

**Pastor Jeff Williams: March 28, 2004:
Love Beyond Reason-Part VIII
Love and Grace**

This morning, we're talking about love and grace. The very fact that we are here this morning-the very fact that our planet is here, still spinning-is a testimony that God is a God of love and grace. It really is. When we consider all the things that go on in the world: the bombing of innocent people, all the immorality that takes place, all the injustice that takes place, the very fact that God allows this planet to keep going and allows us to keep going is a testament to the fact that He is a gracious God. You'd think that He would have called it quits a long time ago and said, "You know what? I existed in all eternity before these little mongrels, and I'll be content to exist after they're gone." But no, He wants us. He loves us. He continues to work out His plan of redemption in our lives. We are thankful for that this morning. We're going to talk about Jonah who was called by God to read to people that he didn't necessarily like. We don't know if it's because he was afraid of them because they were very deprived people. They were started by a man by the name of Nimrah. Nimrah was the great-grandson of Noah. He started this city, and his name is "Rebel." So the city he founded had his characteristics. This was a very rebellious city, a very ungodly city of 120,000 people. Their unrighteousness and their sin had grown to the point where God says from Heaven that He is going to take action unless they repent. They are going to be overturned; the city will be no more.

Jonah is sent with the task of trying to win these people for God. There is an exercise for you to do as you read through this. Try to identify agents of God's grace in the story. I will tell you this: God's grace comes disguised many times. Grace is defined as God's willingness, God's favor, God's willingness to use His power on our behalf to bring us to Him. Anytime God's grace is in action, it is to bring us to Him, and He is using His power, His influence, to reach a lost people. That is the very definition of grace. Even though we don't deserve it, God is using His power, His kindness to bring us to Him. It takes disguise many times that we're not aware of. It takes forms that we don't normally relate with God's grace. The media we saw is one form of that. The character received those golden candlesticks, and the priest covered for him, so he could be excused of his crime and get a second chance on life. If you read the book, he was a changed man. He attempted to save the life of his sworn enemy. He became a good man. It was because of one act of grace.

We're going to see God's grace working in the story in ways that we wouldn't normally see. As we do, it's going to lift the blinders off of your lives so that you can see God working in your life through grace in ways that you did not see before. We're going to scan the first three chapters, and then we will read a bit in Chapter 4. The Lord comes to Jonah, "Jonah, I want you to go to Nineveh." Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh. He gets on a boat in a city called Joppa, and he heads south to Tarshish, 2500 miles away. The point is, he wants to get as far away from the will of God as he possibly can.

Some of you have done that. God has told some of you clearly a direction for your life, clearly giving you a leading, and you've headed in the opposite direction out of fear, anger, whatever it was. So you can relate with what Jonah is going through. He knows it's wrong. He knows he's in rebellion, but his agenda is different than God's agenda. Jonah's agenda was his comfort. God was calling him to reach a people that he didn't like, but he didn't want saved, so he ran from God.

While they're at sea, a storm emerged, and trouble was in the boat. They wake him up, "How can you sleep? We're going to parish! Wake up!" said the captain. "Call in your God and maybe we'll live."

Jonah wakes up, and they do a suspicious thing. The sailors cast lots and the lots fall on Jonah. They said, "What have you done? You're the problem! What's going on?"

Jonah is very honest and upright with them, and he says, "I'm running from God. God has given me a mission, and I'm running the other way."

"What should we do with you Jonah?"

"Just throw me overboard," he said, and that'll be the end of that. Right now, Jonah is really feeling suicidal. He's distraught; he's depressed; he's very angry with himself; he has a low self-esteem. He said, "The world would be better off if you just threw me in the sea."

Verse 1:13 says, "Instead the men did their best to row back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew wilder than before. They cried out to the Lord, 'Oh Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man for you, oh Lord, have done as you pleased.' Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. The men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to Him."

What is the agent of grace right now? What is God using in this story to bring people to Him? The storm. He's bringing the storm. We talked about that last week. Sometimes, God uses the trials and tribulations of our lives to bring us to Him—those thorns actually become agents of grace, bringing us to a deeper walk.

