

# *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

## **Jonah 2:1-10**

**Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 30, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church**



**<sup>1</sup>Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup>saying,**

**“I called to the Lord out of my distress,  
and he answered me;  
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,  
and you heard my voice.**

**<sup>3</sup>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.**

**<sup>4</sup>Then I said, ‘I am driven away  
from your sight;  
how shall I look again  
upon your holy temple?’**

**<sup>5</sup>The waters closed in over me;  
the deep surrounded me;  
weeds were wrapped around my head  
<sup>6</sup> 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.**

**<sup>7</sup>As my life was ebbing away,  
I remembered the Lord,  
and my prayer came to you,  
into your holy temple.**

**<sup>8</sup>Those who worship vain idols  
forsake their true loyalty.**

**<sup>9</sup>But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.  
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!”**

**<sup>10</sup>Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited  
Jonah out onto the dry land. (Jonah 2:1-10, NRSV)**



By now I hope you know the story. The Lord tells Jonah to go tell the wicked Ninevites to repent. Jonah refuses and jumps on a ship heading the opposite way to Tarshish. The Lord sends a storm to turn Jonah around. He responds by hiding from the rest of the crew, going to sleep, refusing to pray, all the while putting the lives of others around him in grave danger.

Those others, the sailors on that ship, beg him to turn back to his God. He won't do it. Jonah will be thrown overboard and drown in the sea before he will obey God. So that's exactly what the sailors do.

Now, if that were the end of the story it would still be a useful story. Like other fables, it would have illustrated a clear moral lesson. Think of the fable of the boy who cried wolf. For amusement, this foolish young man repeatedly tricks the villagers into thinking he is being attacked by a wolf. When an actual wolf appears one day, they don't respond to his cries for help, believing it's just another prank at their expense. Tragically, the boy is eaten by the wolf. The lesson is clear: don't lie to people and erode their trust. If the story of Jonah ended with him sinking to his watery grave, the reader would have a similarly clear moral lesson to take home. Don't disobey God. It will not go well for you in the end.

But that's not where the story ends. I think that's because it's not a moral lesson that we need here. Our main problem is not immorality. It's not even sin or disobedience towards God. As I hope to show you in a minute, those problems are already solved. Our main problem is that we do not have an adequate understanding of grace, much less an experience of grace. That's Jonah's problem as well. It's why Jonah's story is our story. And everything God does in this story is aimed at solving this problem.

You may remember that when we first started in with Jonah a few weeks ago I told you that God is the central character in this story. He is. Pay attention and you'll notice that at every major shift in the story, it is the Lord who is taking the initiative. As Jonah sinks beneath the waves, God moves things forward by appointing a great fish to swallow him whole. Earlier God appointed a storm to chase Jonah down. Later he will appoint a plant to grow and then die to teach Jonah a lesson. As this story demonstrates, every part of creation obeys the Lord except humans, and God often uses his obedient creation to teach lessons to his disobedient people.<sup>1</sup>

Pay attention to the trajectory of the drama God is directing through storms, fish, plants and whatever else is at his disposal. Jonah goes down to Joppa, down to

<sup>1</sup> See Isaiah 1:2-3

the ship, down to the cargo hold of the ship, down to the depths of the sea, and now down to the belly of a fish. The Lord is taking this disobedient prophet down, down, down, down. Why? Because the Lord knows that it is only at the bottom that most of us are ready and able to learn about grace, and Jonah's main problem is that he does not know grace. In this and other lessons, hardship and pain are far better teachers than comfort and pleasure.

I love a good sports movie. By contrast, my wife loves a good foreign film with subtitles. We have a good marriage because we have learned the secret of compromise. It occurred to me this week that one of the things most great sports movies share in common is that the athletes have to be broken down, often by a hard-nosed but wise coach, before they can know glory and greatness. *Hoosiers*, *Remember the Titans*, *Rocky*, *Miracle*, even *Karate Kid*, it's the case in every movie. Pain and hardship become the best teachers.

