

A Welcomed Grace

Jonah 2

August 8, 2010

Introduction:

In art college one of things that we needed to learn besides technical skill was art theory. Throughout art history a number of techniques have been developed that any good artist needs to be aware of, both for the sake of art appreciation as well as to enable the artist to intelligently incorporate those techniques into his own artwork. One particular technique that appealed to me is known as “chiaroscuro” which no doubt is a term I imagine many of you haven’t heard unless you have an art background. Chiaroscuro is a technique which originated during the Renaissance that played off the contrasts between darks and lights. Probably most famous for the use of chiaroscuro is Rembrandt, who often painted with deep, rich shadows offset by the bright, glowing candlelight which fell upon the figures central to his work. The goal of chiaroscuro was to use the juxtapositioning of a small amount of bright light against the deep blackness of the rest of the painting to create a dramatic visual. In paintings using chiaroscuro, your eye is immediately drawn to the lighted areas as they seem to pop out of the otherwise dark painting.

I’d like to think of the passage we’ll be looking at today as a kind of literary chiaroscuro. The setting of Jonah 2 is the belly of a fish, which is about as dark and miserable a place as you can get. Yet in stark contrast to this dark and dismal place, a ray of light appears as a prayer, rising up to God. Jonah’s prayer of thanksgiving and hope is a radiant light shining all the more brightly because it is surrounded by the darkness of Jonah’s distress.

Today we’re going to look at that prayer and see what we can learn about Jonah (and more important about God) from it. So as you open your Bibles to Jonah chapter 2, let me summarize the message I believe we should get from this passage, which is just this:

Main Idea: God’s grace saves us in times of distress.

In our passage today we find Jonah in deep distress, yet out of the darkness of that place God’s grace finds him and recues him, just like God has done for each of us, reaching down in the darkness of our sin and despair and bringing us the light of his grace. So let’s learn more about this by following along with me as I read Jonah 2 from the ESV. **“Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, ‘I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.’ Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will**

sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!’ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.”

Historical Question – A fishy problem

Now before we actually get into the details of the passage, this seems like a good time to address a question that inevitably comes up whenever you study the book of Jonah. The question can be easily summarized by one word: “Really?” Many people come away from reading this wondering if this incident of Jonah surviving inside the belly of a fish for three days really in fact happened. While being swallowed by a whale worked out fine and well for Pinocchio, that was an animated Disney film. This passage on the other hand claims that a real man named Jonah survived three days in the belly of a huge fish and lived to tell about it. For some people, this story simply stretches the bounds of credibility too far.

First, let’s be clear that while we often assume that Jonah was swallowed by a whale, the text never identifies it as anything other than a “great fish” (1:17). Maybe it’s referring to some kind of whale and maybe it is referring to some other kind of large fish, we just don’t know. The text simply isn’t concerned with taxidermy.

Second while there are various tales told of sailors during the 19th century having been swallowed by whales and surviving, none of these stories have been verified and most likely they’re just urban legends. The bottom line is that it’s very difficult to “prove” this took place by means of modern historical parallels.

What I think what we need to do when considering the historical reliability of this story is to consider what Jesus has say about it. Jesus said in Mathew 12, *“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”* What that means first of all is Jesus regards this as a historical event, not a fable or a myth or a parable. Second, Jesus takes Jonah’s survival in the fish to be a miracle on par with his own resurrection, which means this incident isn’t meant to be explainable by natural means. Naturally speaking, nobody survives either being crucified or being devoured by a large fish. So looking for historical parallels isn’t going to help you.

So I’m afraid I can’t identify for you the species of fish or explain how Jonah was able to survive in such an environment for three days because the event defies explanation by virtue of being a miracle. God miraculously preserved Jonah’s life and brought him back to dry land in a way similar to what God would later do for Jesus in the tomb and it does us no more good to search for natural explanations for Jonah’s survival than to try to use medical science to explain how the torn flesh of Jesus healed after three days. We need to simply accept the story as it’s told and believe the same God who spoke the universe into being has the power to preserve the life of a man inside the belly of a fish.

So then, having addressed that very pressing concern which always surrounds the story of Jonah, we can now turn our attention to content of the prayer Jonah prays while living as real-life fish food. So let’s first look at how Jonah’s describes his situation...