These men would not be praying to God had it not been for the storm. These men would not be making vows to the Lord and sacrifices to the Lord had it not been for this storm. Some of the storms in your life right now, God is using them to bring you to Himself. He's using them as an instrument of his grace.

Jonah ends up in the sea. It says, "But the Lord provided a great fish." We say it's a whale; I think that's pretty accurate. Jesus, in the book of Matthew, recounted the story and talked about Jonah and used the word he uses there, a whale. So, we can say he was swallowed by a whale, probably a sperm whale or large whale. Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights, a forced quiet time—an all-expense paid retreat at the "Chateau Moby" provided by God. He's going to get alone with his thoughts and have his devotionals there. We get the privilege to read those devotionals.

Notice what happens here. He talks in Verse 7 about his life ebbing away. He remembered and he prayed to God. He says in Verse 9, "But I with the song of Thanksgiving will sacrifice to you." He's talking about if he gets out of there. "If I live, if I'm able to see the light of day again," and I imagine three days in the belly of a whale is a *long* time; I imagine three minutes is a long time, especially if you're

claustrophobic, “If I ever get out of here, with the song of Thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you, what I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord. If I get out of here God, if you give me another chance, I make a vow to you, I make a promise, I’m going to proclaim your salvation. I’m going to go back to Nineveh and do what I should’ve done the first time.” So there’s repentance here. Jonah is a changed man. He’s going to act upon his promise, just like our character in the film.

The priest looked at him and said, “You no longer belong to evil, but with this silver, I have bought your soul. With this silver, I offer you back to God.” He became a changed man.

So Jonah says, “If you give me another chance, I’m going to be thankful. I make this vow, and I promise I’m going to carry it out.” And God does that. What happened is that whale and Jonah’s pain, his emotional anguish, became an instrument of God’s grace in his life. Is there anything right now in your life that is just consuming you? Something in your life that’s overshadowing you? Do you feel trapped? Do you want to escape? Do you need a way out? You know what? When God is at work in your life, that very thing that encompasses you can be an agent of grace to bring you to him.

Isn’t that good to know? Isn’t that wonderful to know; there’s nothing this world can offer that if our hearts are attuned to God cannot be a vehicle of God’s grace in our life.

Some of you have those whales. Some of you say you’re in the belly of a whale right now, and I believe you. I believe you. God can use that in your life, if you’ll allow him to. God can use that pain in your life as an instrument of His grace.

I want you to turn in your Bibles, keep your place in Jonah, but turn to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 12. Paul talks about the fact that he got to visit Heaven first hand. Paul is talking about a revelation. He says, “I don’t know if I was in the body or out of the body, or if it was my spirit. One thing it was not, it was not a dream.” This was an actual, literal experience that Paul had where he got ushered into the presence of God. Verse 7, he says, “To keep me from becoming conceited, because of these surpassing great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.” He said he didn’t want to be come conceited. It’s not everyday you get to see Heaven.

I took my family to Washington five or so years ago. We went to the White House and got to do the normal White House tour that everybody gets to do when they are there. Wouldn’t have been something if the President had come out of the Oval Office and saw us and said, “Hey, Williams Family! Glad you’re here today! Why don’t you come in to the Oval Office?” We’d go into the Oval Office, get to pet the dog and meet the First Lady. We’d sit down and have a sandwich. He’d give us a little tour, we’d see the Lincoln bedroom, take a nap if we wanted. “There’s the fridge, help yourselves, whatever you need.” So, we would sit down and just talk, me and the Pres. How many of you know when I got back to Janesville, I would have a hard time not bragging about that? Well people want to see my pictures of my trip, I’d have a hard time not showing those first.

“Hey, how were things in DC?”

“Pretty good. Pretty good.” I’d have to really bite by tongue, and so would you. In fact, I don’t think I could. I think I’d say first thing when asked or even not asked, “I went in the Oval Office! I chit chatted with the President. I petted the Presidential dog.”

“You liar!”

