

“Grace in a Strange Place”

Jonah 2:1-10

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Two years ago a Spanish fisherman name Luigi Marguez fell overboard during a bad storm. He was presumed drowned, but the Coast Guard could not find his body. Five days later he appeared back home with a remarkable story. Marguez claimed that after falling into the water he was swallowed by a whale, where he stayed for three days and three nights. Then he somehow ended up on shore and found his way back to his house. Did that really happen? I don't know. The tale sounds a little fishy. Slightly more credible is the story of James Bartley. When he died in England in 1909, this epitaph was put on his tombstone: “The modern day, Jonah.” Bartley was a crew member on a whaling vessel near the Falkland Islands in February of 1891. A Large sperm whale hit the boat and knocked many of the sailors overboard. They were all rescued except for Bartley who was presumed drowned. Thirty-six hours later, the whalers harpooned what they thought was another large whale. However, when they cut it open, they found Bartley inside and alive. The whale's gastric juices had bleached his skin so Bartley was white as snow, and he was nearly blind. Or so the newspaper accounts at the time said. Skeptics maintain the story was pure fiction, but we will never know for sure.

Friends, when we read **Jonah 1:10 “The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights,”**

The first question that comes to the mind of many is, “Did that really happen?” After that, the questions are often, “Well, was it a whale or a fish?” “Can a person really live that long inside of either?” “How could one have air to breathe in that situation?” and “What would Jonah have looked like when the fish spit him out?” Well, folks the bible doesn't really answer any of those questions, except the first. Yes, it did really happen? About 750 years before the birth of Christ, a man really did survive three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish. If you respond, “But Pastor Dan, that is scientifically impossible.” I would say “You are right. It is a miracle. But a miracle, no more credible than Jesus being resurrected from the dead after his crucifixion.” And if that didn't really happen, there is no reason for any of us to be here today.

As for the rest of the questions, they may be interesting, but are not that important. Our text makes it clear that when Jonah is in the fish, it is not what happens to his body, but to his soul, that really matters. Our journey through the book of Jonah brings us to Chapter 2, where we will look at those 10 verses. If you have your bible you can turn there, otherwise the verses will be on the screen. Let's pause and pray the Lord would encourage and challenge us through His word today.

Let me begin by reading our text:

**Jonah 2:1-10 Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish: I called to the Lord in my distress, and he answered me. I cried out for help from deep inside Sheol; you heard my voice. When you threw me into the depths, into the heart of the seas, the current overcame me. All your breakers and your billows swept over me. And I said, “I have been banished from your sight, yet I will look once more toward your holy temple.” The water engulfed me up to the neck; the watery depths overcame me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. I sank to the foundations of the mountains, the earth's gates shut behind me forever! Then you raise my life from the Pit, Lord my God! As my life was fading away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, to your holy temple. Those who cherish worthless idols abandon their faithful love, but as for me, I will sacrifice to you with a voice of thanksgiving. I will fulfill what I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the Lord. Then the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.**

When the text tells us the Lord threw a great storm at Jonah and appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, it is a reminder that everything in this book happen under the umbrella of God's sovereignty. Our focus today will be on Jonah's experience of God's grace, meaning God's unmerited, undeserved favor. That doesn't come because Jonah wanted to experience God's grace. He was running from the Lord. Rather, God has determined to show Jonah grace, even if Jonah is not excited about receiving it. That brings us to our first lesson.

From Jonah we learn, openness to grace often occurs when we hit bottom. Now, technically, Jonah didn't quite hit the bottom of the sea. The fish swallowed him before that happened. Yet, being stuck inside the belly of a great fish, really is about as low as things get. In his community, Peter Craigie notes, that text has been depicting Jonah as descending. He goes down to Joppa, down into a ship, down below the deck of the ship, and now he goes down into the depths of the sea. He adds, "But not until he was all the way down, finally stripped of buoyant self-sufficiency, was deliverance for Jonah possible." Friends, a fatal flaw in Jonah's character, self-sufficiency, thinking he did not really need God, was invisible when things were going well. But in the belly of the fish, that attitude seems really foolish. In the midst the great storm, when the sea captain urged Jonah to pray to the Lord, he was not very interested in doing that, but now, **Jonah 2:1, 2a Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish: I called to the Lord in my distress, and he answered me.**

Friends, Jesus said, **Matthew 10:39, He that loses his life will find.** In a sense, the way to go up, is to go down. The most common place to fully experience God's grace is when we are at the bottom. That happened with various people in the bible. Jacob was not ready for the role God had for him as Patriarch of Israel until he had been cheated by Laban, threatened by Esau, and wrestled with God. Peter's three-time denial that he knew Jesus, the night Jesus was arrested, brought him down to bottom where he wept bitterly. But it also popped his pride bubble, and enabled him to experience God's grace, forgiveness, and power in his life. There are a number of people in this room who will testify that the death of a loved one, health issues, financial disaster, a family crisis or some other very difficult time knocked them to the bottom, to a place where they truly knew that Jesus was all they needed, because at that point, he was all they had. None of these experiences were fun. Many were extremely painful. Yet, with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, these folks are able to look back and say they had experienced God's "severe mercy." That means the Lord used a trial or tragedy, a severe time, to enable them to experience His mercy, His grace, in a way they would not have been able if life had been going well.

