

God's Gracious Rescue

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[0 : 00] These passages, Jonah 1, verse 17 through to 2, verse 10. The text is about Jonah and the fish, or sometimes referred to as Jonah and the whale.

But more specifically, it's a passage about God's gracious rescue of the prophet Jonah. And so you know the story. God sends a fish to swallow Jonah.

He's in the fish. And then God commands the fish to spit Jonah out onto dry land. And so that's what happened. And so what we're going to do is we're going to look at what Jonah prayed inside the fish while he was in its belly for those three days and three nights.

And so Jonah chapter 2 is really a psalm or a song of thanksgiving that Jonah offers to God because God has rescued him. And it teaches us about sin and grace.

So even if we're unfamiliar with what those words mean, sin and grace, then the book of Jonah shows us in pop-up picture book style what sin is and what grace is.

[1 : 03] Essentially, sin is running away from God. And that's what Jonah does. And grace is God's pursuit of undeserving people so that he might save them.

And that's what happens. That's what God does in his dealings with Jonah and the Ninevites. And so sin is running and grace is pursuing. Essentially, that's it. Sin is running and grace is pursuing. That's a simple way of expressing it. So let me just state at the beginning how this comes through in Jonah's prayer. Because we see that sin takes you down, but grace raises you up.

Sin takes you down, but grace raises you up. That's the take-home message, if you like. That's the big idea in this prayer of Jonah. Sin takes you down, but grace raises you up.

And we're going to dive into this in a moment. But before we do, we need to make a few comments about this fish. Because it might be a huge fish, but it's only got a walk-on part. It's only got a swim-on part, really, in the story.

[2 : 05] And yet the story of Jonah is viewed with skepticism by many modern readers. The fish is just too hard to swallow. It's a fishy tale, and it sounds unbelievable.

But we know that this is history as opposed to myth or allegory, because Jesus Christ speaks of Jonah. And Jesus views this story as being history, because he compares Jonah to his own life and ministry.

Specifically, Jesus mentions Jonah in relation to his death and his resurrection. And so if we accept the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the far greater miracle, then there's nothing difficult in accepting Jonah and the fish.

Because we're talking about a real man and a real fish and a real encounter with the living God.

And that's why the message of Jonah is relevant for us all, whether we call ourselves a Christian or not.

Because the real miracle isn't what Jonah does in the belly of the fish. The real miracle is what God does in the heart of Jonah. And so that's what we're going to see today.

[3 : 11] Because God in his grace pursues sinful people like Jonah, like us, so that he might save us. So the outline is on the service sheet.

Sin takes you down. That's the first point. Second point, grace raises you up. Sin takes you down. Grace raises you up. So first, sin takes you down. Jonah was running away from God.

Last time we left Jonah drowning in the sea, but God saved him. So chapter 1, verse 17. Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

God sends the fish. Fish saves Jonah from death. And so this is the Lord God who is in supreme control over everything.

Over the elements, like the storm. Over the animals, like the fish. Over human beings, like Jonah. Jonah. And so the fish is God's way, his method of rescuing Jonah.

[4 : 13] And that's why we're able to read Jonah's prayer. It's because he was rescued. He was still alive. So chapter 2, verse 1. From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God.

Now that's important, those words, the Lord his God. Because Jonah, despite his running, was still being pursued by the God.

He was Jonah's God. So ever since Jonah chose to disobey God, chapter 1, at the beginning of the book, he's had this painful downward journey away from God.

And the text emphasizes how Jonah went down, down, down. So just look with me at his downward journey away from God. So chapter 1, verse 3, he went down to Joppa.

And then the original says, he went down into the ship. Then chapter 1, verse 5, but Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

[5 : 20] And further down, chapter 1, verse 15, they took Jonah and threw him overboard. He's going down into the ocean depths. And in the language of this downward descent, which is there in chapter 1, continues into chapter 2.

So chapter 2, verse 2. From deep in the realm of the dead, I called for help. Then chapter 2, verse 3. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas.

Chapter 2, verse 4. I have been banished from your sight. Further and further away from God.

Chapter 2, verse 5. The engulfing waters threatened me.

The deep surrounded me. Seaweed was wrapped around my head. Chapter 2, verse 6. To the roots of the mountains, I sank down.

