

God's Surprising Grace

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[0 : 00] I'm surprised by the way that God graciously works in your life when you've done everything the wrong way, been rebellious, been hard-hearted, been stubborn, just plain disobedient.

Sometimes I just get in awe of how God puts up with me, how He shows grace.

I am so thankful for His grace. I hope you are as well. Well, that's what we're going to look at this morning in Jonah chapter 1, God's surprising grace.

And the first thing we're going to look at today is that God sometimes uses unbelievers to accomplish His gracious purpose. I want you to look with me.

If you would, open your Bible. We're in Jonah chapter 1. We have read the entire chapter several times, part of it several times. We're going to read more today, but I don't want to read the whole section again.

[1 : 18] I want you to think with me and look at verse 5. Think about the actions of the sailors on the ship with Jonah.

If you haven't been here, if you're not familiar with the story, Jonah was God's prophet. He was called by God to go to a certain place and preach. He didn't. He went the opposite direction. And as a part of going the opposite direction, He boarded a ship that would take him far away.

But then God hurled a storm at the ship to stop Jonah. When the storm first struck, these pagan sailors prayed to their own false gods.

When Jonah was identified as the guilty one, they began to question Him.

Look with me in verse 7 and 8. And they said to one another, Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.

[2 : 54] 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?

Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you? I want you to look at how Jonah responded.

I want you to think about his response and his description of God and how it affected these sailors. I'm going to put this on the screen, verses 9 and 10 now. 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.

[3 : 55] I want you to note that Jonah identified himself as a Hebrew, part of the people of Israel. He identified himself as a Hebrew.

And his God as, look at it, the Lord. And that is a translation of God's special covenant name, Yahweh.

God's holy name. Jonah identified God by that name. And then look at their response.

They were terrified. When they heard he was a Hebrew, that their God, his God was Yahweh. Why would they do that?

Why would such hardened men most likely be afraid of this Hebrew who served the Lord God?

[4 : 57] Well, many commentators believe these sailors had heard about the people of Israel. They'd heard about Israel's God.

And it makes sense. They're professional sailors. They sailed the Mediterranean Sea. This trip that they're on right now began in Joppa, which is not far from Israel.

Richard Phillips, in his commentary, gives us a good explanation for why these sailors responded with fear when they heard Jonah mention the Lord, that name.

Look at it. The mariners likely would have heard about the Hebrews and their frightening God. He was the God who broke Pharaoh's power in order to set his people free and who parted the waters of the Red Sea for the Hebrews to pass through.

But then drowned the pursuing Egyptians. This was the stern God who took his people into Canaan with such frightening power. Therefore, they realized that this was a great God, this God of the Hebrews.

[6 : 05] And it was this God, not a weak God, who was pursuing them for the sake of Jonah. Here they are in the midst of a hurricane type storm.

They're scared to death of that. And then they're described with even a heightened sense of fear when Jonah identifies himself as part of the people of God and calls God by that covenant name. Even though they knew Jonah is rebelling against this God, they still revere him, so to speak, by asking him, what should we do?

And when Jonah told them that the only way for the sea to calm and for them to save themselves was to throw him overboard.

But I want you to look at what they said in verse 13. If I can find it. Jonah has identified himself and his God.

[7 : 40] They have confidence he knows what he's talking about. And so they ask him, what should we do? And he tells them very clearly. It wasn't an answer he wanted to tell them. He was actually being truthful.

But instead of taking this stranger who had brought this storm on them, caused them to lose their cargo and maybe going to lose their lives, instead of them gladly throwing him overboard, they did their best to row out of the storm.

Now think about that. It seems that their discovery of God caused them to show Jonah mercy. Mercy is a quality of God. Mercy is one of the characteristics of a Christian that Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount in the Beatitudes.

If we have a right relationship with God, if we want to please God, we're going to have a merciful heart and desire to show mercy to people instead of just being cruel, just giving people what they deserve.

[9 : 04] And you see it in these pagans right as they first become aware of God. That's powerful. God's doing a work in these men's lives right here.

And we see it in the way they treated Jonah. I mean, be honest. If you'd have been there, you think you're going to die, and some guy you don't know, you don't care about, you think this guy, you know, he's running from this powerful God we've heard about.