So, how is this grace of God experienced? In his classic book, "Knowing God," J.I. Packer talks about three things we need to acknowledge in our minds and feel our hearts if we are to truly experience God's grace. Incidentally, as you may remember, Dr. Packer passed away this summer, in July, after a career of being one of the leading evangelical theologians for about 60 years. An amazingly gifted and truly godly man. Anyway, Dr. Packer reminds us that the first truth we must grasp is:

First, we are totally undeserving of God's grace. He calls this our "moral ill desert." This goes so much against the grain of modern society. Ours is a therapeutic culture where the focus is often on self-esteem, self-fulfillment, or just feeling good about one's self. We are encouraged to combat or simply ignore feeling of guilt, shame or self-incrimination. We are also told that traditional moral standards, often rooted in the bible, are just artificial and can be tossed aside if they get in the way of our happiness. "You have to decide for yourself what is right or wrong," is the advice people are given. The bible's message, **Romans 3:10,23 There is no one righteous, not even one. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God** is rejected as too negative and seen as harmful to one's psychological well-being. Thus, there is no need for grace, since we are all basically good people. God would be foolish not to embrace us. These days, a physician who suggests a weight loss program for an obese patient can be accused of "fat shaming." Pointing out an obvious problem is seen, by some, as a psychological attack. In a similar way, some claim a pastor who tells people they need God's grace is insulting them.

Jonah, however, knew he had messed up big time and did not try to pretend otherwise. When he talks about being thrown into the depths of the sea (verse 2) and being banished from the Lord's sight (verse 3) it reflects an understanding that he is being justly punished for his rebellion against God. And Friends, when we think we can decide for ourselves what is right or wrong, we are indeed rebelling against God. In numerous sermons recently I have ended up quoting Romans 3:10, 23. I am confident most of us believe that we are all indeed sinners. However, I suspect many of us do not realize how important that teaching is in our current culture. In so many different ways. It is a truth we need to firmly grasp to be able to clearly

communicate. And when it comes to experiencing God's grace, Dr. Packer is right, it starts with a realization that we are totally undeserving of that grace.

The second truth Packer says we must grasp, is that we are totally incapable of earning God's favor. He calls this our spiritual impotence. We are helpless to undo the wrong we have done. We cannot make up for our sin or make ourselves deserving of God's grace. Whether someone recognizes the reality of his sin, or just feels discomfort about mistakes when has made, people often try to make up for their short comings. It may involve religion, maybe being faithful in church attendance or religious rituals. It may involve volunteer work or devoting one's self to a good cause. It might involve financial generosity. The underlying premise is that we can somehow fix our relationship with God, and even put God in the position where he owes us.

Now this is not a new belief. People thought like this even 750 years before Christ. However, this was not Jonah's attitude.

In **Jonah 2:6** he said, **I sank to the foundations of the mountains, the earth's gates shut behind me forever!**

He had run from the Lord, and there was nothing he could do. Only God could rescue him. Knowing that, believing that, is a necessary step toward grace.

The third truth Packer says we need to grasp is that God freely offers gracious salvation at an incredible cost to Himself. He is referring to death the bloody and cruel death of Jesus, God's son, on the cross. There Jesus died as a substitutionary sacrifice, paying the penalty for our sins, He took our place, bearing God's wrath against our sin, so that He could forgive and save us without compromising His holiness or justice. God did this because of His great love for us. **Romans 5:8 But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinner, Christ died for us.** He dies for us so we could experience grace, unmerited favor. Jonah's prayer while in the belly of the fish foreshadows this reality. Though Jonah had almost no understanding of what Jesus the Messiah would accomplish on the cross, he says something very interesting in His prayer. **Jonah 2:4 "I have been banished from your sight, yet I will look once more toward your holy temple."** and then in **Jonah 2:7 As my life was**

**fading away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, to your holy temple.** So, why does Jonah speak of "your holy temple?" It was the place where the people went to worship the Lord, but inside the fish that is not an option for Jonah. Perhaps Jonah is just thinking of the temple as the place where God dwells and thus the location to where his prayers are addressed.

I believe, however, that Jonah understands that the temple is also where sacrifices are made. Jonah's rebellion means he deserves God's judgement. He understands there is nothing he can do to make up for his own sins. He must rely on God's mercy and forgiveness. Where can that be found? In the temple, where animals being sacrificed for the sins of the people. Yet, those animal sacrifices had no value in themselves. Only because they pointed to the perfect sacrifice (that) Jesus would make on the cross did anyone ever experience God's grace through the temple sacrifices.