So Jonah's sin took him on a downward trajectory, further and further away from God. And that's what sin does. Sin takes you down.

[6 : 24] And I think that's what some of the conservative party candidates for leadership have realised. They know that if they don't confess up to their sins now, then later on, their sin will just take them down.

And they'll no longer be a credible candidate. And they'll no longer be a credible candidate. But that's what sin does, isn't it? It takes you down. And so Jonah expresses in this prayer how deep down he went before God rescued him.

He was, verse 2, in the realm of the dead. This translates to a Hebrew word, Sheol. Now Sheol is the place of the dead. Place of judgement.

Place of separation from God. A place of no return. So that's how desperate Jonah's situation is. Sounds like a nice children's story. Jonah and the whale.

Down. Spit up. Sounds nice. But for Jonah, terrible, terrible, desperate, near death. So having earlier trying to flee to Tarshish to escape God, he now finds himself destined for Sheol and permanently isolated from God.

[7 : 31] So Jonah had sunk beyond all hope of human rescue. You know, as far as the sailors were concerned, they threw him overboard. He's dead. That guy is not coming back again.

And Jonah knew that was the end for him. So verse 6, he says, the earth beneath barred me in forever. So he was imprisoned by death.

Verse 7, when my life was ebbing away. So as he's drowning, he's fainting, he's losing the battle for air, he's heading for death. It just couldn't be any worse.

And he's describing this in the language of his prayer. Not just because he was about to die, but because of God's judgment on him. He couldn't be in a worse situation.

So see what he says, verse 3. You hurled me into the depths. But wasn't it the sailors who threw Jonah in? Well, yes, but they were only accomplishing God's purposes.

[8 : 30] It was God who hurled him into the depths. All your waves and your breakers swept over me, he says in verse 3. So Jonah had chosen to go down to Joppa, but God took him down even further than he expected.

So verse 4. I've been banished from your sight. So sin doesn't just take you down. Sin casts you out of the very presence of God.

It removes you from him. That's why your sin is so serious. And we might think that sin isn't really a problem. But if we continue to run away from God and rebellion against him, instead of running to him for forgiveness, then we will ultimately be cast out from the presence of God.

And Jonah was sensing this as he was sinking down into the sea. It began to sink into his consciousness as he sank beneath the waves.

And that's why he finally cries out for help. Because God in his mercy wasn't going to let Jonah go. But God in his mercy also needed to discipline Jonah so that Jonah might learn a vital lesson about himself and about God's grace.

[9 : 52] And yet it was a painful lesson. Because Jonah was quite literally in the jaws of death. And yet that's where he needed to be before he could experience the wonder of God's grace.

He needed to be so far down to taste the grace of God that he might be lifted up again. Now, we may not face such severe circumstances as Jonah was facing, but the experience of going down and down and down can be just as common and just as real in our own lives.

It's a place where things are so bad that we just can't imagine that things will get any worse. A place of failure, of sin, of despair.

The author, J.K. Rowling, once described this kind of experience in her own life. Rowling, of course, is the creator of the Harry Potter series.

And she said this in what was a famous speech she gave at Harvard University for the graduates in 2008. She said, And then she goes on.

[11 : 22] So I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was. I began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me, which was her writing of the Harry Potter novels.

I was set free because my greatest fear had been realised. And I was still alive. And I still had a daughter whom I adored. And I had an old typewriter and a big idea.

And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life. She called it rock bottom. That's how J.K. Rowling described her situation.

But of course, Jonah's situation was far worse. Jonah hit rock bottom because he tried to run away from God and he was staring death in the face.

That's what he was looking at, death. So God took Jonah to the very end of himself in order to wake him up to his senses so that he could restore him.

[12 : 24] And that is often the only place that God's grace will be found for some people. Not when life is plain sailing or when we're high flying, but when we hit rock bottom and things just couldn't get any worse.

That's when our sin is brutally exposed and there's no more hiding it from anyone else. Then the only thing left to do is to turn to God when everything else has failed and to seek God's grace.

Because in the course of our lives, we don't tend to think that our sin is really that big of a deal.

We're prepared to carry on maybe with the respectable sins that we commit or the sins that nobody else sees because we just don't see them as being that much of a problem.

And we don't like to be reminded of our sin or told that we're sinful. And so the only thing that's going to wake us up to the danger that we're in is if our sins are revealed to us. And the more painful we experience, the more awake we can become.

