

There's some interesting statistics, you know, and as Christians, you know this, I want you to hear this as being about the whole of kind of the United States, is that the majority of Americans do not read the Bible. And, you know, so there's complex, you know, religious values, et cetera, in this country. But I find it so interesting, though, that while the majority do not read the Bible, many are familiar with some of the most kind of visual stories of the Bible. I think about, like Noah's Ark. You go into any kind of children's store for nurseries, and you have loads of arks and animals to pick from to decorate a nursery with.

People may have watched the Ten Commandments on TBS when it's in the spring. And so there's some familiarity with Bible stories, but there's not always a really good understanding of it because a lot of these kind of media representations are retellings, and they're really heavily edited. They're changed up a little bit. They're rewritten to work for different audiences, particularly when we get to children's literature. Yes, some things probably the kids aren't going to understand or we really don't want to expose them to at that time.

But eventually, hopefully, if they do progress with the story, is to continue to layer into it. But the challenge with kind of these retellings is that these images are what shape people's understanding of scripture. They shape their understanding of God and faith. And the thing is, we have to understand that for the majority of people, the Bible, and more importantly, God, is mediated through these religious and cultural images of God and biblical stories. And so they don't read the Bible.

So they're going to take what they see, they hear, they view as what the story is about. Now, whether that is, again, watching the Ten Commandments in Charlton Heston on TBS, or if it is a veggie tales or two, it runs the gamut. And even those movies or shows that depict themselves describe themselves as biblically accurate. What makes it biblically accurate? How much does it have to have to be biblically accurate?

They still leave things out. They're still going to gear the story in the way they need to tell it. And so for us and for other folks, we need to sometimes unlearn these perceptions that have been kind of pre programmed into us to truly understand what our faith is about, to sift through what media tells us it is to really get the heart of who God is, which is why we are in this series of God unfiltered, exploring the character of God and trying to kind of get to what is the Bible really saying on the page, reading what is there, not what we think is there. And so this happens particularly as we look at the character of God, and we are diving into this through a particular passage in the Old Testament, in this book of Exodus. And so we're going to tackle this actually today through the story of Jonah, which is why I've kind of talked about imagery.

If you are completely unfamiliar with the story, that's fine. But many people know Jonah and the whale, right? That's kind of what comes to mind when, in fact, in the scripture itself, it's not a whale, it's a dog gadol. I'm going to use some Hebrew on you today. You're like, what's a dog gadol?

It's actually one of my favorite hebrew phrases just because of the way it sounds, dog Gadol, which is big fish. So, yeah, maybe a whale, but accurately, it's a big fish. And so that's really what media tends to focus on with regards to Jonah. I mean, this is just, I typed in Jonah in Google, and the images that come up primarily have to do with the fish and Jonah, which is a small part of the story. Now, it's an exciting, it's a dramatic part of the story, but it's not the main point.

But it's so interesting that we grab on to the dramatic moments rather than what is of essence in the story itself. And so when we look at these retellings of Jonah and seeing that, really we want to dig into what the scripture is saying. Now, this is a very small book of the know. And Jonah as the main character, interestingly enough, is more of an anti hero than a hero. And while he is a prophet, he's not a very good prophet.

And he is called to be God's spokesperson to convey God's message, and he actually runs away from his job. And in this story, he becomes an indictment for God against poor behavior on the part of God's people. See, this story really explores the idea of mercy and relationship, questioning the relationship between God's people and his purposes in the world. And it includes some humor, some twists and reversals that are very unexpected. So when people say the Bible is boring, I want to challenge them.

Like, are you reading the good parts? Are you reading what happens? Just, I mean, this is a quick one. This is four chapters, basically about, fills a page and a half, but a lot happens in it, and it raises a lot of big questions. I think that we have about judgment and explores how God's own people, God's own people can get in the way of what God is trying to accomplish.

That as we dig into this story today, I want you to keep that in mind, that we are exploring this to better understand the gracious nature of God's character. Now, we started two weeks ago in Exodus 34, verses six to seven. And we took these two verses that illustrate or actually allow God to tell us who God is, what he's like. And this passage is littered with these descriptors. So let me read the passage for us just as a reminder.

