

Challenging Grace

Jonah 4

October 29, 2000

[Read Jonah 4.] In the English language when we want to talk about the grace of God, the mercy of God, the love of God, the compassion of God, or the faithfulness of God we have to use all those different words--grace, mercy, love, compassion, faithfulness. But in the Hebrew language, the language of the OT, there was one word that encompassed all those attributes of God. That word is *hesed*. In vs 2, Jonah describes God's *hesed*. Jonah says, "God I know that you are gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love--a God who relents from sending calamity. All of those elements make up the *hesed* of God. You can think about God's *hesed* in this way--it is God's covenant love or covenant faithfulness. *Hesed* means God is going to love you no matter what. He will be faithful to you and he will be faithful to the promises he makes to you through thick and thin, through good times and bad. God will remain steadfast in his love and faithfulness even when you walk away from him. That's *hesed*."

So, why the lesson in Hebrew? Well, this entire book and especially this last chapter is a challenge to see God's *hesed*, his covenant love, in a new way. Remember when we started this study I asked you to think about the question to whom will God show grace, mercy, and compassion. You see for many Israelites and certainly Jonah, when you asked the question 'to whom would God display his covenant love?', the answer was easy. God displays his *hesed* to us, his people, the Israelites.

So imagine Jonah's shock when he is called to preach to Ninevah the capital city of the bloodthirsty Assyrian Empire. Not only are these people not Israelites but the Assyrians have made it the national pastime to make war on the Israelite people. Imagine

Jonah's thoughts as he sees the Assyrian people repenting and turning to God. Imagine Jonah's reaction as he sees (3:10) God having compassion, hesed, to Ninevah and not destroying them.

Well, we don't have to leave much to the imagination. Jonah's reaction is described in ch 4. He is angry. Jonah says, "God I knew this would happen. I knew you were going to show hesed to these Ninevites." Read between the lines here. Jonah is saying, "God these Ninevites aren't your people. They are wicked. What are you doing showing them grace and mercy and compassion?" In fact, Jonah is so angry he says, "cancel tomorrow, God. I would be better off dead. I would rather die than see these Ninevites forgiven."

You know, often when God calls us to do something it is not just to complete a task it is so that we can learn something about God and our relationship to him. God could have chosen any prophet in Israel but he chose Jonah because he wanted Jonah to learn a lesson. God wanted to show Jonah the true depth of his mercy and grace. He wanted to expand Jonah's understanding of hesed. But Jonah doesn't get it yet, he is angry that God would dare to show this steadfast love to anyone other than an Israelite. So as Jonah storms off to a place east of Ninevah, God gives Jonah an object lesson. God causes a plant to grow up that shades Jonah from the deadly heat. When the plant springs up, the text literally says Jonah rejoiced with a great rejoicing over the vine. Then God took the plant away and Jonah becomes angry, angry enough to die.

God says in vs 10, "Jonah, here you are weeping over this vine although you had no hand in creating it. Look at Ninevah, Jonah. 120,000 people completely confused. They don't know their right hand from their left. (A metaphorical way of saying they

have lost their moral direction.) And God says, Jonah, if you can weep over something you didn't create and something as insignificant as a vine, should I not weep over the lost condition of this great city?"

As far as I know, this is the only book in the bible that ends with a question. And this book ends with a question for a reason. It is to challenge all who read this story with the question to whom will God show love and mercy and grace? To whom will God display his hesed--his covenant love? When you really begin thinking about that question the answer may be difficult to accept.

There is a verse we often quote Jn 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." We learned that verse in Sunday school when we were kids. But the first six words of that verse are profound. For God so loved the world. This book of Jonah challenges us to find out do we really believe that. Sure we may know it but do we believe it. Do we really believe that God loves this world when we know that the world is filled with murderers, child abusers, liars, those who persecute God's children, those who embrace evil over good? Does God really love the world? More to the point do we believe it.

I remember a few years ago, on one of these shows like 20/20 or 48 hours, they were following a death row inmate through the late stages of his life. This man had committed vile, evil acts and there was no doubt he did them. He admitted to them. Part of the story showed how in the last days of his life he accepted Jesus as his savior. And I remember thinking just how deep is this mercy of God? Can this man commit such evil acts, make an 11th hour confession, and still be welcomed into the Kingdom? Jonah

teaches us the answer to that question. I remember that program showed the day of this man's execution and there was a group of people gathered outside the prison some protesting the execution some supporting it. But I remember there were Christians standing outside the prison, cheering, holding up their bibles and holding up signs condemning this man to hell.

You know, that is just what Jonah was doing. He was sitting outside that city waiting for God to throw the switch. He was waiting to cheer on the destruction of his enemy. Jonah wanted God to show up and take out Ninevah. Well, God showed up but it was with compassion and forgiveness and love. Jonah found out that God's hesed is greater than any wickedness. Jonah found out that the love of God is greater than humanity's sinfulness. God wants us to know that his love is greater than we could have ever imagined. Should I not weep over that great city? It is a powerful, challenging question forcing us to expand our view of God's steadfast love.

Well, we started this morning by defining hesed so let me close with one more definition. It is found in the NT. Hesed is this--that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. The greatest expression of the depth of God's love is seen in his willingness to give up his only son that we might live.