

Jonah – October 16, 2022

This is week 2 of our series exploring the book of Jonah.

As we saw last week this *is* a story about a man getting swallowed by a giant fish, but it's actually about far more than that. It's a book about **calling**, it's a book about **judgementalism**, and most of all it's a book about **grace**.

Last week we looked at how Jonah, this prophet of God, was given a message to take to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the terrifying and evil Assyrian empire. And how Jonah decides instead to reject that calling and try fleeing to the other side of the world.

Long story short, it doesn't work. **Turns out you can't use a boat to escape the God who created the sea.**

Jonah gets tossed overboard to save the lives of the sailors, and then God provides a **giant fish** to swallow him so he can survive and get placed back on track with his calling.

Today we're going to look at what happens while Jonah is inside the belly of the fish. And I think we actually have a photo of that moment.

Oh, that's from the 1940 animated classic, Pinocchio. Something tells me that is not, in fact, what the inside of a whale looks like.

So go ahead and grab a Bible and turn to **Jonah 2**.

[mention podcast] [PRAY]

Before we read, I want to remind you how we're approaching this book. Last week I presented the idea that the **genre** of the book of Jonah is that of a parable.

Parable: a story designed to illustrate a deeper truth or moral lesson.

Parables are meant to **provoke us** and to speak truth into our own lives, and that's what Jonah is.

Now, by calling it a parable, I'm not saying the whole thing is necessarily made

up or fictional. I'm saying the story is told in a *parabolic* way.

Extreme moments, ridiculous commands, and a cliffhanger ending...

Whether it's **history or fable or somewhere in between**, Jonah is a parable, and we would be wise to learn from it.

A PSALM OF THANKSGIVING

So, let's continue where the story left off. Jonah is inside the giant fish, and he begins to... recite poetry? Let's read chapter 2 then we'll talk about it...

Jonah 2:1-3:3

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from inside the fish. He said,

"I cried out to the LORD in my great trouble,

and he answered me.

I called to you from the land of the dead,

and LORD, you heard me!

You threw me into the ocean depths,

and I sank down to the heart of the sea.

The mighty waters engulfed me;

I was buried beneath your wild and stormy waves.

Then I said, 'O LORD, you have driven me from your presence.

Yet I will look once more toward your holy Temple.'

"I sank beneath the waves,

and the waters closed over me.

Seaweed wrapped itself around my head.

I sank down to the very roots of the mountains.

I was imprisoned in the earth,

whose gates lock shut forever.

But you, O LORD my God,

snatched me from the jaws of death!

As my life was slipping away,

I remembered the LORD.

And my earnest prayer went out to you

in your holy Temple.

Those who worship false gods

turn their backs on all God's mercies.

But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise,

and I will fulfill all my vows.

*For my salvation comes from the LORD alone.”
Then the LORD ordered the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach. Then the LORD spoke to Jonah a second time: “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you.” This time Jonah obeyed the LORD’s command and went to Nineveh...*

Let’s talk about what we just read. This is what is commonly called a “**Psalm of Thanksgiving**.” If you look in the book of Psalms you’ll find a bunch of them. And they all follow a similar pattern:

Psalm of Thanksgiving

- **Introductory summary of answered prayer**
 - (I cried out to the LORD in my great trouble, and he answered me.)
- **Reports of personal crisis**
 - (I sank beneath the waves)
- **Reports of divine rescue**
 - (But you, O LORD my God, snatched me from the jaws of death!)
- **Vow of praise**
 - (I will fulfill all my vows)

This psalm follows that pattern to the letter.

And the language that he uses is not uncommon. The **image of drowning** in the sea was clearly an evocative one for ancient Israelites.

Psalm 42:7

I hear the tumult of the raging seas as your waves and surging tides sweep over me.

Psalm 69:1

Save me, O God, for the floodwaters are up to my neck.

Psalm 18:4

The ropes of death entangled me; floods of destruction swept over me.

When you think of the ancient understanding of the world, this makes total sense.

The sea represented **chaos** back then – always threatening to sweep in and take over - and in a chaotic, broken world it does sometimes feel like you're drowning.

Of course, in the story of Jonah that's *literally* what's happening. He's sinking beneath the waves. Nevertheless, the metaphor is a powerful one.

JONAH THE PSALMIST

Now what makes this *particular* psalm of thanksgiving interesting is that the author has it coming from **the mouth of Jonah himself**. Possibly even implying Jonah wrote this psalm himself.

Yet again, in this parable the author is trying to get us thinking.

