

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series through the Old Testament book of Jonah, which is a masterfully told story with a great deal of relevance to our lives today. Over the last two weeks, we looked at the chapter 1 of Jonah and talked about how God called Jonah and calls us to find our identity and purpose in Him and to share His message with others. But Jonah, like many of us, rejected that call. Instead of submitting to that call and finding true purpose and freedom, he decided to run as far as he could from God's call. We saw that although he boarded a ship and tried to sail as far as he could in the opposite direction from where God wanted him to go, he could not escape from God's omnipresent sovereignty. As others on the ship experience a storm of suffering because of Jonah's disobedience, it becomes evident that the only way to survive will be for Jonah to be thrown overboard, to submit himself to God's saving discipline. And so the sailors reluctantly throw Jonah overboard.

This morning, we are going to read from 1:17 – 2:10 to see what happens to Jonah after he hits the water:

Jonah 1:17 - 2:10 - *But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.* ^{NIV} ***Jonah 2:1*** *From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. ² He said: "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. ³ You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. ⁴ I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' ⁵ The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. ⁶ To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God. ⁷ "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. ⁸ "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. ⁹ But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD." ¹⁰ And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.*

God provides a great fish to save Jonah from death, and from inside the fish, Jonah prays to the Lord. He recounts how in his distress he cried out to God, and how God rescued him from drowning. And then he says something incredible that I want to focus on this morning:

"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. ⁹ But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. It's an amazing line. At one level it's a confession that the Ninevites to whom he has been called to preach, and the sailors he shared the boat with, are trusting in idols, in false gods that can not save them, and as a result are missing out on God's grace. But there is more to that line for us today, because idolatry is about more than just statues. Let's take it apart this morning to understand what it means. What is the grace that could be ours to which Jonah is referring? What are idols, and how are we clinging to them? And how do we stop clinging to those idols so that we can receive God's grace?

1) What is the grace that could be ours?

"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. ⁹ But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."

The best definition of grace I have heard of grace is by Tim Keller, who defined it as "an undeserved gift given by an unobligated giver." We don't deserve it, and the giver doesn't owe us anything. And yet we are given it freely. In Jonah's case, he deserved to drown because of his rebellion against God, and God did not owe him salvation, since God was the one who Jonah had sinned against. And yet God saved him, providing a great fish to save him from a watery grave and transport him back to dry land.

The Christian message is that like Jonah, we have all sinned, rebelled against a holy God, and are heading for our own version of a watery grave, an eternity separated from God in Hell. But God offers us salvation by His grace through the death of Jesus, God the son. As Paul writes:

Ephesians 2:8-9 - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Jonah was originally written in Hebrew, and the word for grace is the word "hesed," the covenant faithfulness of God. It is his lovingkindness, his mercy, grace, and steadfast love. It is a sense of love and loyalty that inspires merciful and compassionate behavior toward another. In Jonah 2:8, Jonah gives us the picture of

a God who is offering this heseed to us, but that it can only be appropriated if we stop clinging to our worthless idols. So what is this grace, this gift, that is forfeited by those who cling to worthless idols? Let me give a quick list of 11 aspects of God's grace that He offers to us, with one verse for each:

- **Forgiveness of sins and guilt** – you are declared not guilty by the judge of all the earth. Everything you have ever done wrong or ever will do wrong is wiped away. God will not hold the sin against you. There is an unlimited supply of grace, and no condemnation

Romans 8:1-2 - Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

- **Removal of shame** – The sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with you, that you are bad, is removed as God calls you His beloved child

*Romans 10:9-11 - That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ¹¹ As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to **shame**."*

- **The power of God to change** – His Holy Spirit indwells you, empowering you to overcome any addiction or challenge as you submit to Him

*Ephesians 1:18-20 - I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great **power** for us who believe. That **power** is **like the working** of his mighty strength, ²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,*

- **Purpose in life** – you know that you were created by God for a purpose and that everything you do for Him matters eternally

Ephesians 2:10 - For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

- **Meaning, even in suffering** – you know that God is at work making you more like Him, or using it to prepare you to better minister to others

Romans 8:28 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

- **Joy and peace** that is not contingent upon your circumstances – it is located in God, not in the things of this world. Nothing can touch that joy or peace.

