

JONAH—WEEK 3

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover picture is Michaelangelo's (1474–1564) depiction of Jonah on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

God shows grace to Nineveh, and this sends Jonah around the bend. He cannot stand that God is merciful to them. So, God lights Jonah up with another trial, this time of sun and shade, of plants and worms.

Jonah continues his legendary pout, and God explains His perspective. Eventually, Jonah gets the point.

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Jonah, Week 3 — Attitude Adjustment
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1 Jonah 3:10 (NKJV)

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

How can this happen? Jonah’s prophecy was, “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*” He definitely did not say, “If you don’t repent, Nineveh shall be overthrown!” There was no hint that the coming disaster was conditional. What’s going on?

The Hebrew in this passage doesn’t translate well. There are idioms involved that are specific to prophecy. Prophecies like this are not irrevocable. Irrevocable ones use terms like, “I swear by Myself.” We see the same linguistic idioms when Nathan called out David for his sin with Bathsheba.

So David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die.”

Then Nathan departed to his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became ill. David therefore pleaded with God for the child, and David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. — 2 Samuel 12:13–16 (NKJV)

David’s fasting and praying for his son would have been silly if Nathan’s prophecy was irrevocable. Nathan even used the word “surely,” but that’s about certainty of meaning, not of future events.

Jonah knew that his prophecy didn’t assure Nineveh’s overthrow. Otherwise, Jonah wouldn’t have run away from delivering it.

God’s mercy isn’t just infinite; it’s complicated. That’s grace.

We tend to think of grace in terms of how it affects us. What about how it affects Him? Why does grace even exist? What is its purpose? It must be to glorify God, but how?

God created a universe of cause and effect. You push something to the left; it moves left. You hammer on a nail; it moves down. Cause and effect are part of the structure of reality.

The same applies to justice. Like cause and effect, moral choices have consequences. This can get distorted by sin, but the concept remains. This, too, is part of the structure of God’s magnificent creation.

But God’s mercy sits atop justice. By grace we are saved, while justice is maintained.

Grace gloriously displays God’s character, like a beautiful melody dancing on top of the accompaniment.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2V-EJhyZoUw>

2 Jonah 4:1–4 (ESV)

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 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. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?”

Jonah’s reaction seems incredibly stupid. How can a prophet of God be in such obvious rebellion to the LORD’s direct commands? His preaching worked. Isn’t that the definition of success?

He’s so wound up that he announces, “O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” Dude, get a grip. That’s crazy talk. What’s wrong with you anyway?

What’s wrong with Jonah is that he hates the Ninevites with all his heart, soul, and mind. Jonah has good reason to hate the Ninevites, but that’s not the point. His hatred has taken over.

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” — Matthew 22:37–38 (ESV)

One of the great things about this book is that Jonah is both the good guy and the bad guy. The Bible’s funny like that. We get to see both sides of a lot of folks—Abraham, Jacob, David. The heroes of the Bible are flawed characters.

There’s a lesson in this. No one is simply good or bad; everyone is both. The worst person is redeemable; the best person needs redemption.

That includes both the Ninevites and Jonah.

This is key to a proper understanding of salvation. It’s “I need the gospel,” not “I needed the gospel.” If you look at the life of any Christian, you see both a believer and an unbeliever. They’re the same person at different stages. People change.

The moment of conversion doesn’t end that change, it accelerates it. That’s what Romans 12:2 is about.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. — Romans 12:2 (ESV)

Renewal here (ἀνακρίνωσις, anakainōsis) is a uniquely Christian word that means renewal in the sense of spiritual rebirth. Paul is telling Christians, who have been renewed, to avoid conformity with this world, and, instead, focus on being transformed by that renewal.

The renewal has already happened, but the transformation is ongoing.

It’s a process.

3 Jonah 4:5–8 (ESV)

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. 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. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. 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.”

Do not try this at home!

God does something here that we should never do. Jonah is so upset by what happened in Nineveh that he says, in verse 3, “*Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.*”

The LORD’s response is to thwack him again! He blesses Jonah with a shade plant and then takes it away. Then He breaks out *a scorching east wind*. If you or I tried teaching a lesson this way, there’d be a real chance we’d push Jonah over the edge.

But God has inside information on how much pushing Jonah can handle. His goal is to break Jonah, without killing him, and thus teach a valuable lesson.