And that's the point when we really experience God's grace and we understand what it means and that we really need it. So sin takes us down and eventually if that sin is unforgiven, it will cast us out of God's presence.

[13 : 46] And so that's why the book of Jonah encourages us to reach out to God for mercy because we can help ourselves. Only God can save us. And yet many people still think we can save ourselves through our good works or through our religious performance.

But Jonah proves that just isn't God's way. Just think about it. As Jonah sank deeper towards death, Jonah had no time to make up for his rebellion against God by doing good deeds, like maybe showing up to the temple again because he was about to die.

There was no way back by doing good things for him. And his religious performance it was shocking because he was a complete and utter failure as one of God's prophets.

All Jonah could possibly do was to cry out to the Lord for help. And that's what he did. And we're glad that he did. And so the challenge is, well, have you cried out to God for help?

Because perhaps you haven't done that yet. And you know that you're far away from God, maybe not running away from him. The fact that you're here today means, well, you're maybe not running towards him, but you're not facing him.

[15:02] Well, please don't think that there's no way back with God, either because of your past life or because of what is going on at present. Because we all sin, so no one is so good that we don't need God's grace.

And no one is so bad that they can't find God's grace. That's what Jonah teaches us. So the great news is that no matter how far your sin or my sin has taken us, God will hear our cry and he'll show us mercy, just like he did to Jonah.

But if you are a Christian here today, then your sin can still take you down. My sin can still take me down. We can be on that downward spiral where we continue to disobey God.

We know what he wants us to do, but we fail to do it. And so the application is the same. Cry out to God for mercy. Cry out to God for help. Because God will forgive.

So we shouldn't wait till we hit rock bottom before we do it. Because God will not only show mercy, but he'll give grace to enable us to turn from our sin and towards him.

[16:17] He'll come and live in us as his spirit so that we might be enabled to live his way instead of our own way. So that's the first thing we see. Sin takes you down.

The second thing is that grace raises you up. Sin takes you down, but grace raises you up. So Jonah, having outlined this downward spiral in his life because of his sin, now Jonah introduces a change of direction there in verse 6, halfway through.

Instead of going towards death, Jonah now rises to new life. So look at halfway through, verse 6. It's a change, but you, but you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit.

When he could sink no deeper, the Lord intervened and raised him up. Jonah was weighed down with God's judgment before he could be lifted up by God's grace.

When he was stripped of all resources, when he was stripped of any ability to do anything for himself, God saved him. That's why the contrast in Jonah's prayer between his sin, which is very real, and he expresses it, and God's grace, that contrast is so beautiful.

[17:35] So Jonah said to come down, look at verse 6, to the roots of the mountains, I sank down. But God's grace raised him up again. Verse 6, but you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit.

Jonah's sin had cast him out. Look at verse 4, I have been banished from your sight, but God's grace brought him in. Look at verse 7, my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.

Sin takes you down and it casts you out, but grace raises you up and it brings you in. That is the beauty of the Christian gospel, isn't it?

That's why Christianity offers such good news. Good news that no other religion or philosophy can offer. Every other religion basically says if you work harder, if you've got a good religious performance, if you do enough, then maybe at the end of the day, just maybe, God will accept you. But Christianity is so different. And we see that here, it's beautiful. because when we're down at our lowest and we couldn't go any further and we don't deserve anything, God comes to us in his mercy and by his grace and lifts up our head to him and transforms our lives.

[18:59] You know, God stopped at nothing in his pursuit of Jonah, wanting to raise him up and to bring him home. So Jonah, having attempted to flee from God's presence, now Jonah wants to return.

So in verse 4, Jonah looks towards God's holy temple and the faith that he will live through this ordeal. And his prayer coming into God's temple is his desire to return to God's presence and to worship God again.

And so the contrast from the depths to the heights could not be greater. From the roots of the mountains at the bottom of the sea, Jonah's prayer reaches to the temple on Mount Zion.

And so Jonah can now testify that the Lord saves. Look at verse 8 and 9. Those who claim to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you what I have found I will make good.

I will say salvation comes from the Lord. What a contrast here between those who turn away from God and those who trust in him.

[20:17] So those who worship idols soon discover how useless those idols are just like the sailors did, remember? In chapter 1 their false gods let them down and so they turn to the true God, the living God who saved them.