Consider all the biblical characters who had to go through very difficult seasons of hardship before they could be used by God. Abraham waited years for a son. Joseph was left for dead, enslaved, and spent a decade in prison before he matured to usefulness. Moses was exiled as a lowly shepherd for 40 years, only to then be ready to lead the whole nation of Israel through 40 years wandering in the desert so that they could learn their lesson. Think of all that David went through before he was fit to be king. It should not surprise us that God still adopts the same strategy with us, appointing circumstances in our lives that break us down and make us teachable and humble, especially when there is disobedience in our lives. The disobedience in Jonah's life was radical, meaning the treatment also needed to be radical. God was applying severe mercy to teach Jonah about grace.

In his classic book, *Knowing God*, theologian J.I. Packer speaks about Jonah's problem, which is our problem as well.<sup>2</sup> He says that there are three crucial truths which are necessary to achieve any true understanding or experience of grace. Jonah's story helps us illustrate these truths.

First, we need to understand that *we deserve condemnation* because of our sin. I'm tempted to soften this language to accommodate the aversion our culture feels towards this idea, but I won't do it because the Bible doesn't flinch in declaring this essential truth. Our culture wants to teach us that our problem is not sin, but a lack of self-esteem. Moral standards are merely socially-constructed, and therefore relative.

Who says that what is right for you is also right for me? In this context, grace becomes offensive. Do you see why? The fact that you are telling me that I need God's forgiveness implies that I need to be forgiven. How dare you tell me that I need to be forgiven!

Here is the truth, not as I see it, but as the scriptures consistently declare it. We owe God everything because everything we have is from him, our very lives. And as our creator, God made it clear what his standards are for this life we have been given, that we are to love him with all heart, mind, soul and strength, and love everyone else as much as we love ourselves. This is what God commands from every human being. It's what we owe God. In light of this standard, any honest person recognizes that he or she has severely disregarded these commandments, disregarded God himself. And I'm telling you, you will never really know God's grace until you realize that because of your sin you absolutely do not deserve his favor.

Jonah does realize this. His prayer reveals that he recognizes that it is the Lord who has cast him into the sea because of his sin. He is getting what he deserves. Do we, like Jonah, fully realize what it is that we deserve?

Second, we need to understand that *we cannot save ourselves*. Again, this idea is offensive in our culture, as we are instead taught that we can always save ourselves through therapy, or technology, or medicine, or money, or knowledge, or plain old hard work. Even in religious circles, people believe that it is possible to show enough dedication and moral effort to eventually put God in your debt. But it's all an illusion, only perpetuated as long as things go well in life, which usually isn't all that long. Do we really believe that we can overcome the problem of human sin on our own, much less the problem of death? Jonah's prayer reveals that he realizes there is nothing he can do to save himself. He prays in verse 5, "**The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever...**"

This is a desperate place in life, that place where you finally see that not only do you deserve condemnation from God, but there is nothing you can do on your own to change that fact. And yet this is the place where perhaps a person is now open to the one thing that can save us, which is the costly grace of God. That is the third essential truth we need to learn.

<sup>2</sup> I'm indebted to Timothy Keller for this reference in *Discovering Jonah* (Penguin Books, 2018), 73-78.

Notice that twice in his prayer Jonah looks towards what he calls God's "holy temple" in Jerusalem, the physical location on earth all Jews in that day believed the presence of the Lord was most tangible. To be clear, Jonah is at the lowest possible place, in the belly of a fish at the bottom of the ocean, and is now looking for salvation. Where does he look? He looks to God's holy temple. Why? Well, in the middle of the temple in those days was the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred vessel that contained the Ten Commandments, the sacred law of a God who demanded righteousness from his people. On the top of the Ark was a slab of gold called the mercy seat. The Lord has promised to meet his people in that place. Exodus 25:22 reads, "**There I will meet with you, and from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will tell you all that I am commanding you for the Israelites.**"<sup>3</sup>