All the **theological claims** Jonah makes here are valid. If we found this same poem in the book of Psalms, nobody would bat an eye.

But think about some of these details of what comes out of Jonah's mouth in his prayer and you'll see why there is some **dissonance**.

In verse 2, Jonah says "I cried out to the Lord." Which is the right and proper thing for a godly Israelite to do in distress. Good job, Jonah.

Except, the Hebrew word for "crying out" (qārā') is the same word for what Jonah has consistently refused to do so far in the story.

God tells him to, "cry out against Ninevah," but he doesn't.

During the storm the **ship's captain** pleads with Jonah to "cry out" to his god. Jonah doesn't.

The **sailors** on the ship "cry out" to Yahweh - to God himself - but Jonah doesn't... *until* he's moments away from death. So is Jonah "crying out" to God really a sign of his faithfulness? Maybe not. Maybe he only turned to God when he had no other choice.

That's just one example. I'll give you some more.

In verse 4 of this psalm Jonah says "O LORD, *you* have driven me from your

presence.” ... But we all know it was Jonah who **fled from the presence** of the Lord. It literally says that in chapter one. “*You’ve driven me away...*”

Or another thing: In verse 8 Jonah **belittles Gentiles** who worship idols. “Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God’s mercies.”

And yet think about we just read in chapter 1: Gentile sailors who turn from idolatry and worship God – who experience God’s mercy – while Jonah stays silent and has to be tossed in the ocean for his obstinacy!

Jonah still seems to think he’s **holier than thou** because he doesn’t worship idols, but in this story *he’s* the only one who actually turns his back on God’s mercies. That’s what chapter 4 of Jonah is all about.

The sailors worship God, the Ninevites repent, and Jonah throws a hissy fit because God shows them grace.

I point all that out to say that this psalm of thanksgiving is all true. When we call on God he rescues us from death and destruction.

But I believe having this psalm coming out of the mouth of Jonah is yet another attempt by the author to show us that Jonah is **the anti-hero of this parable**. He’s speaking the truth but for all the wrong reasons.

This dissonance - this juxtaposition - is meant to get us thinking. To get us scratching our chins. What is the author trying to say?

GRACE

So **what is the author trying to say?**

Well, I pointed this out last week, but it’s worth repeating.

This story is not about the wrath and judgment of God; it’s about his mercy and compassion and grace.

Again, in the narrative logic of this ancient story, Jonah deserved to die for rejecting God’s call. That’s what an ancient reader would expect.

And yet God saves him from death. He restores his calling. Even though he

doesn't deserve it.

Maybe having these words of truth coming from the mouth of this very unworthy man is a reminder to all of us that **God's grace extends** not just to heathen sailors, not just to evil nations, but also to rebellious, selfish, thoughtless jerks like Jonah.

"I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me."

You know what it *doesn't* say there? "...because I deserved it."

Here's what I think Jonah chapter 2 is telling us - this psalm of Thanksgiving from the mouth of a rebellious prophet:

God hears the voices of those who cry out to him and his grace is big enough for every one.

Or to put it another way: God doesn't just rescue the righteous. **He rescues the broken.** God's grace is big enough.

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

Alright. That is a pretty big idea to chew on. Perhaps the takeaway for today is just: *go think about that.* Go ponder the grace of God and be amazed.

But with that said, there are two specific takeaways that have struck me this week as I've thought about this passage. And I'm going to share them with you, because this book is a like **a buffet of food for thought...**

The first takeaway I'm struck with is kind of the overall challenge of the book of Jonah itself. God has grace on those who don't deserve it... **do I? Do I have grace for them?**

In a few weeks we're going to deal with Jonah's absolute rejection of God's grace toward the Ninevites.

Again, if you're an ancient Israelite you're conditioned to think that **Nineveh deserves to burn.** So it is a huge inversion of expectations for God to spare this Gentile nation when they repent.

And, frankly, it's a pretty provocative idea for the people of God that's **made**

even more provocative when Jesus comes along and says we're not just supposed to forgive our enemies, but *love* them.

The biblical call to grace is a challenging idea for anyone.

But here's the thing. When *I* read Jonah I don't really have a problem with God sparing the Ninevites. "Yeah, bring the Gentiles into the fold. Awesome."

But I do struggle with something in the book.

You see, I'm a Christ-follower in 2022. And I'm trying to love people at a time when so many Christians and church leaders have, in my view, poisoned the well with their **hatred and judgementalism and holier-than-thou attitudes** towards those outside the Church.

I see so many people who have rejected Christianity because they've been judged and condemned by Christians. The **credibility gap** is wide and it frustrates me that this is the reason.

