

“Death Swallowed by Grace”

Jonah 1:17 – 2:10

May 19, 2024

Today is week 2 in a 4 week study of the book of Jonah entitled *Boundless Compassion*. Last week we learned from Jonah that **running from God’s presence and rebelling against God’s will results in the painful mercy of God’s discipline.**

In chapter 1 God commanded Jonah to go and preach to the wicked people of Ninevah but Jonah fled in the opposite direction aboard a ship sailing for Tarshish. So God sent the severe mercy of His discipline upon Jonah by hurling a treacherous storm on the sea. After being pressed by the sailors, Jonah acknowledged that it was because of him that Yahweh, the God of heaven, had sent this storm that threatened their lives. Eventually the sailors heeded Jonah’s advice, threw him overboard, and they were saved from the storm. As a result these pagan sailors feared the Lord and offered sacrifices to Him while Jonah was swallowed up by a great fish.

Today we will discover that God’s discipline is meant to rescue his wayward children from their rebellion. Salvation belongs to the Lord and He will respond to our cries for mercy because He is a God of steadfast love (covenant faithfulness).

We left off last week at 1:17 with Jonah in the belly of a fish for 3 days and 3 nights. Chapter 2 records what Jonah was doing in the belly of the fish—He was praying! Not a prayer of repentance or a prayer for deliverance, but a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s saving mercy. He recognized, while still in the fish, that God had saved him from death. One of the big truths that we will see unfold in chapter 2 is that....

Big Truth: Our lives are in God’s hands. He has the power to preserve us, and He answers the cry of those who look to Him for mercy (Jon 2).

I may have left you with the impression last week that Jonah had not prayed at all before he found himself in the belly of the great fish. You may recall that I was making the point that God’s mercy is not a mere reaction to our repentance. Rather, *God’s mercy pursues our repentance*. And this is precisely what God was doing when Jonah finally cried out to the Lord in his

in his distress as he plunged to the bottom of the sea. Yet, as the story unfolds, we will discover that Jonah’s cry for mercy is far from a heart of full repentance (more on that later).

[Scripture Reading Jonah 1:17 – 2:10]

As I mentioned last week, Jonah is a small book full of big truths. As we transition into chapter 2, the first big truth that becomes apparent is that...

Big Truth: God will use distress to wean us from our sinful independence and reveal our deep need for God’s mercy (Jon 1:17-2:3).

Verses 1-2 are a simple summary of chapter 2. Jonah cried to the Lord in his distress and Yahweh answered him. In vs. 3-6a Jonah is going to elaborate on his distress and his cry for help. Then in vs. 6b and following, he will turn our attention God’s response. The first detail I want to draw our attention to is in vs. 2: “from the belly of Sheol I cried...” (vs. 2). What does he mean by “the belly of Sheol?”

Jonah uses remarkable imagery throughout this passage that his readers would have understood as references to Sheol, or death. Earlier we learned from 1:17 that God appointed a great fish to “swallow up” Jonah. The Hebrew term for “swallow up” was often used to convey the sense of “to devour” or “to destroy,” or “annihilate.”

The term was often associated with divine judgment and destruction. For example, it would have been used of one nation swallowing up or devouring another nation as when Babylon later swallowed up Jerusalem in Jeremiah 51:34. Listen to Jeremiah’s striking language: “Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has *devoured* me, he has crushed me...he has *swallowed* me like a monster...I will punish Bel in Babylon, and I shall make what he has *swallowed* come out of his mouth...” (Jer 51:34-44). In a similar way, when this language is used of Jonah being *swallowed* by a great fish—which would later spew him out of his mouth—there is a sense of Jonah experiencing God’s *judgment*, but a judgment that will lead to salvation. But Jonah’s point here is that he was on the verge of utter ruin.

Add to this, that 1:17 made the point that Jonah was in the belly of the fish for 3 days and nights. In Jonah’s day, 3 days was traditionally understood to be the time it took to confirm one’s death—the time for the soul to travel to

Sheol (or the afterlife). So when Jonah says that he cried out in his distress and the Yahweh answered him from Sheol, Jonah is indicating that he could have been no closer to death than he was in that moment.

Now, as we pick up our reading in vs. 3, keep in mind that the Hebrews associated the sea with death and the underworld. [vs. 3-6a] Notice first, in vs. 3, that Jonah recognized God's sovereign hand in this: "You cast me into the deep..." He may have told the sailors to throw him overboard, but as Jonah plunges to the deep, he knows that God's hand of discipline is upon him. And there is nothing that Jonah can do at this point to save himself. He is surrounded by the flood and all of God's billows passed over him. Jonah's only hope is to cry out for mercy!