**Hebrews 10:4** say **"For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."** And the **Hebrews 10:10** reads **"We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time."**

As Jonah looks toward the holy temple for grace and salvation, he does not know how the Lord is going to provide it. We, however know the Lord paid an incredibly high price to save sinners such as Jonah, such as you, such as me. It was the blood of his own son, Jesus' death of the cross, that brings salvation.

And somehow, in that belly of the great fish, Jonah becomes confident he will experience God's salvation. **Jonah 2:9 I will sacrifice to you with a voice of thanksgiving. I will fulfill what I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the Lord.** This is the proper response to grace, gratitude to the Lord. He is the one responsible. Jonah could not save himself. We cannot save ourselves. Only God can do that. We deserve judgement and wrath. We can do nothing to change that. Yet, God, in His mercy, pays the price that needs to be paid. What amazing grace! Salvation belongs to the Lord.

Well, folks this morning I hope you see that this gospel message, salvation, by grace, through Jesus Christ alone is found though the bible. No, in the Old Testament they don't know the name of the savior would be Jesus, but they did realize that,

yes, salvation belongs to the Lord. It is only by His grace that any of us can be reconciled to God, become His beloved child, escape His wrath in hell, and look forward to the glories of heaven. This is a message all of us need to hear. Yes, it is especially important for those who are no believers in Jesus Christ. If you are listening this morning, I pray the Lord has opened your eyes and heart, and you realize your need for Jesus Christ. Because friends, without Jesus you are in trouble. Your rebellion against God, your refusal to honor the Lord as he deserves to be honored, means you are deserving of His wrath. There is nothing you can do to change that. You are helpless. But the Lord has done what needs to be done, at great cost to Himself. Jesus Christ died on the cross for sinners like you. If you turn to Him and stop trusting yourself, in your accomplishment, in your own virtue, and put your faith in Jesus Christ you would be saved. He will save you. He will forgive your sin, He will change your life right now, today, and He promises eternal life in Heaven.

**John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

This is also, however, a very important message for those who are already believers in Jesus. The gospel, the great news of God's grace that we have explored today, is not the ABC's of the Christian life. It is the A through Z of the Christian life. It is something we need to embrace not just at the beginning of our Christian life, but something we should embrace every day of our Christian life. Now, I am not talking at all about receiving Jesus Christ as your savior over and over again. That initial step of trusting in the Lord Jesus, genuine Holy Spirit generated faith, is a once for all experience. It need not, in fact, cannot be repeated.

What I am talking about is this: remembering the reality of Grace. Remembering that salvation belongs to the Lord is something we should do each day. Doing so builds gratitude, love and obedience to the Lord. It produces joy and hope in our lives. Knowing we have already received such amazing grace enables us to have what John Piper calls a confidence in God's future grace. Yet, I think sometimes, amidst everything going on in our lives, we forget those basic things Jonah understood and J.I. Packer summarized so well. All of us as believers in Jesus, whether we have

recently trusted in Jesus, or if we have been following him for many decades, like Roger Johnson, need to frequently remind ourselves of those three truths of grace.

Number 1: We are totally undeserving of God's grace. As sinners, rebels against God. We deserve God's wrath.

Number 2: There is nothing we can do to earn God's favor. We are helpless to undo the wrong we have done.

Number 3: the only solution to our problem is what the Lord Jesus has done, what he done at a very high price, suffered and died in our place. Our relationship with God, our standing before Him, our hope of heaven, our joy each day, all depends on what Jesus Christ has done for us. Salvation belongs to the Lord.

Today we close with a song we sometime sing that powerfully expresses our need for God's grace. It is called "Not in Me." Before we sing, let me read the words, they are so clear and so powerful, and as we grasp them we will see how amazing that grace truly is:

No list of sins I have not done, No list of virtues I pursue,  
No list of those I am not like, Can earn myself a place  
With You. O God! Be merciful to me—I am a sinner  
Through and through! My only hope of righteousness  
Is not in me, but only You.  
No humble dress, no fervent prayer, No lifted hands, no  
Tearful song, No recitation of the truth Can justify a single wrong. My righteousness is Jesus' life, My debt was paid  
By Jesus' death, My weary load was borne by Him  
And he alone can give me rest.  
No separation from the world, No work I do, no gift I give, Can cleanse my conscience, cleanse my hands; I  
Cannot cause my soul to live. But Jesus died and rose  
Again—The pow'r of death is overthrown! My God is  
Merciful to me And merciful in Christ alone.  
My righteousness is Jesus's life,  
My debt as paid by Jesus' death, My weary load was borne by Him  
And he alone can give me rest.