Maybe you feel the same way.

And then I see this story of **a prophet of God** – one who is called to represent God in this world – I see him **sitting in judgment** over people he doesn't like.

I see him staying silent and inactive while innocent sailors are fighting for their lives. I see him belittling Gentiles because he sees himself as superior.

I don't have a problem with God sparing the Ninevites. I think I have a problem with God sparing *Jonah*! Because of what he represents in my world.

That's **what I'm wrestling with**. Where's *my* heart in all of this? I'm telling you... good parables have a way of exposing our hearts.

I'll cut to the chase. Here's the takeaway: regardless of whether you struggle with God sparing Nineveh or God sparing Jonah, this parable is an invitation for you and for me to:

Expand the horizons of your grace.

God's grace and mercy is far deeper than ours, *however* we are still invited **to**

share it with him. The Apostle Paul made it really clear:

Romans 5:8-9

God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation.

That's the grace of God offered to every single person *while they are still sinners*. While Nineveh was still sinning, while Jonah was still sinning, God's grace was on offer.

Nineveh repented of their ways. Jonah cried out to the Lord in his great trouble. And *both* were spared from death.

If they can be saved from *God's* condemnation, why should they still receive mine?

As followers of Jesus, we are called to represent God's heart to this broken world and that includes his **outrageous love and grace towards those who don't deserve it**, *whatever they look like*.

Evil sinners and holier than thou Christians...

If we want to close the credibility gap in our community, I think learning how to **love our enemies** (both outside *and* inside the Church) is a pretty good place to start...

Who knew this story of a guy getting swallowed by a fish would have such important ramifications in *our* lives?

TURN YOUR FACE

Let's **switch gears** entirely for a moment. Because the other takeaway that I'm pondering from this second chapter of Jonah focuses more on **the words of the psalm itself**.

Because again, they speak great truth, even if they're spoken by a somewhat imperfect protagonist.

Specifically I think they speak truth to those of us who feel ourselves **sinking**

beneath the waves of this chaotic, broken world.

In verse 8, the psalm says

Jonah 2:8

Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God's mercies.

Now, we don't have many idols and temples in our day to day lives, but we do still worship an awful lot of false gods.

The false gods of **money and success**, the gods of **lust and power**, the god of **self**.

We sacrifice our lives to these gods. We give them whatever they ask for. And **at first they reward us**. We find ourselves getting more successful and powerful... we feel good! We're the masters of our own universe.

Even though God offers us mercy, **we turn our backs to him** because we think we've found something better. We walk in the other direction.

Of course, it doesn't take long, does it, for our selfish pursuits to start choking the life out of us. Our lust and greed keeps growing and it can't be satisfied anymore.

We sink into the depths, our heads wrapped in seaweed at the roots of the mountains. Our sacrifice to these false gods leads to our own destruction.

If that describes you at all right now, I want this psalm of thanksgiving to speak truth to you: You may have turned your back on God's mercies, **but you can turn around again**.

Like evil, destructive Nineveh, like the rebellious prophet Jonah, you can turn around. You can repent. (I know that's a heavy theological word, but it's actually really simple.)

Let me show you something my father used to teach all the time. **Repentance** is not knowing all the right theology, it's not saying some perfectly worded prayer. It's this: [repentance walking demonstration]

This is the **invitation** God extends in his grace to every one of us being

drowned by this life. To those of us who have turned our backs on God's mercy.

Turn your face to God's mercy and he will lift you up.

This is why Jesus came. This is why Jesus died. And this is why Jesus rose again. To open a door out of death for *you*.

Jonah 2:6-7

I sank down to the very roots of the mountains.

*I was imprisoned in the earth,
whose gates lock shut forever.*

*But you, O LORD my God,
snatched me from the jaws of death!*

*As my life was slipping away,
I remembered the LORD.*

*And my earnest prayer went out to you
in your holy Temple.*

When Jesus came, he told people he was going to show them the “**sign of Jonah**.” Because just *like* Jonah he spent three days “imprisoned in the earth whose gates lock shut forever.”

Except they didn't lock shut for him. In his profound grace, God raised Christ from the dead and **shattered the gates of death** forever. And when he rose, he didn't rise alone. He grabbed our hands and took us with him.

Turn your face to God's mercy. Cry out to him. Remember the LORD and look up.

It has nothing to do with whether you've earned it. It has nothing to do with how godly you are. It has *everything* to do with whether you're willing to **stop, turn around, and start moving in the other direction.**

Turn your face to God's mercy and he will lift you up.