What a picture this is of the human condition, even today. Just as Jonah could not escape the hand of God's discipline for his sin, so we too can do nothing to save ourselves from the condemnation of sin short of crying out to God for mercy. Ephesians 2 cuts through all delusion of self-help. We are spiritually dead in our transgression and sins, and only Christ can raise us to life. [Eph 2:1-7] We were not just close to death, like Jonah. We were spiritually dead in our sins. We need God's mercy more than Jonah needed it in the bottom of the sea.

In vs. 3 as Jonah was caught in the undertow, the ESV uses the phrase, "the flood surrounded me." This can also be translated, "the current engulfed me." Jonah actually uses the word, *nahar*, or *river*. Why would he use that word? One commentator explains: "In Mesopotamian thought a river flowed through the bottom of the sea and served as the threshold to the underworld. This river was [considered] the location where souls were judged to determine innocence or guilt." There was actually a practice in the Ancient Near East where the accused would be thrown into the river and his fate was determined by whether or not he survived the current.¹

So what do you think was going through Jonah's mind? He has come under the judgment of God and apart from the sheer mercy of God, Sheol is certain!

You may recall from chapter 1 that Jonah chose self-initiated exile rather than preaching to the Ninevites—he sought to distance himself from God's presence and God's word. But now in vs. 4, he realizes that his exile is no longer just his own doing but also God's—an exile which he cannot will his way out of. Vs. 4: "Then I said, 'I am driven away from Your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'"

What does Jonah mean when he says, "yet I shall again look upon your holy temple"? This was a phrase used often in the Psalms to refer to prayer. It originated in Solomon's dedication of the temple when He asked the Lord to honor the prayers of His people when they were in exile for their sin. Solomon was referring to a future time when they would turn their hearts toward the temple, in the direction of God's presence, and seek His mercy (1Kings 8:46-51).

Here's what's happening: God's hand of discipline has been brought against Jonah with such severe mercy that Jonah is pressed to pray for mercy!

Vs. 5: "*The waters closed in over me to take my life...*" From a human perspective, Jonah is completely helpless. He cannot save himself. Death is imminent. 5b: "*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...*" The word translated weeds in vs. 5 is actually "reeds." Reeds are river plants—recalling the judgment associated with the river current in vs. 3. The roots of the mountains (6) not only suggest that Jonah was at the bottom of the sea, they were also associated with the grave and thought to "flank the threshold of Sheol." This is why Jonah refers to "the land whose bars closed upon me forever"—the prison of death and Sheol. Jonah was as good as dead. This is the bottom, he can descend no further.

Jonah is doing everything he can to paint for us a picture of absolute depression and helplessness in this deluge of God's judgment. Would God respond to his cry for mercy? Would God rescue him from the uttermost depths? Vs. 6: "**Yet You brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.**"

¹ Kevin Youngblood, *Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Zondervan): Jonah*, pg. 107.

What a beautiful picture this is of the gospel. When we were imprisoned by our sin, under the ocean of God's wrath, with a sentence of condemnation over us, God responded to our helpless cry for mercy through the death of Christ. Vs. 6 is the testimony of every genuine believer: "I was drowning in a sea of guilt and judgment, **'yet You brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God!'**"

How did God bring Jonah up from the pit? He appointed a great fish to swallow him up! What appeared to be the final blow—the grave—was actually God's instrument of salvation. [And what appeared to be the final blow to Christ—the grave—was actually God's instrument of salvation.]

Back in vs. 1:17, Jonah used the feminine form of *fish* which combined with the word *stomach* creates a strong maternal nuance.² If fact, the term *stomach* could actually be translated as *womb* in some contexts. The belly of the fish seemed to be a *tomb*, yet by God's hand it became a *womb* to deliver Jonah to the land of the living. Can you see the imagery of resurrection and rebirth here?

When the God-appointed fish swallowed Jonah, *death was swallowed by grace*³, and judgment gave way to life. Or as I stated last week, this was salvation *through* judgment. We too are saved through judgment—saved through the judgment that fell on Christ.

To whom does Jonah attribute his salvation? Yahweh, the only God who saves! [vs. 7-9]. Do you remember me saying last week that the book of Jonah is ultimately about God? We will see next week that God is a God of abounding compassion to all who repent. But let's not overlook what we have already seen of God. He is the Sovereign Lord whose ways will not be thwarted. He disciplines those whom He loves. He pursues His wayward children with His mercy. He preserves us and answers our cry for mercy. He is the sovereign LORD who saves! The God of Jonah is a God worthy of worship, trust, and obedience.

² Kevin Youngblood, *Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Zondervan): Jonah*, pg. 104.

Notice in vs. 7 that Jonah is once again seeking the presence of God, which represented by His holy temple. Notice here that God, from the highest of heights, responds to a cry of mercy from the lowest of lows.

