

A Surprising Grace

Jonah 3

August 15, 2010

Introduction:

Do you like surprises? I imagine that can be a somewhat difficult question to answer since it depends on the nature of the surprise, doesn't it? Some surprises are pleasant and others... not so much. For example, the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was not exactly a very welcomed surprise. Or if you're on the receiving end of some prank that involves scaring you half to death, then being surprised isn't all that great.

Of course at other times surprises can be very pleasant. If somebody goes through all the trouble to secretly gather your friends together to throw you a surprise birthday party, then that certainly qualifies as a welcomed surprise. Or if you entered a contest that you really didn't expect you'd win but then you find out weeks later after you had forgotten all about it that you won the grand prize, then that's a surprise anybody would enjoy. I think it's safe to say we all like surprises like that.

If you like pleasant surprises, then you're going to like the passage we'll be looking at this morning. Jonah 3 is a chapter full of surprises because it is a chapter about God's grace. Since a surprise can be defined as something unexpected and grace can be defined as receiving something which we do not deserve (and therefore would not have any reason to expect it) the words "grace" and "surprise" are, in essence, synonymous. Grace is the exceedingly pleasant surprise sinners receive from God. Or another way of putting it is: God's grace is a joyful surprise.

This morning we're going to consider the surprising grace of God found in Jonah 3. Much of what takes place in this chapter really ought not to take place at all; if the universe was governed by justice alone, then our text this morning would read vastly different than what we have before us. But because our universe is governed by a God who is both just and full of mercy and grace, we have a story full of joyful surprises.

So let's take a look this surprising passage of Scripture by opening your Bibles with me to Jonah 3. I'll be reading v. 1-10 in the English Standard Version. **"Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn**

from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.’ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”

We’re going to get into the details of this passage in just a moment, but before we do let me summarize the main idea that these ten verses here are communicating to us about God’s grace, which is just this:

Main idea: God’s surprising grace extends to even the worst of sinners.

This passage is all about God’s surprising grace to sinners whom you’d only expect to receive God’s wrath. Yet as has been the case so far in the book of Jonah, that which transpires is far from what anyone would expect. So let’s begin by considering our first point from our text, which is...

1. God’s surprising grace to Jonah

Look back in your Bibles with me at v. 1-2. **“Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’”**

The Word of the Lord does not have to come to Jonah a second time. Jonah should have obeyed it the first time it came. Instead, he disobeyed it by trying to set sail to a city in the opposite direction. God could have by all rights snuffed out Jonah’s life in the storm and called somebody else to travel to Nineveh. Instead God rescued him from certain death at sea, brought him back to dry land, and reiterated his same call to go and preach to the city of Nineveh.

These two verses are pure grace. In fact, any time we sin and God does not strike us down on the spot for our rebellion against him is grace. Jonah deserved death and yet God gave him a second chance to be obedient; how many chances have you been given? Think about all that you’ve done just in the past week, much less over your whole life. How many lies and half-truths have you told recently? How often did you speak ill of another person out of anger or jealousy? Into what dark places have your thoughts wandered into over the past few days? How many times can you recall not doing that which you knew you should and instead doing that which you knew you should not? And yet, amazingly, here you are. God has allowed you to rebel against him in various and sundry ways, all grievous and heinous in his sight, and yet you still draw breath. We are each Jonah, ten thousand times over. We deserve death for our rebellion, yet God gives us second and third and fourth and countless more chances to repent of our sin and obey him. That’s grace, pure and simple.

It says in Romans 2:4 that the kindness of God leads us to repentance. When we see what we by all rights deserve for our sin, and yet discover that the kindness of God’s grace has not given us what we deserve but rather has given us opportunity upon opportunity to turn back to God, that’s meant to lead us to repentance. Our hearts are

to be so moved by the surprising grace of God that we turn from our sinful ways and turn back to God. Has that been true of those of you sitting here? Do you recognize God's surprising grace that allows you to be here among God's people, praising his name and listening to his Word rather than suffering the unquenchable agonies of the fires of hell? That grace is given to lead you to repentance.

Well, let's see what God's surprising grace does to Jonah. Look back at the first half of v. 3. **“So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.”** At long last, it finally happens: Jonah obeys God. Whereas in chapter 1 Jonah arose to flee from God's call, now in chapter 3 Jonah arose to obey God's Word. Jonah has learned a couple things between God's first call and the second. First, he's learned the hard way that you can't flee from God. When it comes to God, you can run, but you can't hide. If God wants you, he will relentlessly pursue you until he has you. And second, Jonah has gained a greater understanding of God's grace. Mind you, his understanding isn't perfect, as will be made abundantly clear once we get to chapter 4, but it's enough that this time Jonah obeys God's call rather than runs from it. The surprising grace of God that saved him in the belly of a fish and gave him a second chance caused Jonah to reconsider his actions. God's kindness to him has led Jonah to repentance, and as a result he obeys God and sets off for Nineveh.