He says, if we want to see the calm, throw him overboard. Wouldn't you throw him overboard? I'd throw you overboard if it was you. You'd throw me overboard if it was me in that setting.

But they didn't Jonah. God used these unbelievers, pagans, idol worshipers at this time to show grace to Jonah.

We're going to see later on the actual way of grace was to throw him overboard. But right now, at the beginning, they think the way of being gracious and merciful is to try to row out of the storm and avoid throwing him overboard.

[10 : 19] But finally, God shows these sailors they're wasting their time. They cannot outrun the storm. And so they've got a choice. Either throw him overboard or die themselves.

So they decide to do it. But look at verses 14 and 15. They call out to God for mercy on themselves before they do it.

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.

That's their way of saying, this is your call, Lord. Don't blame us. Blame you. So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea and the sea ceased from its raging.

What I want us to see here is that God will do whatever it takes to change us if we are his child and he has determined to use us in a certain way.

[11 : 33] God will do whatever it takes if he is determined to use us in a certain way. God will do whatever it takes to cause us to change our mind if we are rebelling.

God will do whatever it takes to make us willing to do it. God works through these unbelievers and God will work through unbelievers around us. God is never limited.

There may be times in your life when you are not close to God, you are disobeying him, something is going on and you don't come to church because you think that's one way I can get away from being convicted.

Maybe I can forget. Maybe the Lord will leave me alone so you don't come to church or you don't want to be around Christian people. Well, God could even work through pagans.

God could even work through the worst people you know if he chooses to touch you, to correct you, to bring you to the point where he wants you to be.

[12 : 41] God sometimes even uses miracles to get our attention. Look at number two, this point. God sometimes uses miraculous interventions to put us on the path he has chosen for us.

This chapter begins and ends with a strong statement of how God sovereignly intervenes in Jonah's life to prevent him from escaping God's call.

God first hurled a great storm at Jonah's ship that we've read about and talked about already in verse four and then in verse 17 God appointed a great fish to rescue Jonah and prevent him from drowning.

Look at that. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. That's what we're going to start looking at next week. But these two miraculous interventions make it clear that when God chooses us to carry out his plan he's going to so manipulate things in our lives that we will eventually be willing to do his will.

Now I want to pause here and be clear about this matter of disobeying God. we can disobey God. Jonah disobeyed God. Sometimes God allows us to disobey him as his children and miss out on the blessing that we would have received if we had obeyed him.

[14 : 21] We can see an example of that in the book of Acts chapter 13 when Mark the writer of the second gospel he took off on the first mission trip of the New Testament church in Acts 13 he went with Paul and Barnabas but he didn't go far he quit.

You can read about it. He quit. He turned around and he went home. He abandoned his mission team. Well Paul was offended by that angered by that and later on Mark wanted to go on a second trip with Paul and Barnabas and Paul said you ain't going.

You quit on me one time you will not quit on me a second time. Well Barnabas was more compassionate more merciful maybe. He wanted Mark to go.

He wanted to give him a second chance. Paul didn't back down and their disagreement was so strong over Mark that they split. Paul went one way and took Silas Barnabas took Mark and went another way.

You can read about that in Acts 15. Here's what I want us to see. Mark's failure quitting the first missionary trip. It had some serious consequences.

[15 : 42] It led to the breakup of the Paul Barnabas mission team. The original mission team. And then Mark missed out on the blessings of seeing how God used his team to save many people's lives.

To start new churches. Mark could have been a part of that but he wasn't because of his failure. God is an example of how God sometimes allows us to disobey him.

And he uses other people to do what he originally wanted us to do. And the result will always be that we miss out on being used of God to bless somebody else.

And we miss out on being blessed ourselves by being obedient to God. But God does not always allow us to disobey him and get by with it.

I want you to hear this. We've talked in some of the other messages about how Jonah disobeyed. Mark did. We have. We've suffered for it.

[16 : 56] We've missed out on some things most likely. But there are times when God is not going to allow us to disobey him or keep on disobeying him because he is determined to use us.

Let's take some examples. Moses. God raised up Moses, called him to be his spokesman, the deliverer of the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage.

But a lot of you know the story. At first, Moses, he didn't want to go. He didn't want to be that. He didn't want to do that. He made excuses. But God would not accept his excuses.

God had chosen him for that assignment. And God made sure that Moses fulfilled it. Paul, the apostle, he was chosen by God.