1. Jonah's situation

Let's begin at v. 3 where Jonah recounts what happened to him while still on the boat. Jonah says there, **"For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me."** The first thing that I'd like to point out is Jonah's awareness of God's sovereignty over the situation. First, Jonah attributes the actions of the sailors to God. In 1:15 we're told the sailors picked Jonah up and hurled him into the sea whereas here Jonah says God cast him into the deep. Jonah recognizes God's sovereignty over human decisions. It was God's purposes working through human choices that brought Jonah into the depths of the sea. The sailors made their decision, but God was still sovereign over their choices so that Jonah could say, "God is the one who ultimately cast me into the sea."

Furthermore Jonah recognizes God's sovereignty over nature once he's in the water when he says, **"...all your waves and your billows passed over me."** The waves that crashed over Jonah while he struggled to keep his head above water were under God's control. Although Jonah was trying to flee the Lord, God was inescapably present with him, dictating the turbulent waves that were quickly submerging him.

Now look at v. 4. **"Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'"** In his last moments of disparately trying to stay afloat, Jonah remembered God and hoped against hope that God might have mercy on him. But finally Jonah can hold out no longer and he begins to sink below the waves. Look at v. 5-6. **"The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever..."**

As far as Jonah was concerned, he had met his doom. The raging waters engulfed him. Seaweed entangled itself around his head. He was sinking, down, down, down to sea floor. Jonah had finally gone as low as he could go. This was the last leg of a downward journey of trying to flee from God. First he went down to Joppa to board a ship, then he went down into the hull of the ship to sleep, and now after being hurled from the ship he was sinking down to the very depths of the sea. There wasn't much left for Jonah to do than to try to hold his breath for a long as he could until the end.

Admittedly, it's a bleak scene. Drowning seems like a horrible way to die and I can't imagine the panic and fear Jonah must have felt when he realized that within a few short minutes his breath would give out and the salty seawater would begin pouring into his lungs causing him to suffocate and die. But this was the place that God had to bring Jonah to in order to save him. God had to bring Jonah as far down as possible to a place where there was no chance of Jonah saving himself, where certain doom was upon him, in order for God's grace to come to save him. In fact, it's the only way God's saving grace ever works – it is only given to those who are as good as dead, who have nothing they can do to save themselves but are totally dependent upon God.

I've heard some folks describe God's grace like a life preserver thrown to a drowning man; Jesus will save you but it's up to you to grab hold of it. In light of Jonah and the

rest of Scripture, I would say God's grace is more like you lying dead at the bottom of the sea, unable to do anything, and God comes and pulls your lifeless body out of the water and breathes new life into you. Jonah was as good as dead, much the same way we are in our sins. We can't respond to Christ anymore than Jonah could try to swim into a fish's mouth. Like Jonah, we are totally helpless, dead in the waters of sin, and yet God in his grace rescues us from certain death by miraculously doing for us what we are totally unable to do for ourselves.

Thankfully for Jonah, God in his grace does rescue him, albeit through a very unlikely manner. Perhaps the last thing Jonah dimly recalls as he slowly floated down to the murky waters below was a gigantic fish swimming toward him, its gaping mouth open wide. Then the next thing you know, instead of being devoured into tiny little pieces, Jonah finds himself entombed inside the digestive track of a fish. I don't know how long it took Jonah to get hold of himself as he no doubt experienced waves of terror at his horrifying situation and yet at the same time experienced joyful relief that he was somehow still alive, but eventually he gets his wits about him and calls out to God in prayer. So the next point we want to consider from this passage is...

2. Jonah's hope

Now at this point in the story you must purge from your mind all the cute images you've seen in children's books and from watching Pinocchio. Do not think for a moment that Jonah is now in some cavernous chamber that's all nice and clean with plenty of room to stand. Jonah has essentially been buried alive. It is pitch black and bitterly cold. It is cramped and dreadfully uncomfortable as the innards of this fish press in upon him. The smell is unbearably nauseating. Jonah is surrounded by the slimy remains of half-digested food and the fish's stomach acid is already working to slowly dissolve Jonah's flesh. This is no Disney film: few men have ever experienced as horrifying of a situation as Jonah does here and live to tell about it.

But here in the most dreadful place imaginable, Jonah finally stops fleeing and turns to God in prayer. It's remarkable, isn't it, to see how bad the situation needs to get before Jonah comes to his senses, repents, and reaches out to God? If you remember from last week, Jonah never offers to pray while on board the ship. The terrified sailors had enough sense to pray to their gods for deliverance, but Jonah did not. His rebellious heart had cut him off from God. It isn't until he reaches the lowest place imaginable that he finally stops his fleeing and turns to God in prayer.