It's a surprising grace Jonah receives just as it should be surprising to us when God's gives us grace even after we run from him into our own sinful pursuits and pleasures. But this is only the tip of the iceberg of God's surprising grace in this passage. Let's move on to our second point and consider the majority of what our text focuses on, which is...

2. God's surprising grace to the Assyrians

Look back in your Bibles as I read v. 3-4. **“So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’”**

Now before we go too far, let me tell you a little bit about Nineveh. The city of Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, so Jonah was being sent to the equivalent of Washington D.C. Having just made the trip to Washington D. C. with my family a few weeks ago, I can tell you it was enjoyable, but Jonah wasn't going to Nineveh to visit the Assyrian version of the Smithsonian. No, he was sent there to warn them that within forty days Nineveh would be overthrown. Needless to say if I had entered the senate chambers last month proclaiming that message to our congressmen, I'd likely still be locked up in a mental ward. But Jonah no doubt had another concern eating at the back of his mind as he made the 500 mile journey from Jerusalem to Nineveh. The Assyrian Empire was not a friendly democracy with Miranda rights and laws saying you're innocent until proven guilty. Assyria was one of the most ruthless, oppressive, and cruel nations ever to exist and Jonah was being sent into the very heart of it.

If you remember from God's original commission to Jonah in 1:2, the reason God was sending Jonah to Nineveh was because of their evil wickedness. The Assyrians were notorious for their cruel and torturous behavior towards those they conquered; in fact, they proudly boasted of it. One of the Assyrian kings who lived a few years before Jonah wrote this about his conquests:

"I flayed the skin from as many nobles as had rebelled against me and draped their skins over the pile of corpses... I cut off the heads of their fighters and built with them a tower before their city. I burnt their adolescent boys and girls...I captured many troops alive. I cut off of some their arms and hands; of others I cut of their noses, ears, and extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living and one of the heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city." (as quoted in Bruckner 29).

In another place, they boast of dismembering captives alive, often leaving one hand attached so they could shake it before the person died (Bruckner 28). In all fairness to Jonah, I can understand why Jonah would be reluctant to go there and proclaim this message to them. Would you want that assignment? These are the most vile, cruel, sadistic people on the face of the earth. It's no wonder Jonah's first instinct was to flee and no wonder they got God's attention due to their exceedingly great wickedness.

So you need to grasp the incredible cruelty of the Assyrians to understand first of all, Jonah's reluctance, and second, how utterly surprising is what happens next in the passage. Jonah arrives in Nineveh and begins proclaiming that in forty days the city will meet its doom. Anybody reading this that was even remotely familiar with the Assyrians knew exactly what was going to happen next – Jonah's severed head is going to end up mounted on a pole followed by God laying waste to the city of Nineveh. The end. Game over.

But look what happens instead in v. 5. **"And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them."** Jonah heads out into the public squares and marketplaces and the people respond to his message not by killing him but by repenting. They call a fast and put on sackcloth at all levels of society and turn to God. This is certainly not what anyone would have expected.

Before long this grassroots movement reaches the ears of the king. Look at what he does in v. 6-9. **"The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.'"**

This is not at all what anyone would expect to happen. Even the king of Nineveh himself responds positively to Jonah's message. He puts on sackcloth and ashes and makes it national policy that everyone in the city (including the animals!) should fast

and be covered with sackcloth. Furthermore the king decrees that everyone should repent of their sin in hopes of averting the impending wrath of God. This is truly astonishing. This is the equivalent of Jonah marching into Berlin during the Second World War, telling Adolph Hitler to repent of his sin, and then Hitler responding by stopping the bombing of England, calling his troops lay down their arms and trade in their swastika for sackcloth, releasing all the prisoners from the concentration camps, and proclaiming a fast for every person across Germany. This may very well be the most incredible revival ever to take place in the history of the world.

If you really want to know what the greatest miracle in the book of Jonah is, it isn't that Jonah survives in the belly of a fish for three days. That's impressive, but that isn't it by a long shot. The greatest miracle in the book of Jonah is an entire city of exceedingly wicked and vile people all repent of their sin in response to Jonah's preaching. Few are those in human history who were crueller than the Assyrians and far fewer are those who have collectively turned from sin the way this generation of Assyrians did.