The problem was, who was going to approach the presence of God at the Ark, since everyone had relentlessly failed to keep the law that was contained within? Nobody dared approach because they knew that death is the consequence for approaching a righteous God while you are committed to unrighteousness. In those days, only the high priest once a year on the Day of Atonement, would approach and offer a sacrifice on the mercy seat on behalf of the people, usually the blood of a spotless lamb. Sin had been committed, so blood must be shed to atone for sin. The problem, of course, is that how can the life of a mere animal adequately atone for the sin of a generation?<sup>4</sup> It could not. So as the people kept sinning the blood kept flowing, never sufficient. Still, even Jonah knew that the only possible salvation available to him was from God, and the place where people went to meet God was the temple, that place of costly sacrifice. So that's where Jonah looks.

But you see, the sacrifices in the ancient temple weren't the solution to human sin. *They were merely pointing forward to what was to become the solution for human sin.* Do you remember when John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching one day and declares for all to hear, "**Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!**"<sup>5</sup> Jesus himself became the sacrifice which was sufficient enough to finally pay the steep price for human sin. In the shedding of his blood on the cross we find the forgiveness of all generations. It's why the curtain in the temple, the one that had forever separated the mercy seat of God from the people of God who were not worthy to approach, was torn in two the moment

Jesus died on the cross. Through his death, Christ has won our forgiveness and made us righteous, now able to approach a righteous God and receive his favor and blessing.

This is why I said earlier that our main problem as humans is not immorality and sin. At the cross those things have been dealt with. Our main problem, rather, is that we just don't understand and know grace. In Jonah's case, I believe he is clear on the first two essential truths, that he deserves condemnation and that he cannot save himself. I think that's why he allows the sailors to toss him overboard to what he believes will be his death. It's that place of hopelessness that Jacob spoke about last week. But something changes that leads Jonah to eventually pray the prayer he prays from the belly of the fish, which is essentially a prayer of thanksgiving. Maybe when he hits the water he immediately regrets his decision. I've read that most people who survive after trying to end their lives by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, later recount how they immediately regretted their decision right after jumping. Whether that was the case for Jonah, we don't know. Either way, by the time he is swallowed whole he has changed. Maybe he finally realizes that there is absolutely nowhere that he can run and avoid God. God is simply not going to let him go. And so he begins to pray. He is now in the same place the sailors were just moments before, recognizing the hand of God and ready to make vows.

By the way, this is a powerful reminder here that you can pray anywhere you find yourself, and know that God will hear your prayer. Sometimes we think our prayers have a better chance of being heard if they are prayed in so-called "sacred spaces". But that's simply not true. The moment a person turns sincerely to God in prayer, the ordinary space they occupy suddenly becomes sacred space, wherever that space happens to be, even in the belly of fish at the bottom of the ocean! And when we pray like Jonah prays, desperate because we know our very lives depend on God, amazing things can happen. Eugene Peterson says, "We become what we are called to be by praying."<sup>6</sup>

I believe that it is in that desperate place where Jonah finally sees the grace of God. In verse 8 he declares, "**Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.**" That word "loyalty" is the Hebrew word *hesed*. This is a key word in the scriptures, and it essentially means "covenant love".<sup>7</sup> Jonah is acknowledging that those who turn from God to

<sup>3</sup> This and all other biblical texts are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> The writer of Hebrews 4:4-10 recognizes this reality.

<sup>5</sup> John 1:29

<sup>6</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Eerdmans, 1992), 74.

<sup>7</sup> James Limburg, *Interpretation Commentary Series: Hosea-Micah* (Westminster John Knox, 1988), 147-148.

worship anything else in life are forsaking their true love, a love which can never fail them, a love that tracks you even in your disobedience with a storm to the far reaches of the sea, and a love that then comes into the sea after you when all you want to do is die, and swallows you up to spare your life. Jonah has to go through a great deal to get there, even most of his prayer, but he eventually does get to the grace of God. And in doing so, he finds deliverance.

