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Glory: The Character of God / Forgiveness / Exodus 34:6–7; Jonah 3:1–4:11

In Jonah 3:1-4:11, we learn that God’s forgiveness extends to all, even to those we expect would reject God.

Introduction

I am currently preaching a series of sermons that I am calling, “Glory: The Character of God.” In this five-week-long series, I am exploring God’s self-revelation of himself to Moses in [Exodus 34:6-7](#).

God revealed several of his attributes to Moses in [Exodus 34:6–7](#), which reads as follows:

⁶ The LORD passed before him [that is, Moses] and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

Several weeks ago, we examined the truth that God is merciful and gracious. Then, we examined the truth that God is slow to anger. That was followed by the truth that God is faithful. Today, I would like to examine the truth that God is forgiving.

The text I want to use to see that God is forgiving is from the Prophet Jonah.

Jonah lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II, which was about 793-753 BC. The book of Jonah focuses more on the prophet himself than on his message.

God sent Jonah to preach against the great pagan city of Nineveh. However, Jonah disobeyed God and fled in the opposite direction to Tarshish. Jonah was eventually swallowed by a great fish. According to Jesus, Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish (see [Matthew 12:39-41](#)).

Jonah repented of his disobedience. So, God ordered the fish to vomit Jonah out on dry land.

This is where we will pick up the story from the Prophet Jonah.

Scripture

Let's read [Jonah 3:1-4:11](#):

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” ³ 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. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 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.

⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ 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, ⁸ 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. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

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.

¹ But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ² And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. ³ Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴ And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?”

⁵ Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. ⁶ Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” ⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” ¹⁰ And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

Lesson

In [Jonah 3:1-4:11](#), we learn that God’s forgiveness extends to all, even to those we expect would reject God.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. God Grants an Undeserved Commission (3:1-2)
2. God Causes an Unprecedented Awakening (3:3-10)
3. God Challenges an Unhappy Servant (4:1-11)
4. God Concludes with an Unanswered Question (4:11)

I. God Grants an Undeserved Commission (3:1-2)

First, God grants an undeserved commission.

We don’t know where the great fish vomited up Jonah. Remember that he had been in the great fish for three days and three nights.

Several years ago, I read a commentary by a pastor who corrected my very wrong thinking about Jonah’s time in the great fish.

I suppose I had been thinking of picture storybooks for children. And in one particular book, the artist had a great fish and one could see Jonah sitting inside the big belly of the great fish. Jonah was sitting on a chair at a table and there was a candle on the table and Jonah was praying his prayer of repentance that we read about in [Jonah 2](#). Now, for very small children, that might not be scary.

The reality, however, was dreadful for Jonah. There was no chair, no table, and certainly no candle. Instead, Jonah was inside the stomach of a great fish, in pitch darkness, desperately grasping for each breath. He would have been squished with slimy gastric juices, mucous, and pieces of half-chewed and digested fish or seaweed.

It is very likely that when Jonah was vomited out of the great fish three days later, he was bleached and smelly. Undoubtedly, Jonah would have been amazed that he was still alive.

More importantly, God met Jonah on the beach. Charles Spurgeon said, “The life of Jonah cannot be written without God; take God out of the prophet’s history, and there is no history to write” (C. H. Spurgeon, “Jonah’s Object-Lessons,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 43 [London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1897], 73).

God had called Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh. Though Jonah utterly disobeyed God, God did not desert Jonah. It was God who controlled the storm, prepared the great fish, and rescued Jonah from certain death.

What happened next is astonishing. “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’ ” ([Jonah 3:1-2](#)).

Though Jonah had earlier turned his back on God, it is amazing that God now spoke to Jonah again.

But Jonah had repented (in the belly of the great fish). Jonah had turned back to the Lord. Now the Lord could once again speak to Jonah through his word.

Friends, God cannot use you unless you repent of your sin. You may have rebelled against God and you may think that your sin is so heinous that God could never use you. Don’t you believe that for a minute.

All over the Bible are the histories of people who sinned against God and then sought his forgiveness, received it, and were restored to useful service to God. Think of the following:

Abraham fled to Egypt, where he lied about his wife, but God gave him another chance ([Gen. 12:10–13:4](#)). Jacob lied to his father Isaac, but God restored him and used him to build the nation of Israel. Moses killed a man (probably in self-defense) and fled from Egypt, but God called him to be the leader of His people. Peter denied the Lord three times, but Jesus forgave him and said, “Follow Me” ([John 21:19](#)) (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Amazed*, “Be” Commentary Series [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996], 85).