“No, here are all the pictures.” That’s a roll of film you want to protect right there. Just imagine if you had an audience with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. It’s not everyday a person gets taken and allowed a sneak peak at Heaven. It happened to Paul. Paul says, “I saw things no man has seen. I saw things I can’t even repeat. I can’t even tell you what I saw.” Paul got to *see* that. That doesn’t happen everyday, and that doesn’t happen to everyone, but it happened to Paul. Usually you don’t see that stuff until after you pass. He got to see it while he was alive. He says, “I was tempted to be conceited about that. I was tempted to brag about that. But God humbled me, and I got a thorn in the flesh.”

It doesn’t go into great detail about what it was, but we know Paul wanted to get rid of it. He didn’t like it. Thorn in the flesh wasn’t too much fun. It was painful. He says three times in Verse 8, “I pleaded with the Lord, ‘Take it away from me.’” The word pleaded means he begged, he cried, he was distraught. “God take this away from me. I can’t bear this.” But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore,” Paul says, “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, insults, hardships, and persecutions, and difficulties, for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

When I am weak, I am strong in my faith, because I find out that His grace is sufficient. I find out that weaknesses, I find out that hardships, I find out that persecutions and difficulties can be an agent of God’s grace to bring me to Him, and I find out He is sufficient. That was the lesson. So God used that pain to bring Paul into a deeper walk with him. Paul used Jonah’s pain to change his actions, change his direction of his life.

I ran across a story that I want to share with you, a true story about two boxers who met in the ring. One was named Gabriel Ruelas, and the other was named Jimmy Garcia. Ruelas was the super featherweight champion of the world; Jimmy Garcia, a challenger. From the early on when they bowed, it became clear that Garcia was overmatched; he was no match for the champion. Gabriel was landing shots to the head and scoring points to the body almost at will. At one point announcer Roy Jones Jr said, “This fight needs to be stopped.” At another point, the doctor came in the ring and looked at him, looked in his eyes and said, “He can’t continue the fight.” He took a lot of punishment, but he was egged on by his dad who was in his corner and was his trainer, saying, “Don’t give up Jimmy! Keep fighting Jimmy! This is for your dream! This is for the championship! Don’t quit!” And he didn’t quit. He should’ve quit. In the eleventh round, after several hard blows, the fight was stopped. Jimmy Garcia lay unconscious in the ring. He was rushed to the hospital where they discovered there was damage to his brain. It didn’t look like he was going to live much longer. Gabriel Ruelas was beside himself with grief. He went to the hospital, and he apologized to his father and to his brother. He said, “I didn’t mean to hurt him. I’m so sorry. I wish I could take his place.” For days, he

prayed. For days, he was suicidal. For days, he struggled with grief. And then he reached a decision, and I want to share that with you this morning. One task remained, the one that Gab dreaded, perhaps, most of all. No, he wouldn't go to visit Jimmy again. He was afraid Jimmy might die right in front of him. He had decided to lock in his mind an image of Jimmy alive in the ring, but Jimmy's mother Karmen who had stayed home and prayed in a church in Columbia, rather than go to the fight, had just arrived in Las Vegas to see her son before he died. She, too, Gab decided he must face. He got on an airplane nine days after the fight, his insides turning. On a stairwell outside the top rank offices, he found her, such a small woman, middle-aged, but already graying. When he looked at her, he saw only his own mother. He reached out to take her hand, but Karmen shrank away, sobbing, staring at his hands. He pulled them back. He wished he could stand on them. Then she turned her back on him. Beside her, Jimmy's sister whaled, "Oh my Jimmy!" Gab thought he'd imagined the worst that could happen that day, but no, this was even worse.

"You can hit me," he said to Karmen, "I'll understand."

She said, "When I look at those hands, I see the hands that killed my son. Please, you don't understand, I told his father not to let Jimmy fight you. People in Columbia told us you have knives for hands."

Gab blinked. Did she know she was killing him too? Had she planned each one of these blows?

"Why didn't you let him win Ruelas? You already had won the title."

Gab took a breath and tried again. "His dreams were my dreams. A championship, a family, a nice house, a car: I had already achieved my dreams, but your son never got the chance. You must believe me. I wish it could've happened to me instead of him."