And now Jonah can say the same. He found the Lord to be gracious to him because he was saved. And that's why he uses the Hebrew word *chesed* here in his prayer and verse 8.

It's a key Bible word translated as steadfast love or sometimes as kindness. And it refers to the covenant love of God.

And it comes from Jonah's lips because he had experienced it in his heart. Jonah knew he deserved God's judgment for his sin but God's grace had pursued him and it had reached out to him and it had grabbed him and it had saved him.

And that's why Jonah shouts out in praise to God. And he devotes himself to God with sacrifice and vows. Remember at this point he's still in the belly of the fish but he can say salvation comes from the Lord because grace is sinking deeper into his heart.

[21 : 37] Because it was only after he acknowledged God's salvation that God saved him. Verse 10 And the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Just as the Lord provided the fish to rescue Jonah from death now the Lord commands the fish to spew Jonah out onto dry land. And so Jonah is now ready to go to Nineveh.

God dealt with Jonah in this way because he needed to face up to the reality of his sin and disobedience and where it would take him. But he also needed to feel God's grace towards him so that he could be the one who went to minister that grace to the people of Nineveh.

And that's the same grace that we all need. Sin is the same as a problem for us all but God's grace is also the same because we all need it.

Because when it has touched our lives and God's grace has sunk deep into our hearts then we also want to sing our praise to God. Indeed Stormzy here's a cultural reference Stormzy the South London grime artist did just that.

[22 : 46] He sang about God's grace. If you don't know who Stormzy is he won the BBC Music Award for Artist of the Year in 2017. He also received two Brit Awards for Male Solo Artist and Best Album in 2018.

And his album Gang Signs and Prayer went straight into number one in the UK album chart. And he released that extraordinary track on that album called Blinded by Your Grace.

And this is what he sings. He says Lord I've been broken although I'm not worthy you fixed me I'm blinded by Your Grace you came and saved me.

Stormzy is singing the truth that Jonah sang in this psalm. Because when we're aware of our sin but have tasted God's grace towards us in Jesus Christ we too will want to say salvation comes from the Lord and we want to say it so everybody can hear it.

And so the story of Jonah is a remarkable story of sin and grace in pop-up picture book form.

Because it doesn't just tell us the story of God and his dealings with Jonah of Jonah running and of God pursuing the story of Jonah illustrates God and his dealings with us.

[24 : 02] Because it fits into the bigger storyline of the Bible by pointing us to Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus himself spoke about the sign of the prophet Jonah in Matthew chapter 12.

Jesus said 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. Jesus compares his ministry to Jonah's.

Jonah's deliverance is a picture of Jesus' resurrection from death. So as Jonah was under the judgment of God for his sin so Jesus came under the judgment of God for our sin.

As Jonah sank down towards death he was buried in a fish but God brought him out again so Jesus died on a cross. He was buried in a tomb but God raised him to life again.

It was our sin that took Jesus down to his death but it's his resurrection that raises us up to eternal life. and that's the sign of Jonah.

[25 : 09] And that's why the news of the death and the resurrection of Jesus is the best news ever because like Jonah our sin takes us down and casts us out but God in his grace towards us in Jesus Christ raises us up and welcomes us in.

And so unless we realise the depths of our own sin and what God has done to rescue us and save us will never be amazed by God's grace.

God's grace is beyond measure. It's incomparable and it impacts our lives now and it sees us through death and into eternity and it's far better than we deserve and it's far more wonderful than we could dream of.

So isn't it foolish as we close foolish to try and run away from God. It is the height of stupidity because our sin takes us down and ends up casting us out away from God forever.

And yet God in his grace pursues us in Jesus Christ to save us and raise us up to everlasting life. And so let's just not delay in crying out to God whether we profess to be a Christian or not. [26 : 28] Cry out to God. and he will give his grace. And if we are committed to Jesus Christ let's never forget that salvation comes from the Lord.

That means there's nothing more to us more to our identity than that we are a sinner saved by grace. And so if we're to be effective as Christians as Christ Church Glasgow in our mission to go and tell people about Jesus then we need to feel the deep joy of an experience of God's grace in our own hearts don't we?

Because that's going to be the motivation for us to go and share that good news of Jesus with others.