The Lord, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents of the third and fourth generations.

Now, we talked about a lot, the balance between God's mercy and his judgment a few weeks ago. And last week, we dug into the idea of God's compassion.

And so today we're going to dig into this second descriptor, gracious and gracious in Hebrew again. I got to use my seminary education somewhere, okay? This seems like the most appropriate place. I want to make sure I got my money's worth. It makes me feel a little bit better.

But the Hebrew word that is here is related to *chen*. Got to get it rolled out there. But *chen* is grace, the idea of grace, which is a critical theme and idea for us as Christ followers, right? And so it holds this meaning, though of delight, favor, generosity, and it's the ultimate expression for us of God's *chen*. God's grace is in the person of Christ.

And we see this littered throughout scripture as God again and again extends his grace and mercy to people who rebel against him, which most often is causing harm to other people. That God forgives, God continually forgives. And again. And that is the nature of him being gracious. And to look for examples of grace, for sure, we look to the person of Christ, showcasing what grace looks like in action in everyday life and throughout scripture.

We see this emphasis on God's grace, even when we as humans fall short. And so looking at this idea of grace and bringing this into this story of Jonah in the Old Testament, we're going to see how God's graciousness to a disobedient prophet and a repentant Nineveh challenges our understanding of how grace should work in this world. It challenges our perceptions of who deserves God's mercy and how he extends it even when we least expect it. Now, I'm going to ask you to kind of reflect on this in light of your own understandings of grace and who you are willing to extend grace to in your own life. So let's start with the story of Jonah.

So we have Jonah, and he's a prophet, he's an Israelite, and he is called by God to go to a place called Nineveh, which is an Assyria. And the Assyrians are enemies of Israel. And so Jonah's not excited about this task to begin with. One, he doesn't want to go into enemy territory, let alone go and help people turn to God because he knows if they don't turn to God, God is going to wreck havoc on them. So he's like, why would I do that?

I don't like these people. I want bad things for them because they're bad people in my mind. So Jonah, because he's not feeling it, decides he's going to take a cruise in the opposite direction. He's going to go to the exotic locale of Tarshish. Put that on your agenda for your next vacation.

And so he hops on a ship that is bound for Tarshish, and he is on this boat. And God is not thrilled with this behavior. Like, I told you where to go, and now

you're going the opposite direction. So God sends a storm to get Jonah's attention. And this storm is remarkable.

And it scares the sailors to death. Like they are freaked out. They are throwing things overboard. They are not sure what's going on. Why is this happening to us?

And Jonah is sleeping throughout the storm. He's like my oldest kid who can sleep through his brother's screaming bloody murder in his room. Just snoozes away. I wish I had that gift, but I do not. But Jonah is just taking a big old nap on the ship while the sailors are trying to figure out how do we survive this, what's going on?

And they're not aware that the reason this is happening is because of Jonah. And after a game of kind of drawing some straws, they reluctantly, I get, hear this. These sailors who are not believers, they look at Jonah and Jonah's like, you got to throw me overboard. I'm the reason. I'm the cause.

They reluctantly throw him overboard only because it is a last ditch effort to save everyone. And so Jonah ends up in the water, and God sends a fish, a dog, gadol. You can use this in your everyday language. Trust me. Let's have some dog gadol for dinner, folks.

And so in this big fish, Jonah is swallowed up. And it's in the side, the fish, in the belly of the fish, that Jonah starts to get real with God. He acknowledges, yeah, I messed up. God, save me. Help me out here, God.

And he repents, and God has mercy on him. And so God's merciful action to him is to believe Jonah when he says, yes, I will go to Nineveh. Yes, I will preach to them what you have asked me to preach. I will do what you asked me to do in the first place. I will be obedient.

So God has the fish vomit him up. I know it's lovely this early in the morning to talk about things like that. So the fish spits Jonah out on dry land, and he goes about what he was asked to do. I love this image from the Bible project because he just looks so unexcited about this. Like, I will do it, God, if you really ask.