That's what leads him to say in the following verse: **“But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!”** Those last words are not a slogan tacked on to the end of the prayer, but the climax and very heart of the prayer. We deserve condemnation. We cannot save ourselves. But deliverance, salvation, belongs to the Lord. The Lord can save us. Better yet, the Lord desires to save us! Best of all, he has saved us! It is a costly salvation, but the Lord deemed that we were worth it.

Without knowing it, Jonah is once again pointing us forward to this costly salvation. The Hebrew word here translated “deliverance” is the word *yeshu'ah*. Does that word sound familiar to you? The Hebrew name Joshua comes from this word, and Joshua means “Yahweh saves” or “the Lord saves.”<sup>8</sup> And so when an angel announced to a virgin named Mary one day that she was going to bear a child who would be the Savior of the world, she was instructed, **“You are to name him Jesus [Joshua, in the Hebrew], for he will save his people from their sins.”**<sup>9</sup> Deliverance comes only from the Lord, and the Lord brings deliverance through Jesus Christ. There is no salvation outside of Jesus, but salvation through Jesus is freely extended to the whole world.<sup>10</sup> True life begins when a person comes to believe this is true.

John Newton was born in 1725 in London. Most people know him as the author of what is perhaps the church's best-loved hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Not everybody, however, knows the story behind the song. Early on in his life, Newton's mother taught him about the love and grace of God. But when she died just before his seventh birthday, he started down a long road that led him further and further from those realities. He quickly became a rebellious and free spirit. After deserting the navy at 19, he was caught and publicly stripped and whipped, and then swapped by his captain for sailors on a ship bound for West Africa to procure slaves. That was his introduction to a business which would become his livelihood for many years. Those who knew him as

a slave trader in those years said he was the most profane, depraved man among a group of profane and depraved men.

Then in March of 1748, a fierce storm overtook his slave ship, almost swamping it. Men, animals and provisions were swept overboard. Newton found himself praying for the first time in years. He believed he was about to die, and so if the things his mother once taught him about the love and grace of God were true, perhaps he could be saved and forgiven. After four long days the storm finally stopped. Others attributed the beeswax in the ship's hold as the reason the ship stayed afloat. Newton, however, believed it was God who had saved them. Though the ship drifted for another four months as provisions ran dangerously low, when they finally washed up on the shores of Northern Ireland, Newton swore he would become a different man and return to God.

It didn't last. Within a year he was back to running away from God. It wasn't until he almost died from malaria on the west coast of Africa – he was still slave trading! – that he finally and fully gave his life to God, determined that God should do with his life what God pleased to do. Things did not change all at once. The record shows that he had run so far from God, embraced so many evils of the world, that it took years for him to find healing and transformation. But by the end of his life, he had demonstrated a full commitment to Christ. He labored faithfully as a pastor for 23 years, wrote hundreds of hymns to nurture the church, and joined with others like William Wilberforce to abolish the slave trade he once profited from. At the very end of his life, John Newton explained his radical transformation this way, “My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”<sup>11</sup> John Newton's life was changed because he finally came to realize, and not just realize but experience first hand, the amazing grace of God through Jesus Christ.

I tell his story today because it is so similar to Jonah's story. Jonah also comes face to face with the grace of God in the middle of a storm on the ocean. Unlike John Newton, Jonah actually did find himself sinking beneath the waves. He also was spared. It was enough to change him forever, and set up a wonderful ending to this story where Jonah, now a changed man, willingly and eagerly rushes off to Nineveh. With love in his heart for the lost people he finds there, he boldly proclaims to them that though they are deserving of God's condemnation, and that there is nothing they can do to save

<sup>8</sup> <https://studybible.info/strongs/H3444>

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 1:21

<sup>10</sup> John 3:16-17

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Scott, “Saved by Amazing Grace: The Story of John Newton”. Read the full article at <https://israelmyglory.org/article/saved-by-amazing-grace-the-story-of-john-newton/>

themselves, even so God is ready and willing to forgive them at infinite cost to himself. What a story!

