other than they were sailors and weren't Jewish because they worshipped various false gods. They don't seem to have any idea that a famous Jewish prophet had just boarded their ship; as far as they're concerned, as long as he pays the fare and stays out of their way, they don't care to get to know anything about him. But their indifference toward Jonah quickly changes when their prayers to their gods fall on deaf ears and the storm rages about them. Suddenly they become exceedingly interested in Jonah and the God that Jonah serves and start bombarding him with questions.

I find it ironic that Jonah, who was running away from testifying to pagans about God, found himself doing that very thing to these terrified sailors. Jonah tells them Yahweh is behind the storm and that he has made the lands and the seas. I'm not sure how much the sailors grasp what Jonah tells them; either because they don't trust Jonah or because they fear what Yahweh will do to them if they murder his prophet, they don't throw Jonah overboard at first. It's only when God forces their hand by making the storm so terrible that they hurl Jonah into the surging waters.

That was their first act of faith. Not meekly raising a hand after a gospel presentation or walking down an aisle while a piano softly plays "Just As I Am" in the background. No, their conversion involved hurling a famous prophet to his death during a raging storm at sea. All of heaven's fury had been unleashed on their tiny ship and these cold, wet, terrified men demonstrated faith in Yahweh by killing his prophet. That's a violent grace, but a grace that resulted in their salvation, both physically and spiritually.

No sooner did Jonah disappear into the watery abyss, the seas died down and they were saved from physical death. But more importantly, they now knew Yahweh was without a doubt the one true God. Verse 18 says, "**Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.**" Jonah had unknowingly just made the first converts of his journey. Mind you it took the forced testimony of a disobedient prophet, a violent and terrifying storm at sea, and a initial act of faith involving hurling a man to his death, but these men who had set sail as pagans returned to port as transformed men. They had encountered the violent grace of God and it shattered their false idols and destroyed any doubts about who was the true God of the land and the seas.

So both Jonah and these sailors are recipients of God's violent grace and both are saved through that grace. But there's one more character pertinent to this story that we need to address and that's us, the reader. The book of Jonah is written for us. God deemed fit to include this narrative in Scripture in order to teach us something about his grace. So our third and final point this morning concerns...

3. God's violent grace towards us

Just like Jonah and the sailors, we also are recipients of God's violent grace, both historically and personally. Historically, the entire basis of our salvation comes from Jesus' death on an ancient torture device called the Roman cross. The cross is the ultimate symbol of God's violent grace. On the cross, God's grace towards sinners is demonstrated by the most violent and torturous means of death ever devised: death by crucifixion. Yet God sent us His only begotten Son to suffer that for us, so that His justice could be satisfied. Far worse than hurling a storm against Jonah for his sin, God hurled all of his holy wrath upon Jesus who had become sin for us.

And just as Jonah suffered because of sin and was for all intents and purposes "dead" in the cold belly of the fish for three days, so also Jesus suffered for sin and was dead in the cold tomb for three days until God restores him back to life. This is the parallel Jesus draws between himself and Jonah in the gospels. Jesus compares himself with Jonah in Matthew 12:40 when he says, *"For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."* So Jonah is not simply a cute little story we read to preschoolers: Jonah is a type of Christ. This is a serious story that prefigures what is to happen to the Messiah when he comes.

Jonah's suffering for his sin, a suffering which results in a violent "death" in the sea and yet a miraculous resurrection after three days, points ahead to Christ's suffering for our sin and his death and resurrection. And just as Jonah's death at sea results in the salvation of the pagan sailors, so also does the death of Christ bring salvation to the lost today. Jonah prophesied far more deeply than he could ever realize. Jonah shows us that a righteous prophet would need to suffer God's wrath for sin and yet would be raised again from certain death to new life. The only difference is that Jonah suffered God's violent grace for his own sin while Christ suffered for our sin as an innocent substitute, becoming sin for us so that we might be saved.

No, God is not safe by a long shot. His grace towards us was a violent grace, a grace that demanded that the wrath of God be hurled upon the spotless Lamb of God on the cross in order to obtain our salvation. But not only do we see God's violent grace towards us historically on the cross, but in order for us to be saved, we must each experience God's violent grace towards us personally.

Our problem is we're all either like the sailors or Jonah - we're either sinning against God by our ignorance or by our willful rebellion. And just like Jonah, we'd sail on as far away from God as we could if God would allow us. And for some, that is exactly what God does. In Romans 1, to those who neither thanked him nor worshipped him, we're told God *"gave them over"* to their sin. It's as if God says, *"Take your ship to Tarshish and go. I will not stop you."* It is God's wrath, not his grace, which provides the blue skies and gentle wind for clear sailing through the sea of sin that we delight in. It is the wrath of God which leaves us alone to be free to choose in accordance with the depraved wickedness of our hearts

We're all in the same boat, as it were. Romans 3 says we've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Scripture repeatedly says our hearts are darkened, that we are spiritually deaf and blind, dead in our transgressions, that we are by nature objects of God's wrath, and that no one seeks God, no not one. In other words, if God doesn't interfere, we're all damned. Unless the violent grace of God is hurled against the ship of your life, you will keep sailing away to your doom. We'll never choose God unless God first does violence to our hearts and minds by transforming through regeneration to believe. By ourselves, we don't want anything to do with God. We run away from God either in ignorance or in rebellion. So God must interfere in some way otherwise no one will be saved. God must do that which we neither will nor want in order to give us that which we most need.

I know some claim God is a gentleman; that he will only lightly knock on the doors of our hearts but it is up to us to invite him in, to which I reply along with the rest of Scripture, "Balderdash!" If that were true, heaven would be vacant and hell would be bursting at the seams because Scripture says nobody would answer the door. God does not gently rap on the door of our heart: he rips the door off the hinges and storms inside to take what is his. The Spirit of God blows where he wills and on whom he will, causing those whom God has chosen before the foundations of the world to be born again, *"not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God"* (John 1:13). It is by the glorious violence of God's grace that he gives to us the very thing we do not want nor would ever want by causing us to be born again so our spiritually blind eyes can finally be opened to see Christ as Lord and trust in him.

My friends, it is the violent grace of God which saved us, a grace we did not seek, but a grace which *"even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ"* (Eph 2:5). It is God's violent grace which interfered with Jonah's choice to flee from God in order to save him, and it's God's violent grace which saves rebels like you and me to this day.

Conclusion

So let me close by having us take some time to praise God for his violent grace towards each of us who call Christ our Lord. If God had not relentlessly pursued me in spite of the fact that I wanted nothing to do with him, if he had not caused me to be born again down in Savannah, GA so that my spiritually blind eyes could see as Lord, I would not be here today, certainly not as your pastor and definitely not as a Christian. God's violent grace saved me because he chose for me what I would never have chosen for myself. And what's true for me is true for each of you. We are all Jonah, fleeing from God, and God saved us anyway. It is a violent grace, but it's also an amazing grace that we'll have all eternity to thank God for. Let's pray.

Prayer

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Brethren Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2010.