

**SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS**  
**Commentary by Michael Sigler**  
**March 14, 2010**

**A Community to Redeem**

Jonah 3:10—4:5

**Key verse: “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (Jonah 4:2).**

A Gallup Poll revealed that the hymn that Americans most enjoy singing is “Amazing Grace.” America’s favorite hymn was written by John Newton, the former captain of a slave ship. He piloted that ship that sailed from Great Britain to the coast of Africa. There Newton and his crew herded Africans into the hold of their ship for the trip back to England.

To maximize profits, the Brits often stacked the slaves like logs, crowded together in such squalid conditions that many died on the journey from Africa. Those Africans who survived the journey were sold at the slave market, like cattle or any other commodity.

By his own admission, John Newton lived hard and drank hard, no doubt as a way to dull the pains of a troubled conscience. His heart became hardened toward God and his fellow human beings. But then John Newton was converted to Jesus Christ! Newton’s conversion was so life-changing that he eventually became an Anglican minister and worked to abolish the slave trade. It was from this background of his own sinfulness, repentance, and his experience of God’s mercy and grace that Newton wrote those words:

*Amazing grace how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now I’m found  
Was blind but now I see.*

Jonah, the prophet, experienced some of that same mercy and grace when God delivered him from the belly of a great fish and gave Jonah a second chance to preach to Nineveh. The people of Nineveh experienced God’s amazing mercy and grace when, having heard Jonah’s warning, they repented of their wickedness. Seeing their repentance, God gave them mercy and grace: “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the

calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it” (Jonah 3:10).

But instead of rejoicing in Nineveh’s repentance and God’s mercy and grace, this was Jonah’s response: “But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry” (Jonah 4:1).

Jonah stands in a long line of people who somehow think God’s grace is fine for them but not for others. Such people are like the older brother in Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, people who feel that “those folks are so bad, why should God bless them?” Self-righteous and legalistic, the Jonahs and the older brothers think, “I’ve been good, so I deserve God’s blessing. But those really bad folks don’t deserve God’s amazing grace.”

Mark Buchanon provided a checklist of symptoms related to what he calls “the Jonah syndrome.” He suggests that we might be following in Jonah’s un-gracious ways if some of the following are true of us:

*1. You seek God’s blessing, but not his presence or his kingdom; you’re a consumer, not a worshipper or a follower.*

*2. You ignore lost people, and when that’s no longer tenable, you scorn and resent them.*

*3. You’re self-righteous and proud.*

*4. You confess, witness, or obey God only when forced to or when the pain of not doing so exceeds the pain of doing it.*

*5. You pray only when you’re in trouble and only about your own problems and predicaments.*

*6. If you are obedient to God, it is in a grudging, stingy, and unimaginative way; you bitterly do the minimum required;*

*7. You would rather die than die to self.*

*8. Your happiness is directly tied to getting your own way, not seeing God get his way.*

*9. You’re consumed with your own comfort and angry when it is threatened or removed.*

*10. You want to see judgment—vengeance, really—for those you don’t like.*

*11. You gladly receive God’s grace but don’t extend it to others or celebrate when God extends it to them.*

*12. Your loyalty is to your own kind or to your cherished traditions rather than to the kingdom of God.*

If you see symptoms of the Jonah syndrome in your life, here is good news: The same grace that saved “a wretch like me” (and you) can also change us to become less like Jonah and more like Jesus!

When God spared Nineveh, Jonah didn’t think it was fair. Ironically, Jonah didn’t think it unfair when God delivered him from the fish’s belly and gave Jonah a

second chance. Jonah was all too glad to receive God's mercy and grace for himself, but he was not happy when the wicked Ninevites received it.

May God's amazing grace keep working in our lives. The same grace that saved us can also purify us from attitudes of self-righteousness and pride. God's grace can fill us with love for sinners and send us out to touch a world that is lost and broken. That is "amazing grace" indeed!

(Contact Michael at [msigler@fumcfwb.com](mailto:msigler@fumcfwb.com).)