I will clean my room. I'll do the dishes. So he drags himself to Nineveh, and he delivers God's message. And this is the best because his sermon, so powerful, so compassionate. That's sarcasm.

40 days more and Nineveh will be overthrown. That's all he says to them. He stands in the middle of Nineveh, and Jonah says, 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown. He's done. He's like, I did what you asked.

I did the bare minimum. But surprisingly, the people of Nineveh grab onto that. They take it seriously. Even the king says, oh, we better do something. And so they repent.

They ask for forgiveness and mercy. They fast. They put on sackcloth. All of these things are representations of grieving in Hebrew culture. They are grieving their sin.

And God sees their genuine remorse. And he has mercy on them. He spares them. And Jonah, Jonah is not thrilled about this. He was really hoping for some divine wrath to rain down some fire, some brimstone.

He was hoping to roast some marshmallows while he's watching this. And it doesn't happen. So he marches himself outside of Nineveh, camps out and starts to pout. And he prays this to God. He prayed to the Lord.

Isn't this what I said? Lord, when I was still at home? This is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are gracious and compassionate, God, slow to anger and abounding in love. He's quoting Exodus here, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Jonah knew the type of God God was and is and will be. And the story doesn't end there. Yes, we are in the final chapter, which usually gets omitted in most of the retellings of Jonah in our culture. But God has a lesson for Jonah. And so, as Jonah is sitting outside the city pouting, God causes this giant plant to grow over him, and it provides Jonah shade.

So life has gotten a little bit better for Jonah. And then the next day, God sends a worm that makes a meal out of Jonah's precious shade plant. And Jonah is pissed. He's so upset. He gets all upset about the plant.

Why would you take my plant? I love that plant. And this is where God speaks some words to Jonah. You're more worried about a plant than people. You had this plant for a day, and you are all torn up about it.

You are emotionally distraught because this plant is gone. Can you not see that the people of Nineveh are more valuable than vines? Isn't it okay if God feels the same emotional intensity and concern for the city of Nineveh, full of thousands of people who have lost their way? And this, interestingly enough, is where the book ends, with God asking these questions of Jonah. So we never hear Jonah's response, which I'm not sure it would have been very worthwhile, seeing as how cranky and just hard hearted this man is, because it's not the point of how Jonah would respond.

The point is how God responds. The point is that this story actually messes with

us a little bit. Scripture should make us uncomfortable. Scripture should ask questions that we have to wrestle with, because it is in the wrestling, in the reflection, in the thinking on it, that we ourselves are transformed. See, God's questions are addressed to us.

Are you okay with the fact that God loves your enemy? Are you okay with the fact that God loves your enemy? Are you okay that God loves the people that you don't love? Are you okay that God loves the people you don't even like? See, scripture often holds up a mirror to us.

We talk about reading scripture, but in fact, we need scripture to read us. See, in reading Jonah, I see some of my worst behaviors, attitudes magnified enough that I can see them. That I feel humbled and suddenly very grateful that God loves my enemies, because it means he loves me as well. That God puts up with the Jonah in all of us, the disobedient person who begrudgingly does anything in response to God. The person who resists being kind to others because they just don't feel like it.

If all we ever did was based on how we feel, the world would be a very sad place. I'd be punching more people. I would have chased down the person that I almost had an accident with the other day. And we're both doing this, yelling at each. Why do we yell at that person in our car?

They can't hear us. But I'm seriously going, you have your turn signal on. And they're like, I have the right of way. And I'm like, but you're indicating you're going to turn, so you don't. You have poor communication skills in your car.

Seriously. That is my plant. That is my plant. I'm still upset about it. I am still upset about this stupid incident.

And yet God loves that person, who clearly doesn't know how to drive as much as he loves me. See, when I read Jonah, I see all the things that I put on God that are really know, the hard heartedness, the desire to punish and judge, that's really coming from me, not God. See, we think that God is judging us and looking to catch us so he can punish us, when in fact he is always extending second chances and opportunities for grace. I am the one who withholds grace and mercy from other people. God is that father that we talked about last week, who is watching the horizon, probably barely blinking, watching the horizon, waiting for his lost child to come home, hopeful that this will be the day that they turn around and they come home.