God will use you in his service if you repent of your sins and make yourself available to him.

II. God Causes an Unprecedented Awakening (3:3-10)

Second, God causes an unprecedented awakening.

[Jonah 3:3](#) states, “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.”

One commentator tells us the following about the city of Nineveh:

Four times in this book, Nineveh is called a “great city” (1:2; 3:2–3; 4:11), and archeologists tell us that the adjective is well-deserved.

It was great in history, having been founded in ancient times by Noah’s great-grandson Nimrod (Gen. 10:8–10).

It was also great in size. The circumference of the city and its suburbs was sixty miles, and from the Lord’s statement in Jonah 4:11, we could infer that there were probably over 600,000 people living there. One wall of the city had a circumference of eight miles and boasted 1,500 towers.

The city was great in splendor and influence, being one of the leading cities of the powerful Assyrian Empire. It was built near the Tigris River and had the Khoser River running through it.... Its merchants traveled the empire and

brought great wealth into the city, and Assyria's armies were feared everywhere.

Nineveh was great in sin, for the Assyrians were known far and wide for their violence, showing no mercy to their enemies. They impaled live victims on sharp poles, leaving them to roast to death in the desert sun; they beheaded people by the thousands and stacked their skulls up in piles by the city gates; and they even skinned people alive. They respected neither age nor sex and followed a policy of killing babies and young children so they wouldn't have to care for them (Nahum 3:10) (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Amazed*, "Be" Commentary Series [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996], 85–86).

This was the city to which God sent Jonah. One can understand Jonah's initial hesitation. But, Jonah now trusted the Lord to lead him, as Warren Wiersbe wrote, "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God can't keep you and the power of God can't use you" (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Amazed*, "Be" Commentary Series [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996], 86).

When Jonah got to Nineveh, he rented a massive stadium, sent out fliers all over the city, and invited everyone to come and hear him preach. No, he didn't!

He just walked through the city and called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ([Jonah 3:4b](#)). We don't know anything else about Jonah's ministry in Nineveh. We don't know if he exposed Nineveh's sin. We don't know if he talked about the grace of God. All we know is that he had a very short message, which in Hebrew is only five words, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ([Jonah 3:4b](#)).

Commentator Warren Wiersbe notes, "Throughout Scripture, the number forty seems to be identified with testing or judgment. During the time of Noah, it rained forty days and forty nights ([Gen. 7:4](#), [12](#), [17](#)). The Jewish spies explored Canaan forty days ([Num. 14:34](#)), and the nation of Israel was tested in the wilderness forty years ([Deut. 2:7](#)). The giant Goliath taunted the army of Israel forty days ([1 Sam. 17:16](#)), and the Lord gave the people of Nineveh forty days to repent and turn from their wickedness" (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Amazed*, "Be" Commentary Series [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996], 87).

The astonishing thing is that the people of Nineveh paid attention to Jonah's message. The wicked Ninevites repented! We read in [Jonah 3:5](#), "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.”

Even the king of Nineveh repented, for we read in [Jonah 3:6](#), “The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.”

How did God respond to the repentance of the Ninevites? “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” ([Jonah 3:10](#)).

Many years ago, I read that the repentance of the city of Nineveh would be like the entire city of New York turning to God in repentance. There was an unprecedented awakening that took place in the city of Nineveh.

God caused an unprecedented awakening in response to Jonah’s preaching if one can even call his one-sentence message “preaching.”

Our task is to be faithful to what God calls us to do and leave the results to God.

If the book of Jonah concluded at the end of [Jonah 3](#), Jonah would have gone down in history as the greatest preacher ever. Hundreds of thousands of people repented of their sins. There was an unprecedented awakening in Nineveh.

But the story does not conclude with chapter 3. Chapter 4 shows us that the Lord looks at the heart.

III. God Challenges an Unhappy Servant (4:1-11)

Third, God challenges an unhappy servant.

Very surprisingly, Jonah was not happy with the response of the Ninevites. We read in [Jonah 4:1](#), “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.”

Why was Jonah angry?