Now look at what he says in v.1-2. **"Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 'I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.'"** In the Old Testament, **"Sheol"** was the abode of the dead. Jonah knew that though he was temporally saved from drowning, he might just as well be six feet under buried alive in a coffin as be in the belly of this fish. His life was forfeit; he was as good as dead. So Jonah finally prays to God in his distress and in God's mercy and grace he hears his voice and answers him.

After describing his experience of nearly drowning in v. 3-6, Jonah describes the content of his prayer in v. 7-9. Look back in your Bibles there with me. **“When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”**

Finally at long last Jonah repents and turns to God. He recognizes it was God’s grace that saved him from drowning and is presently keeping him alive inside this fish. Jonah has been given a second chance but he recognizes his life hangs in the balance by the thinnest of treads. So with language similar to what the sailors did once the storm at sea stopped, Jonah says in v. 9 that with **“thanksgiving”** he will worship God with sacrifices and will do what he had vowed to do as a prophet of the Most High God and speak the message God gave to him to deliver.

This is indeed a most welcomed grace for Jonah, and he rightly praises God for it, but it comes to him in the darkest, rankest, most terrifying place imaginable. Yet that’s what it took for God to bring Jonah to the place of repentance. And sometimes that’s what God needs to do for us. God may need to bring us to a place of deep darkness, where life is unbearably horrible, in order to get our attention. As I mentioned last week, C. S. Lewis said pain is God’s megaphone. God used it with great effectiveness with Jonah and he still uses it for those who try to run from him today. The reality is this: the most difficult trials of your life may actually be God’s grace to lead you to repentance. Just as we say, “Not all that glitters is gold,” conversely the book of Jonah reminds us that “Not all that is painful is evil.” Sometimes a very painful circumstance is the necessary means that God in his grace uses to bring you to repentance.

Many people have encountered the shining light of God’s grace in the midst of their darkest times of life. Joni Eareckson Tada dove into a shallow lake as a youth and fractured her spinal cord, leaving her paralyzed from the neck down, yet God spoke to her in her suffering to bring her to faith in Christ. John MacArthur had to lie flat on his stomach for three long months after an automobile accident in college ripped the skin off his back, yet during that time God called him to the teaching ministry he has today. I could go on and name others including, I would imagine, the names of some of you sitting here. God brought you down low during the darkest time of your life in order to rescue you. While it was a miserable time full of darkness and despair, you can look back and see the glorious light of God’s grace shining out from it. You realize now that it was God’s grace that those trials came to you in order to get you to come to him.

In light of this, I think at times it may be appropriate to ask God to bring somebody down low in order for God to deliver them because when life is going well, it’s easy to tune out God. Who cares about all heaven when I’m enjoying the good life right now? I’ve got wealth, wine, and women – who needs God? As a result, sometimes the best prayer you can pray for somebody is for the worst thing to happen to them. You may have people in your life right now who are in such rebellion to God that you need to pray for God to hurl a storm at them, throw them into the raging sea, and have them wake up half-dead in the intestines of fish – metaphorically speaking of course.

Maybe what you need to pray is for God to do something so drastic – like getting into a serious automobile accident or being diagnosed with a dreaded disease – that they can't ignore God any longer. They need God to hurl a serious, life-threatening storm their way so that turn from their sin and turn to God.

Now I know that might seem a strange and even cruel thing to pray, and some of you may be thinking, "Pastor Rob, you can't seriously expect me to pray that somebody I love ends up in intensive care or becomes paralyzed can you?" Well, yes I can if that's what is necessary to bring them to repentance. If that seems too far off base to you, I would have you recall what Jesus himself said. He said,

"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."

Sin is serious and something as tragic as losing an eye or a hand or being in a car accident that causes a person to be bedridden for months in agonizing pain may be the only thing left that will save them from something far worse happening to them if they succeed in their rebellion to God. Jonah needed to nearly drown at sea and lay half-dead in the belly of a fish for him to finally seek God; it may take something just as terrible and drastic in order for God to reach unsaved people that we know.

Well, God does indeed hear Jonah's prayer and in response to it he delivers Jonah from the bowels of the fish. So our last point is we'll briefly consider is...

3. Jonah's deliverance

Look back quickly with me at your Bibles at v. 10. **"And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land."** After three harrowing days inside this fish, Jonah finally reaches out to God in prayer, promising to do what God has called him to do, and as a result the fish vomits him out upon dry land.