John 15:11 - *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

Philippians 4:6-7 - *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

- **Hope for the future** – you know that God is always working everything together for good, and that beyond the grave is perfect life everlasting

1 Peter 1:3-4 - *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you,*

- **Eternal life** – the promise of eternity. You do not need to fear death, because you know that there will be no more suffering, no more crying, no more pain, and no more death. All your heart's desires will be forever satisfied

Revelation 21:3-4 - *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

- **Eternal glory** – We will share in His glory, be honored and rejoiced in

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 - *But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ He called you*

to this through our gospel, that you might **share in the glory** of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- **Perfect family & community** – a family that is as diverse as possible, where people from every ethnic group and culture live together in harmony

Revelation 7:9 - *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from **every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.***

- **Perfect love that never leaves** – one who sees you and knows you and loves you enough to die for you and will never ever leave you

Romans 8:38-39 - *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

This is the grace, the undeserved gift of God, that is yours in Jesus Christ. We get God, and with Him comes all of this. But, as Jonah said, we so often forfeit this grace by clinging to worthless idols.

2) What are idols, and how are we clinging to them?

Jonah 2:8-9 - *Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD.*

In Jonah's day, idols were tangible things. Throughout the Old Testament, you see statues and shrines and altars to gods like Ba'al and Molech, as well as false gods like the ones to which the sailors were praying to save them in the storm in Jonah chapter 1. I think that part of the meaning of Jonah's prayer is that he realizes that God is a God of grace, and that the sailors and the Ninevites are missing out on His grace, His hesed, His covenant faithfulness, because they are clinging to false gods and idols.

In our culture, we may not have physical, tangible idols, but we are not that different than the ancient pagans. We all have idols of the heart that we worship, that we put our hope in, that we look to for our salvation or joy or comfort, that we

sacrifice to. Instead of turning to God, we turn to other things and people for our ultimate joy and hope.

An idol is anything that is more important to your identity and happiness than God. It is anything or anyone that you are looking to in order to give you what only God can give you, to give you significance and security. Anything can be an idol - money, status, reputation, the approval of others, brains, beauty, love, sex, freedom, individuality, morality, a politician or a social cause. In fact, good things in our life are especially likely to become idols, things that we elevate above God and look to for our identity and happiness.

Underneath these idols are often deeper idols. The desire for approval. The desire for security and control of the environment. The desire for power and influence. The desire for happiness or peace. As John Calvin said, the human heart is a perpetual idol factory, constantly manufacturing things that we look to instead of God for our significance and security. Turning to YouTube, or shopping, or mindlessly surfing the Internet, or social media, or alcohol, or flirting, or work, or leisure, or a hobby, instead of to God.

What are you looking to for your significance and security? Where do you turn in times of anxiety or sadness for peace or happiness?

Jonah 2:8-9 - *Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD.*

Clinging to idols forfeits God's grace, because we are looking to something or someone other than God to give us what He has promised, and they can not deliver on the promise. **Our idols take hold of our emotions**, filling us with fear, anger, guilt, disillusionment or despair if they are threatened or lost. Even when we actually achieve them, they can prove to not fulfill, to not deliver on their promises.

Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote *Democracy in America* in the 19th century: *"A strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants... in the midst of abundance."* *Americans believed that prosperity could quench their yearning for happiness, but such a hope was illusory, because "the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart."*

Our idols have a powerful hold on us, enslaving us, making us willing to sacrifice anything in order to keep them and please them and serve them.