She shook with grief for a few moments, and then she drew near. Words, intellect, they could do no good, not for a moment like this, and not for a man like Gab. He saw her arms come up, felt them wrap around him and hug him hard like a son. That act of grace changed that man. As I read articles about him, I saw how he was more committed than ever to being a good man. More committed than ever to providing for the widow of Jimmy Garcia and for their children. More committed than ever to be a spiritual man. More committed than ever to live a good life because of what happened.

God used the pain of that fight and that day as an instrument of grace in Gabriel Ruelas' life. God will use it in ours if we'll allow him to. We can either take that pain and become angry and curse God or we can yield and say, "God use this in my life. God, use this to draw me to you. God help me to be a better man or woman in God. If I can do that, if I can draw closer to you, then whatever I go through is worth that."

Chapter 3, Jonah is spit out, and he is going to go back into the city. Jonah is probably a little weak; he probably doesn't smell very good, and he probably doesn't look too good. I read an account about a sailor who was swallowed up by a sperm whale, just like Jonah. A day after being in the whale's belly, just one day, when the whale's belly was cut open, and he emerged, his skin had been bleached, so he was white from the acids and gastric juices in the whale's stomach.

Now Jonah's been in there three days. He looks like a ghost. So when a guy comes walking into a town with seaweed in his hair, white like a ghost, and saying, "Repent," you listen, right? This guy's got something to say, and that's what he does.

It says, "Jonah obeyed the Lord. He went to Nineveh and he proclaimed 40 more days and Nineveh will be overturned. What happens? The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sack cloth, a visual form of repentance. They repented; the king repented. The king made a vow to God. The king said, "We're going to change as a city. We are not going to be the same city as we were. We're going to live for God."

Verse 10 says, "When God saw what they did, and how they turned from their ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."

What's Jonah's response here? You'd think that Jonah would say, "God used me to bring change to 120,000 people." You'd think he'd be ecstatic. Wouldn't you be happy if God had used you to reach 120,000 people? Well, he's not. He's not happy.

Why isn't he happy? He's not happy because #1, he doesn't like the people of Nineveh. He's hoping that God nukes them. He's hoping for a fireworks display after 40 days. That's our nature. When our agenda is not God's agenda, when instead of operating in grace, we're operating in law, then we want grace for us, and we want justice for others. If I cut you off in traffic, then grace to me because I didn't see you. I wasn't paying attention. You were in my blind spot. We get all offended when they get mad at us and honk their horn and show us parts of their anatomy that we don't want to see or give us a scowl and yell at us. We get bent out of shape. We expect grace. But when they cut us off, on goes the horn and "what's the matter with you?" We get all upset. If somebody cuts us off in the grocery line, we have one or two items, and they come with a full cart and cut us off, we get upset. "Watch out for my cart, I'm coming after you pal!" But we cut somebody off and "I was in a hurry. Grace!?! Right?" We have double standards.

Have you ever been a ref? If you have ever been a ref, you know you've made bad calls. When you make a bad call, you're thinking "grace. This is a hard job. Anybody could make a mistake." And the people in the stands are saying, "You stink! You're a loser!" And they say other things we can't repeat in church to you. So we want grace for us and mercy for us and judgment and justice for everybody else. That's what Jonah wanted here. I don't want Nineveh to be spared. I want Nineveh to get what's coming to them. They're a wicked people. So he becomes mad. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, "Oh Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." That's a new one: God getting in trouble for all of his good attributes.

You've not had that fight at home. "Honey, I'm so mad at you!"

"Why?"

"Cause you're so compassionate, gracious, and kind. It just drives me nuts."

You've never had that discussion with your children, ha? "Kids, you make me so mad, why do you have to listen so well? Why do you always have to have your room so clean and respect your elders and honor me like that, like the Bible says. I just can't take it anymore." That has not happened in your home. That did not happen in Beaver Cleaver's home. That happens in nobody's home. Yet God is getting in trouble here for being gracious and kind and slow to anger because His agenda was different than Jonah's.

Jonah's words, his actions were right, but his heart was not right. His heart was not right. Still more grace, still more teaching was going to need to take place. I can remember when I shared an illustration, and it's been many years, so I think it's okay to share it again. A man was called upon to preach in his pastor's pulpit. The pastor was going to be gone, and they said, "You have a good word to say. Why don't you preach?"