Jonah is now reduced to a whimpering pile of self-pity.

Good. Now he’s ready to learn.

We get like this too. God pushes us, and we get all self-absorbed and forget to think about why our trials are happening.

But the Lord is determined to see us grow, so He pushes hard. Whenever you get a bout of self-pity, just remember 1 Corinthians 10:13.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (ESV)

1 Corinthians 10:13 is about temptation, but it applies more generally. Our trials are not special; they are what is *common to man*. And notice that Paul doesn’t just say, “Get over yourself.” He gives us specifics. God takes us to the edge, but not over it.

We’re students. The teacher isn’t going to go easy on us.

Great teachers never do.

4 Jonah 4:9 (ESV)

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.”

This is the second time that God has asked Jonah, “*Do you do well to be angry.*” He’s challenging Jonah’s thinking.

Of course, Jonah doesn’t do well to be angry—about Nineveh’s repentance or about the plant. But this hasn’t dawned on him yet.

Jonah’s pout has gone nuclear. His whole perspective has zoomed down to a single plant. He loses the plant, and he starts talking like he’s suicidal.

Jonah’s problem is deeper than just hating the Ninevites. The silliness about the plant shows that something else is at play here.

The bit with Nineveh is over, and yet Jonah is still trying to have everything go exactly the way he wants. He doesn’t understand what it means to be a prophet.

It’s a magnificent, precious position, but it’s one of service.

The book is almost over and Jonah still doesn’t get it. He thinks he should get to call the shots.

Jonah has been through a series of trials, some large, some small. Through it all, he never seems to realize that God planned the whole thing.

It all started with the “trial” of being called to preach repentance to a city he hates. That wouldn’t be a trial at all but for Jonah’s sinfulness.

Jonah’s spoiled brat attitude sets him on a long road to repentance. He’s learning a tough lesson, which wouldn’t be so tough if he was interested in learning.

The lesson for Jonah, and for us, is that God is in charge—and that He’s qualified to be in charge. So, trust Him.

Trusting God is easy when times are good. Too easy. You can memorize this doctrine until you’re blue in the face but not really know it. Doctrines only become real through trials.

That’s why we have trials. Sure, it’s good to memorize the truths of scripture; that prepares you to correctly interpret life’s events.

But it’s through these events that the doctrines hit us in the face—and we realize that they’re really true.

You don’t *learn* that the great doctrines are true; you *discover* that they are.

5 Jonah 4:10–11 (ESV)

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. 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?”

The book of Jonah ends with a joke. The line, “*and also much cattle,*” is a flip comment that mocks Jonah’s priorities. In the grand scheme of things, the cattle couldn’t possibly matter.

It’s like God interrupting Jonah’s pout to blurt out, “Good news! I just saved a ton of money by switching my car insurance.” He has absolutely no respect for Jonah’s self-pity.

The LORD wants Jonah to think, “God must know something I don’t know.” Jonah has surely memorized this doctrine, but truly believing it is something else entirely. So, God hits him with the clue bat of righteousness yet again.

And then the book ends. We don’t know whether Jonah finally got it, because Jonah didn’t write an epilogue.

Actually, he did. The epilogue is that he wrote this book. That means he got it, all of it, every bit, and he was willing to write it all down in a book that makes him look like an idiot every step of the way.

At last, he’s thinking like a prophet.

And with that, Jonah’s personal mission field expands to include the whole world for all generations. It even reaches down through history to you and me.

The key to all this was Jonah abandoning his pride. And he didn’t just abandon his pride; he mocked it.

His perspective changed from being Jonah-centered to kingdom-centered. After all these events ended, Jonah thought about what God said and changed his mind.

That’s the takeaway from this marvelous book. Everything isn’t all about Jonah, and it’s not all about you. It’s all about the kingdom and its king. That’s what this familiar passage means.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. — John 15:7–8 (ESV)

What could “*abide in me*” mean, other than to be “in” Jesus? When you’re “in” Jesus, you have His perspective. You can’t be abiding in Jesus if you’re praying “it’s all about me” prayers.

And notice the second verse. What matters from Jesus’s perspective is that *my Father is glorified*.

That’s the purpose of everything.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What is your understanding of grace?
2. How have you changed/grown in the last year?
3. When has God pushed you to grow or learn?
4. What doctrines have you “discovered” are true?
5. What did you learn from this book?