Now I don't know what it's like to be vomited out of a creature (and I hope I never do find out!), but I'm fairly familiar with the sight, sounds, smells and texture of vomit, so I cannot imagine this is a very pleasant experience for Jonah. After three days, I'm sure Jonah was rather relieved to be able to breathe in fresh air once again, but I can't bear to think of what he looked (or smelled) like once he staggered to his feet, did his best to wipe the sticky vomit off his face, and tried to refocus his eyes to the daylight and wander off to somewhere inhabited. Jonah is not a pretty sight (or scent for that matter), but at least he is alive. God had delivered him from certain death and miraculously brought him back to dry land, safe and sound.

Jonah had experienced God's relentless grace towards sinners and lived to tell about it. At times that relentless grace was violent, as the storm raged against the ship he was on. Then God's relentless grace was horrifying, as Jonah found himself buried alive in the cold, dark, acidic belly of a fish. And now, God's relentless grace is messy

as God delivers Jonah from death by allowing him to become fish vomit. But in spite of it all, it's a welcomed grace. Jonah deserved death for his sin; instead, he received God's grace which relentlessly pursued him down to the depths of the sea and brought him back to life. God's grace was not tidy, but it accomplished its goal and saved Jonah from his sin and certain death.

Conclusion

So then, with Jonah back on land again here at the end of chapter 2, we need to ask what does this story mean for us. As I said at the beginning of the message, the main idea of this passage is that **God's grace saves us in times of distress**. God had to bring Jonah to a point of deep distress in order to save him. If God in his grace did not interfere and bring these difficult situations about, Jonah would have kept on running from God. Jonah needed to experience the dark distress at sea and in the belly of a fish in order to bring him to repentance. The same is true for you and me.

For in many ways, Jonah's story is also our story. It's a mirror in which we're to gaze in and see ourselves. Like Jonah, every time we sin we're in essence running from God and to paraphrase Romans 3, "Everybody runs." We all know what God commands us to do and instead we go in the opposite direction. And like I said last week when we run from God in our sin, God has two options: the first option is to let us go. That's what the apostle Paul talks about in Romans 1 where he says people did not glorify him or give him thanks so God "gave them over" to all kinds of wickedness. It would have been God's wrath upon Jonah not to interfere with his sinful behavior. When God allows us to do just what we want, he's not giving us freedom of choice or respecting our free will – he's judging us by allowing us to store up wrath against ourselves for the Day of Judgment (Romans 2:5).

The second option God has when we run from him in disobedience is to intervene. God prevents us from going down the path of destruction by stepping in so we might turn from rebellion to repentance. We of course don't want God's grace in the midst of our sin but we need it, so God relentlessly pursues us. In his grace he hurls the storms of various trials our way and casts us down into the depths of the sea of distress. He brings us to a place of darkness and despair, not because God is cruel but because his grace will stop at nothing to save those he loves from their sin. Admittedly at first it is an unwelcomed grace, since we are sinners fleeing from God, but once that grace captures us in its dark and painful embrace, we welcome it because now we see it for what it really is: a grace not to destroy us but to destroy our sin.

For some of you listening, you may be in that place of darkness and despair right now. You are, metaphorically speaking, in the belly of the fish and life is dark and dreary and quite frankly it utterly stinks! If that's you, God may have you there not to punish you but to rescue you. God is using the situation you find yourself in to stop you from running from him and get your attention. Your pain is God's megaphone to rouse you from your spiritual numbness and get you to seek him.

If that's you and God has finally slowed you down enough to get your attention, then God has a message for you from the book of Jonah. Just as Jonah was three days in the belly

of a fish, so also was Jesus, God's Son, three days in the belly of the earth after having died on a cross. But whereas Jonah suffered for his own sin, Jesus was innocent of sin. Since he was God incarnate, he lived the perfect life we should have lived, obeying God perfectly. Yet we're told in Scripture that Christ became sin for us in order to take upon himself the punishment we deserved. As a result, instead of hurling his wrath against us, God hurled his wrath on Christ on the cross, and by his death Christ satisfied God's holy wrath against our sin.

Each one of us are sinners who deserve death and hell for our sin, but God loved us so much that he sent his Son to die for us, so God's wrath against sin would be satisfied and we could be forgiven. But in order to receive that wonderful gift, you need to stop running from God. You need to turn to him in faith believing that Jesus died, rose again, and now reigns as Lord over all the earth including your life. It means ceasing from pursuing a life of self-centered sin and instead pursuing a life of joyful obedience to Christ Jesus.

It's time to stop running from God and start running to God. God offers you full pardon from sin and the promise of eternal life if you simply turn from sin and in faith believe in Christ as your Savior who die for your sins and as your Lord whom you are willing to follow all of the days of your life. If you've been running from God, why don't you stop your running this morning and turn to God through Christ Jesus as I pray...

Prayer

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Brethren Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2010.