He says in Galatians chapter 1, from his mother's womb. Before he ever entered this world, God had a plan for his life. He was going to be a great missionary, a great evangelist, great church

planter.

[18 : 09] God was even going to use him to write a large portion of the New Testament. But Paul began his adult life as an enemy of Jesus Christ and the church.

He was well known in the church, before he became a Christian, as one who will track you down, and have you put in prison, and possibly even executed, all because you are a follower of Jesus. But when the Lord got ready to use him, the Lord miraculously broke into his life, and you can read about this in Acts 9, God literally knocked him to the ground and blinded him for a period of time because God was serious about getting his attention and changing everything about his life because God was going to use him in a tremendous way as one of the early leaders of the church. God can intervene in your life and mine at any time. If it requires disciplining us severely, he will and just do whatever it takes to cause us to want to obey him.

That's what God's doing with Jonah in chapter 1 and 2, and we're going to read in chapter 3 a little bit later on that when God called Jonah the second time to go and preach to Neva, he went and he did not argue.

[19 : 54] But just think, that was after his painful experience of being thrown off a ship in the middle of the storm, nearly drowning and spending three days and three nights stuck inside a great fish.

I want to encourage you. Always listen when God speaks. And God speaks to us through his word. That's the clearest way he speaks to us today. If you're a Christian, he speaks through his spirit who indwells you. God speaks through wise people he's put into your life. God speaks to us in all different kinds of ways.

And when he speaks, we need to listen with the idea, I want to know God's will because I want to do God's will. Paul tells us at the end of Romans 12, 2, that God's doing God's will will be good for us because God's will is good and acceptable and perfect.

He describes it that way. Well, think about it this way. When we're faithful to do what we know God wants us to be, and it may be something small, maybe about your attitude, your relationships, some of the people you live with, the way you go about your job, whatever it is, when we're faithful to God to do whatever it is he's calling us to do, he's going to be pleased, he's going to be glorified in it.

[21 : 32] The people that we're involved with, they'll be helped. And we ourselves, we ourselves in the long run, we will be blessed by doing God's will and pleasing him.

Let's look at one more thing. God sometimes uses us in spite of our rebellion to bless other people. Chapter one begins with Jonah refusing to preach to the pagan people of Nineveh.

He hated them. They were the enemies of his country, they were the enemies of Israel. They were ruthless, savage, brutal people. He didn't want to go for a lot of reasons, but one of the reasons was he wanted them to die and go to hell.

He didn't want these people to be saved. He didn't want to go and preach and them turn. And we'll see some of the things about how he didn't like it when they did later on.

This chapter begins with Jonah refusing to go and preach to the pagan people of Nineveh, but it closes with Jonah unwillingly, preaching to the pagan sailors on the ship.

[22 : 52] God worked through Jonah in spite of his rebellion to save these men. That's what verse 16 indicates. Look at it. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

Again, they call on God's covenant name, the Lord, Yahweh. Here's what I want you to know. They did this after the storm stopped. Think about it.

If they had done this before the storm stopped, we might think they were just doing whatever it took to try to save themselves. Jailhouse religion, foxhole religion, whatever you want to call it.

A lot of times, people, maybe some of us in here, will bargain with God, will tell God what we'll do, and maybe even go through the motions of doing certain things until we get out of a jam.

Then we forget about it. Well, these people, they feared the Lord, offered sacrifices, made vows after the danger had passed.

[24 : 06] It appears that these men had truly been converted. It seems that what we read there in verse 16 are expressions of faith, real faith in God, gratitude to Him.

They are thankful. They love this God, this one true God, Yahweh, who has rescued them. God graciously used rebellious Jonah to accomplish His purpose in these men's lives, to call them to be His children.

Now, I want you to think, if God could do that with uncooperating Jonah, think about how God could use us when we willingly cooperate with Him and are willing to do whatever it is He tells us to do. You know, we've looked at chapter one now for five weeks. There's a lot of great lessons here about God's grace, about how God graciously works out His purpose in our lives and in this world. God's grace. Therefore, we must not be intimidated by anyone's unbelief. You shouldn't write off anyone as beyond God's ability to save.