Sadly, as you might already know, that's not what happens. After the great fish spits him out and leaves him in the sunshine on the beach, Jonah does go to Nineveh. But as we will see in the weeks to come, he's still not happy about it. Because grace hasn't sunk deeply enough into his heart, his heart is still hard, far from God and even further from people God loves. And when the Ninevites repent and turn back to God, he's bitter about it. He is repulsed by a grace he still doesn't understand.

As both John Newton and Jonah demonstrate, it's possible to encounter God's grace and still not know it to the extent that it changes your life. I love how Tim Keller puts it:

God's grace becomes wondrous, endlessly consoling, beautiful, and humbling only when we fully believe, grasp, and remind ourselves of [the truth] - that we deserve nothing but condemnation, that we are utterly incapable of saving ourselves, and that God has saved us, despite our sin, at infinite cost to himself.<sup>12</sup>

Nobody can be simply told these things, especially told that they are sinners and can't save themselves. Have you ever convinced somebody that they are a sinner by telling them that they are a sinner? It doesn't work. We have to experience this reality, which usually means we have to be taken down, down, down, down to that desperate place where we can no longer ignore what should have been obvious. In the same way, nobody will believe and trust God's grace simply because they somebody tells them about God's grace. I think we all have to experience it, to meet God ourselves in that desperate place where we realize we deserve nothing but his condemnation, and yet to our surprise find that instead all God has for us is salvation. That is where we realize with John Newton that we are great sinners, but that Christ is a great savior. That is where we realize with Jonah that deliverance belongs to the Lord!

I heard a quote this past week attributed to 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglican bishop, J.C. Ryle. He once said, "There is a commonly worldly kind of Christianity in this day which many have, and they think they have enough, a cheap Christianity which offends nobody, requires no sacrifice, and which costs nothing and is worth nothing."<sup>13</sup> This weak and worthless Christianity is only possible when people imagine that God's grace is cheap because our sin is slight. But if and when you do realize the infinite cost Christ paid for such grace

shown to those who are burdened by an infinite debt, it will then be the easiest and more natural thing in the world to entrust your whole life into his hands.

It's too bad that it takes going to the lowest place for us to come to realize this truth. Nonetheless, if God has taken you to that place where you finally realize that you are indeed lost and unable to save yourself, and in that place you are fortunate enough to not only see, but experience, God's amazing grace, they spend each day for the rest of your life praying the kind of prayer of thanksgiving that Jonah once prayed. And not only praying such a prayer, but living a life that demonstrates you truly are grateful.

Amen.

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## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Jonah 1:2-10 again. What stands out most to you from Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish?
2. How would you best characterize Jonah's prayer? Do you think this is a prayer of thanksgiving, a prayer of repentance, a prayer for deliverance, a prayer of commitment? Or something else?
3. It was stated that it is not possible to truly understand the grace of God until we understand these three essential truths: we deserve condemnation because of our sin; we cannot save ourselves; only the costly grace of God through Christ can save us. Do you agree?
4. Tim Keller puts it this way: "God's grace becomes wondrous, endlessly consoling, beautiful, and humbling only when we fully believe, grasp, and remind ourselves of [the truth] - that we deserve nothing but condemnation, that we are utterly incapable of saving ourselves, and that God has saved us, despite our sin, at infinite cost to himself." Do you agree?
5. The climax of the prayer is Jonah's declaration in verse 9: "**Deliverance belongs to the Lord!**" Is it true that there is no salvation apart from Jonah's God, the God we know in Jesus Christ? Why or why not?

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Keller, 78.

<sup>13</sup> Source unknown

6. Has there been a time in your life when you have prayed a prayer similar to Jonah's prayer? What were the circumstances? What was the result?
7. Would you say that you have truly experienced the grace of God in your life to the point where you will never be the same?
8. What is the message you have heard from Christ in all this? What is your response?

**Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.**



*We talk a lot about the grace of God.  
What is grace? Why is it so important?*