And in case anyone doubts the sincerity of their repentance, look back in your Bibles with me at v. 10. **“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”**

Amazing, surprising, astonishing grace. If ever there were a people deserving of death and judgment, the Assyrians were it. But yet to even such as these, God gives grace. He grants them humble hearts to be open to Jonah's message and they in turn repent of their wickedness. God then relents giving them what their sin rightfully deserved. Jonah chapter 3 is a story of God's surprising grace on a grand scale, demonstrating God's great love and mercy even to those who least deserve it.

Now it might seem at this point that the sermon is almost done. After all, I've arrived at the last verse in the chapter and detailed how God's surprising grace worked in the life of a reluctant and disobedient prophet and how it was even extended to embrace an incredibly wicked group of people living in Nineveh. But there is one more group of people who have been recipients of God's surprising grace this passage addresses that I need to talk about before we're done and that's us, the readers. This chapter is not in Scripture merely to give us a history lesson on what happen in Nineveh during the 8th century B.C.; it's there to call us to reflect on God's surprising grace given to us in our own lives. So our third and final point this morning concerns...

3. God's surprising grace to you and me

Each of us has been recipients of God's surprising grace and should be able to see hints of ourselves in this passage. The Assyrians were an exceedingly wicked people, steeped in sin and vice, and yet for all practice purposes we're no better than they were before we came to Christ. Scripture doesn't pull any punches to describe our sinful condition. At the end of Romans 3, the apostle Paul fires off Scripture passage after Scripture passage like a machine gun to describe us. He says...

*...as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands; no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good, not even one.'
Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.
The venom of asps is under their lips.
Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.
Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known.
There is no fear of God before their eyes.'*

In Ephesians 2 Paul speaks out even more bleakly concerning our condition saying,

"You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience - among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

There is no difference between us and the Assyrians. We are all a wicked, violent, hateful, cruel, slanderous, boastful, proud, and arrogant people. We deserve God's wrath just as fully as we don't deserve God's grace. Yet God in his surprising grace somewhere along the line sent somebody to you with a message. Maybe it was your mom or dad, or a Sunday school teacher, or a friend at school and they told you the good news about Jesus Christ, how he died for your sins on the cross and rose again from the dead. They told you that if you turned from your sins and believed in him, you would be forgiven and receive the gift of eternal life. Then a miracle happened. Your spiritually blind eyes were opened. Your heart of stone that once rejected God now saw him as wonderful and desirable. You who were once dead in your sins had now become spiritually alive and you believed the message, turned from your sin, and trusted in Christ as your Savior.

I think of my own experience of becoming a Christian down at Savannah College of Art and Design. I was a sinful young man who wasn't looking for God and was content worshiping the false gods of the world. Yet God's surprising grace found me and saved me from continuing down the wide and easy path of sin that leads only to destruction and instead placed my feet upon the narrow road that leads to life. God's surprising grace came to me just as it did the Ninevites twenty-eight centuries earlier. It was a grace which I deserved no more than they did, yet it was a grace which has transformed my life ever since.

But not only does God's surprising grace come to the most vilest of sinners, but it's even given to those who should know better. Jonah was a Jew, a successful prophet who knew the Lord and the Law. Nevertheless, when given a difficult assignment, he fled from God. Yet in spite of his disobedience, God gave him a second chance to obey. His failure, while serious, was not the end for Jonah but rather an opportunity for God to teach him more about his grace.

So it is with us when we fail as Christians to do what we know we ought to do. We dare not minimize the sin of disobedience, but at the same time we dare not forget the wonderful grace of God that surprises us by giving us second chances. Even when we fail God miserably and deliberately, God is always ready to graciously forgive and restore us. This is a truth the apostle Peter knew personally. He had denied Christ three times and run away, trying to protect his own skin. Yet Jesus took this man who had run away from him and restored him to leadership. Peter had encountered God's surprising grace and it transformed his life.

That same surprising grace is available to us when we run from God and fail to do what he calls us to do. The apostle John speaks about it in 1 John 1:9 when he writes, "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" Even though we sin, if we confess them, God is ready and able to forgive us of our sins and make us clean again. He can and will restore anyone who has fallen. He doesn't have to: that's grace. But that he does for people like you and I is a gloriously wonderful and surprising grace indeed!

Conclusion

So as we close our time in Jonah 3, I think God would have us reflect upon his surprising grace in our own lives. How has God lavished his unexpected grace on you? Do you think of your own salvation and how God graciously saved you from a life of sin which would have resulted in your damnation if he had not intervened? Or do you think of the many times you were like Jonah, where you disobeyed God's Word and tried to run from him and yet God still give you and second and third and forty-fourth chance to repent of your sin and do what was right? God would have us leave this morning recalling the numerous ways his grace has come to us unexpectedly to save us and restore us and that in turn should lead our hearts to praise for who he is and all that he has graciously done for us. Let's do that now as we turn our hearts to him in prayer. 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.