That is the heart of God. Gracious to the point. It overwhelms us, makes us uncomfortable, because it is so lavish and so expansive. That is the strange story of today in Jonah, of God's good news to the people of Nineveh, the wideness of God's love contrasted with the very shallow mercy that Jonah has.

And I think this should challenge us to our core.

See, Jonah focuses so much on truth, not forgiveness. He sees the ninevites as these awful people. Yes, that is the facts. They have done awful things. They have been his enemy.

They have done awful things. These facts are not disputed, but Jonah has no room for forgiveness for them. They should be punished. But God is the one who decides that, not us. And when he is forced to go, he is so resentful of it.

But strangely enough, the ninevites respond. They repent, and God is gracious with them. And seeing Jonah's anger, anger that God would be merciful, that God would be gracious. How dare God give them a second chance when all I want are second chances. See the beautiful thing is that God's grace is not limited to our standards.

Praise God. Praise God. That God's standards for mercy and grace are not defined by Moriah. That God's grace transcends our understanding. It is so uncomprehensible.

It is beautiful and mysterious and is offered freely to all who repent and turn towards him. That is really what it means to repent. It's just simply to turn to God to receive the gift he is extending to us that we have done nothing to earn. We are not worthy of it, and he still gives it. He will have mercy and compassion on whom he chooses.

And the thing is, this is not the only place in scripture where God's gracious nature is on full display. We see it in the person of Jesus, where again, his mercy is extended to all. They simply must receive it. Jesus, described as full of truth and grace, came to save, not condemn. His story forces me to pause and think about those places where I have experienced God's grace in my own life, because God's grace knows no bounds.

And it's not about our deserving it. Because if we had to earn it, it wouldn't be grace. Grace, in and of itself is a gift. Gifts are not earned or purchased. This is not a transactional faith.

This is a relational one. This is all about God's character, who he is and who he says we are. So I want us to take some time to look at our own attitudes, our own hard heartedness at times where we withhold mercy from people, where we withhold being gracious because we don't feel that someone is deserving of it. By its very nature, they shouldn't be. Let us embrace the reality of God's unmerited favor.

See, Jonah, the sailors, and the ninevites all experience God's mercy.

Throughout this story, God continually rescues people from themselves, and it shows up in so many unexpected ways. And we, too, are recipients of that grace. Now, last week, as we have been going through this series, I've been telling you, yes, we want to embrace the character of God. We want to recognize it, we want to know it, and then we want to live it ourselves.

But I'm not going to give you three easy steps to do so. Last week I invited you to pray to experience more of God's compassion so that in turn, you may be able to extend compassion to others. And so this week I want us to think about what it is to experience God's graciousness. I want you to take moments, and I want you to take a moment right now to reflect on God's own grace that has been extended to you in your life. Where in your journey have you interacted, encountered the grace of God in beautiful and unexpected ways?

I want you to maybe even take a prayer card or a note card out of the bucket, write it down. Maybe it's just one word. Maybe it's just a reminder of an event that happened in your life or just how things turned out differently than you expected because God showed up. Maybe you would prefer to text it in. But I want you to know, where has God been gracious with you?

Take a moment. Take a moment now. Take a moment as we go to communion here shortly. Where has God been gracious with you? Where have you received abundantly from God?

I want you to name it. I want you to write it down. I want you to maybe think about sharing it with a friend or have a conversation a little bit later. Maybe send a text message to someone. Say, hey.

I was asked to reflect on God's grace for me, and I thought of this moment when fill in the blank for me. God's grace showed up for Mariah when I was 16 at a concert, and God showed up again with abundant grace when I was 25. And I found a church home in a small little community in Licking County, Ohio, and showed up again when I heard my call to ministry. There are so many moments of grace that I have experienced in my life that I sometimes, if I think about them all, I'm so overwhelmed and humbled. So I invite you to name one for yourself today and share it with somebody as an act of gratitude.

Embrace the truth that God's grace, it is not confined to human standards or expectations. It's a gift freely extended, waiting. Waiting to be experienced.