So he said, "I will. I have a message I want to share." So he came up with his Bible, opened it up, read a scripture and said, "I have three points to make to you this morning. Point number one, hundreds of thousands of people are going to die tonight and go into a Christless eternity." Yawn. People are looking around. He said, "Number two..." First of all, he went for the jugular with point number one. No introductory comments, no jokes, just right for the heavy stuff, but they're forgiving him because he's already on point number two, and he just started. This is a pretty good sermon. Our pastor spends like 20 minutes on point number one. This guy reads point number one; he's on point number two; I'm going to get out of here in time for the pre-game show. So everybody likes this sermon here. He says, "Number two, most of you don't give a BLANK that hundreds of thousands of people are going to go into a crisis eternity today." Only he didn't say blank, he said the uncensored version, the unedited version. He said the "D" word in church, and most of you don't BLANK about it. Oh, that brought a response. Whisper, whisper from the audience. "Did he really say...Did you hear..." He saw that and he said, "And number three," and already at point number three, "the fact of the matter is that more of you are more upset over that fact that I just said a swear word in this church than you are over the fact that hundreds of thousands of people are going into a Cristless eternity." He closed his Bible and he sat down. End of sermon. That sermon said a lot, didn't it? I've got to remember that sermon, in case I'm supposed to prepare for the weekend, I'll have a sermon in the pocket right there. Not true at this church. We care about people's souls. The point of it was, sometimes our agenda, when we go away from grace, can get so twisted, it can become so selfish, that our motivation is ourselves, and our means are justice and judgment, rather than our motivation being God's agenda and our means love and grace.

God's way puts people first, so Jonah needs some more teaching, needs some more agents of grace in his life. So he goes up on the hill and looks into the city. God provides a vine and a shelter, a shade, for him. He's going to wait until the sun comes up. What are the people of Nineveh going to do? Are they going to change, or was it just cheap talk? Are they really going to change, or are they going to go back to their old ways, and God's going to have a fireworks display in the daytime? What's going to happen? He's like the Grinch watching Whoville. He's waiting to see if Little Who is going to come out after the presents are gone and sing Bah Who

Do Ray. What's going to happen here? What happens if the people of Nineveh don't change, and God does not bring calamity? Jonah is irate. That is not the outcome he wanted. Jonah needs more grace in his heart, so God is going to provide yet another instrument of grace, yet another object lesson for him. He causes a worm to come and eat the vine, so Jonah has no other protection from the sun and the wind, and he begins to become hot and miserable and angry. He says to God, "It would be better for me to die than to live." He's really sulking here. He's really pouting. He's really feeling sorry for himself.

God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine? (Verse 9)" "I do, and I'm angry enough to die." A little bit of an emotionally unstable guy at this point, Jonah is. Maybe it had something to do with the three days in the whale, or he might have been a little unstable to begin with anyway.

God shoots an arrow right into his heart and says, "You've been concerned about this vine though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight, but Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. These guys need help and guidance. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

"Jonah, look at your heart when a vine matters to you more than 120,000 people." What was taken away from Jonah became an agent of God's grace.

Friends, if we'll become aware of the storms of our lives, the whales of our lives-where things consume us; the vines of our lives-when things are taken away from us and we become angry and upset and demand justice, those are the times that you get your spiritual antenna up. Those are the times to turn on your spiritual radar and say, "What's God teaching me here? Is this not an agent of grace in disguise that God can use in my life to bring me to him?"

That's our assignment. Let's stand together for closing prayer.

Father, this morning we want to thank you for the example of Jonah and the example of Paul. We don't know what happened to Jonah after that object lesson. We'd like to believe Jonah was a changed man, that Jonah said, "Look at my heart. I put my agenda over your agenda. I see now that what matters most is people." Lord, the times we have cursed the storm, and we've cursed that which has been taken away from us, and we've cursed that which has consumed us instead of seeing your grace working in and through those circumstances to bring us to you. I pray that you'd lift the blinders this morning. I pray that your Holy Spirit would teach us, and Lord we'd be able to, as Paul did, give thanks for those things that bring us to you. That we will seek to be better men and women of God, to live a life worthy of the gospel to which we were called. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.