[25 : 34] If God could save these pagan sailors who worshipped false gods with this unfaithful prophet of His, He can save anyone.

one. Here's the point I want to make here. Most of us in this room, we have family members or close friends who are not Christians.

And some of them, we may think, they're beyond hope. Some of them may claim to be atheists. Some of them may just be hard-hearted, mean individuals.

You may have tried to share the gospel with them before and they just brushed you off, cussed you out even. There may be people in our lives that we've just sort of given up on, but what I want us to see to happen with Jonah and these sailors is no one is beyond hope.

So don't quit praying for that person. Don't quit trying to live out your faith in front of them and be a real friend to them.

[26 : 47] And don't not share the gospel with them because you're afraid, because they've not responded well in the past. Prayerfully, carefully, lovingly, ask God to use you as you willingly try to influence them.

Ask God to use you the way he used unwilling Jonah. Ask God to let you see a miracle happen before your eyes and see that hardened family member or friend.

See that hardened person, that person with a hard heart's heart melt and embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior. A second lesson we find in chapter one is we as individuals, we must stay on guard against becoming hard-hearted toward God ourselves.

throughout this ordeal, Jonah is running from God, unwilling to change, unwilling to stop.

It comes to the point where Jonah realizes these sailors, they now know that the only way for this storm to stop and save their own lives is throw me overboard.

[28 : 04] And he's willing to be thrown overboard before he will confess his sin to God and repent. There is every reason to believe that if Jonah at any point on this ship, if he had just said, God, I'm tired of running, you win.

If Jonah just confessed his sin, his disobedience, repented, changed his mind and said, Lord, I will go now and preach to the people of Nineveh. There's no reason to think that God wouldn't have stopped the storm then.

That was the whole point, getting Jonah to go. But his heart was so hard, he was so stubborn, he was willing to die, be thrown overboard, rather than to go to these people and preach.

You and I, we could become so hardened by our sin and disobedience that we destroy our own lives.

You know, the writer to the Hebrews issued a warning about this. Look at it. He says, but encourage one another daily as long as it is called today, so that none of you, writing to Christians, may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

[29 : 23] In a room this size, there's most likely people, professing Christians, and if you're honest, your heart is a whole lot harder right now than it was this time last year.

You think, are you less sensitive to the Spirit of God right now? Are you less merciful and compassionate and loving? Have you developed some calluses in your heart?

Not just toward God, but even toward people. This is a warning to us. Don't be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

I want you to understand, it can ruin your life. It can cost you some relationships. It can cost you more than you want to pay. Let's learn from Jonah.

Don't become so hardened that you're willing to die before you'll do God's will. He may, he could let you do that.

[30 : 37] The final lesson I want us to look at this morning is, it's always to our advantage that we maintain an open heart and mind to God's call and a willingness to do His will.

Just think, if Jonah had obeyed God the first time, he would have avoided all the pain and misery that he went through and that he caused these sailors and everybody else in the ship to go through.

God's will is always the best for us and the people around us. Don't make God teach you every lesson the hard way.

All of us in this room, we've learned a lot of lessons the hard way. It's no fun, is it? We don't need to learn God's lessons the hard way and we don't have to. Let's learn from Jonah's mistakes.

Let's learn to trust God. To obey Him willingly the first time, every time. And if we love Him, why don't we do it?

[31 : 46] If we're confident that He loves us, we have to be confident that His plan, His will will lead to the best life possible for us.

So let's learn to trust God and be faithful to obey Him every time. Let's pray together.

Father, show us now how we should respond. Make it clear if our heart is hard.

Maybe we don't even see it. We don't know it because it's so hard. Lord, intervene in whoever's life needs your intervention to make this known.

If there are people here who are not Christians, make it clear to your God that their real problem is that they don't know you. They're far from you.

[32 : 46] And I pray that you'll help that person to be honest and admit it, turn from their sin and trust Jesus as their Savior and Lord right now. If there's Christians in this room, Father, who are running from you, running from doing something specific that they know you want them to do, help them to understand they can run all they want to, but they can't get away.

And Father, help us all to understand that if there's something that you have determined that we will do, we will do it. But Lord, help us to avoid the pain, the discipline of getting us in a position where we do want it.

Let's just all be still and quiet before the Lord and respond to Him as He speaks to us. And I would be happy to pray with you during this time. If you want to come down to the front as musicians play. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.