Nineveh was Israel’s hated enemy. Jonah was happy to pronounce God’s judgment on Israel’s enemy. He wanted them to be punished for all their wickedness and sin. He had no love for the wicked, pagan Ninevites.

So, when the Ninevites repented and God relented of the disaster that he said would do to the Ninevites, that took Jonah by surprise. God did not act in the way that Jonah expected.

So Jonah prayed and said to the Lord in verse 2, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”

Jonah’s theology was better than his heart. He knew that God was “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.” He knew that God is a forgiving God.

But Jonah did not want the Ninevites to repent. He wanted them to burn in hell. Jonah was like every other Israelite who hated the Ninevites and the Assyrians. Jonah was hoping that he could go back home and be the hero among his friends.

“Yes, I told them that God was going to overthrow the great city of Nineveh and punish them! I warned them but they would not listen.” Jonah’s friends would have hailed him as a hero.

Instead, Jonah had to go back to Israel and say that God used his preaching to bring about an unprecedented awakening. Everyone, from the king down to the humblest person, repented of their sin. And God did not punish them!

Friends, God is a forgiving God. He does not want sinners to perish. He wants sinners to repent and be saved.

The problem is never with God. It is often with me. I am quite happy to see people like me come to repentance and faith in Jesus. But, deep down, I don’t want to see people who are very different than me repent and be saved by God. Or, deep down, I don’t want to see people who have hurt me repent and be saved by God.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells the story of struggling to forgive the mother of one of her son’s classmates. Through a series of misunderstandings (and cultural differences), Anne believes that this woman is competing with Anne to be the better mom and severely judging her when Anne fails to live up to a certain standard of behavior and values.

Despite her loathing for this woman, Anne feels that God is sending increasingly unobvious signs that Anne needs to forgive her for the anger and hurt she's caused.

At one point, she feels like she is constantly having the benefits of forgiveness explained to her. "There were admonitions about the self-destructiveness of not forgiving people, and reminders that this usually doesn't hurt other people as much as it hurts you. In fact, not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."

Eventually, she ends up forgiving her enemy when she realizes the destruction the lack of forgiveness is wreaking on her heart and mind and that *Anne* is the one who needs to stop competing with the other mom who is sincerely trying to live her best life and extend a well-intentioned (if not misunderstood) hand of friendship (Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* [New York: Anchor Books, 1999], 134).

Friends, God is a forgiving God. He is "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."

May we learn to forgive others as God has forgiven us.

IV. God Concludes with an Unanswered Question (4:11)

And fourth, God concludes with an unanswered question.

[Jonah 4:11](#) concludes with this question from God, "And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Jonah and Nahum are the only two books in the Bible that end with a question, and both books have to do with the great city of Nineveh.

God's question to Jonah is about God's pity (or compassion, as it is in some versions of the Bible).

How did Jonah respond to God's question? We don't know. Charles Spurgeon wrote of Jonah, "Let us hope that, during the rest of his life, he so lived as to rejoice in the sparing mercy of God" (C. H. Spurgeon, "Jonah's Object-Lessons,"

in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 43 [London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1897], 84).

After all, had Jonah not himself been spared because of the mercy and forgiveness of God?

Conclusion

Let us rejoice in the forgiveness that God extends to us and let us extend this forgiveness to others.

In 2015, people were attending a Bible study at the Mother Emanuel AME church in Charleston, SC. Suddenly, a young white man burst in and shot and killed nine black parishioners attending the Bible study. The shooter claimed to be a white supremacist and neo-Nazi. The people he shot were all black. This shooting shocked the nation, and it was labeled as a “hate crime.”

What was astonishing, however, was the reaction of the survivors. Rather than respond in kind to the killer with hatred, some of the family members who had lost loved ones in that shooting publicly forgave the shooter.

Five years after the shooting, the survivors reflected on their willingness to forgive someone who had done something so unspeakably horrible to their families. They admitted that forgiveness was a process and that some days were harder than others.

But, by the grace of God, they were able to forgive someone because they had received the forgiveness of God.

Think of a person who has wronged you. What is holding you back from forgiving that person?

If you have received the forgiveness of God, then nothing should hold you back from forgiving that person.

And also, think of a person you have wronged. What is holding you back from asking for that person’s forgiveness?

May God help each one of us to know the joy of forgiveness that he extends to us. And may we extend his forgiveness to others. Amen.