They have a hold over our mind. Think about it. Where does your mind naturally go? What do you find yourself daydreaming about? A relationship with a particular person? Material goods? Scenarios for career advancement? Your fears of what might happen? That's probably an idol.

And they have a hold over our money and time.

Matthew 6:21 - For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Your money flows effortlessly to your greatest loves.

Listen to the counselor and author David Powlison – *“Has something or someone besides Jesus Christ taken title to your heart’s functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight? To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance? What do you really want and expect out of life? What would really make you happy? What would make you an acceptable person? Where do you look for power and success?”*

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. Looking to anything other than God for your significance, security, or acceptance will only let you down.

Jeremiah 2:12-13 - Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD. ¹³ "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

3) How do we stop clinging to those idols so that we can receive God's grace?

Jonah looked to the temple.

When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you.

What is the significance of the temple? It was the place of sacrifice. Sin is taken seriously in the temple. There is shedding of blood, but it is not the blood of the

sinner. The temple is a reminder of substitutionary atonement, that someone else dies for his sins. It's not just about bulls and goats, but about Jesus:

*Matthew 12:38-41 - Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." ³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet **Jonah**. ⁴⁰ For as **Jonah** was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of **Jonah**, and now one greater than **Jonah** is here.*

Jonah was thrown in, but Jesus took the punishment Jonah deserved. The love of God as displayed in the sacrificial death of His Son is what convinces our hearts to give up clinging to our idols and to embrace His grace.

Jonah says that "what I have vowed, I will make good." He trusts God now and will go to the Ninevites.

How do you give up your idols? When you see Jesus as the treasure that He is, over time you come to realize that there is nothing that you would not give up for more of Him. Your money is his. Your time is his. Your sexuality is his. Your dreams are his. Your past is His. Your relationships are his. That is worship – realizing that everything your heart has desired is in Him, and being willing to lay everything else down so that you might have more of Him.

*Matthew 13:44-46 - "The kingdom of heaven is like **treasure hidden** in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. ⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*

Thomas Chalmers put it this way: "No one changes a habit just by trying – 'oh, I shouldn't be like that.' The only way to dispossess an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new affection." His point is that the more that you see the beauty of God's grace, the easier it becomes to let go of your idols and look to Him for all you need. One of the great phrases I've heard about what it means to come into a relationship with Jesus is this: **I've been seized by the power of a great affection.**

So what is it that He is calling you to sell, to surrender, to lay down today, so that you might have more of the true treasure? **List out the idols again.** The truth is that there is nothing you can give up for God that He will not replace with something better: more of His presence, His blessing, His power, His protection, His joy, His peace, and His love. If you choose to give up **social standing and the acceptance of the crowd** out of a desire to honor and obey Him, the world may reject you but He will strengthen you, and you will find that His acceptance is enough. If you give up **money** by deciding to tithe and be generous and live on less, you may have less money and fewer possessions, but you will find that His presence gives you greater peace than you ever had when you were rich. You may give up **unhealthy relationships**, and as a result you may have less immediate companionship, but you will find that His presence gives you more love and joy than any earthly relationship ever could. You may give up **earthly pleasures and entertainment**, and so maybe you will be a little more out of touch with what is going on in the world, but you will find that nothing compares to the joy and satisfaction of the presence of God.

As Jim Elliot said, *“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”*

Salvation comes from the Lord. It is not by my own works or efforts.

Looking to the Lord for your satisfaction, for your joy, for your approval and affirmation – that is Biblical fasting. **Biblical fasting is identifying what it is that you are looking to for your salvation, for your joy, for your meaning, for your peace, and declaring to God that as much as I love this, I love you more, and as much as I want this, I want you more. It is not just giving something up but letting God meet your deeper need that that material thing can never meet.**

There is nothing you can give up that the Lord will not give to you 100x over in His presence.

What are you clinging to? What are you looking to instead of God? Smash your idols. Fast from them. Or lay them down before the Lord.