Big Truth: To whatever degree God must discipline us, from that degree He is able to deliver us by His steadfast love (Jon 2:6-8).

Notice also, that the temple is the place where sacrifices are made and a covenant relationship with God is maintained. Jonah recognizes that God's mercy in saving him is not based on anything that Jonah has done, but rather based on God's covenant faithfulness to His people. This is why Jonah says in vs. 8, "Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love." *Steadfast love* is the word *hesed*—covenant faithfulness. The only true living God is a God of covenant faithfulness who will not forsake His steadfast love for His own. So Jonah purposes in his heart to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord and to pay what he has vowed. That is, to return to obedience to the Lord.

Then, in contrast to those who serve vain idols, Jonah makes the climactic declaration of this psalm of thanksgiving in vs. 9: "Salvation belongs to the Lord!" (Yeshua Yahweh). In a sense, Jonah is saying, "Yahweh is the only one who saves. Idols can't save you. Idols can't extend steadfast love and covenant faithfulness to you. Only Yahweh can save, and He saves because of His steadfast love." What boundless compassion Yahweh has had on Jonah! The very kind of boundless compassion that he will have on Ninevah.

There is some real irony at this point in the story. God has brought Jonah to the very position the Ninevites will find themselves in. In vs. 2 Jonah is crying to Yahweh for mercy in his distress of facing God's judgment. In chapter 3 the Ninevites will be crying out to Yahweh for mercy in their distress of facing God's judgment. And God in His boundless compassion will have mercy on both Jonah and the Ninevites.

Furthermore, in vs. 9, Jonah will sacrifice to the Lord and honor his vows like the pagan sailors sacrificed and made vows in 1:16. So Jonah is also in the same position as the sailors, rejoicing in Yahweh's deliverance. Perhaps

³ Rosemary Nixon, *The Message of Jonah* (The Bible Speaks Today series), pg. 149.

Jonah is not as different from the pagan sailors and the Ninevites as he thought. Do you think God might want us to see that we need God's mercy no less than those we consider the wicked of this world?

Big Truth: Beware of spiritual pride that believes some are less worthy of God's mercy and compassion than we are. This is the very heart of the book of Jonah. If God has boundless compassion for all who repent, then we must rend our hearts of any spiritual pride that believes we are more worthy of God's mercy than others.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. And He is free as the sovereign Lord to extend His salvation to whomever he wishes according to *His* terms. He is a God of boundless compassion to *all* who repent and believe—even those who seem the furthest from God's grace. We must learn from Jonah that before we can have God's heart of boundless compassion for the lost, we need to understand how deeply *we* need His mercy.

God humbled Jonah under His hand of discipline, and that humbling will also be seen in Jonah's salvation. [vs. 10] The fish did not throw him out, cough him out, or even spit him out. The fish *vomited* him out. There is no possible way to use the word *vomit* positively. Jonah does not land on the shore as a hero, but as a humbled recipient of God's undeserved mercy.

Big Truth: God is able to use anything or any circumstance to deliver us from trouble. With God all things are possible, and hope is always in season (Jonah 2:10).

God can use anything to deliver us, but it always comes with a heart change of humility. Salvation by its very nature is humbling because we can't save ourselves. Crying out to God for mercy, by its very nature is humbling, because we are needy and can't do anything to remedy our situation. And yet, ***no greater good comes into our lives than by the humility that acknowledges God's proper place of supremacy over us.***

At this point all may seem well in the story of Jonah. The runaway prophet as come to the end of himself under God's hand of discipline and now he is ready to obey God and deliver His word. But we know from chapter 4 that something is still not right in Jonah's heart. He will end up *resenting* God's compassion on the Ninevites—the very compassion that he himself has

received from God. This should cause us to pause and take a closer look at chapter 2.

God's heavy hand of discipline created distress in Jonah's life. In his distress he called out to the Lord for mercy and God delivered him from death. Then Jonah praises God with a psalm of thanksgiving for delivering him from the watery pit of death—from the circumstance of discipline. But has Jonah really dealt with the deeper attitudes of his heart that caused him to run from God? Saying, "I'll stop running from God" is good. But its altogether different than asking, "*Why* do I run from God?"

Big Truth: The heart requires deep searching. Outward 'obedience' does not guarantee a pure heart before God (Jon 2-4). We must beware of outward 'obedience' that lacks a heart of true repentance. It's so easy to breathe a quick confession so that we can get back to business as usual. We do it with God and we do it in our conflict with each other. But have we plumbed the depths of our hearts to really wrestle with why we do what we do, or think what we think, or say what we say. Do we really repent?

What's missing in chapter 2? Do we see any admission of guilt on Jonah's part? We may see a more *compliant* Jonah in chapter 3 as he preaches in Ninevah. But is he obeying from the heart? Why does Jonah respond with *resentment* in chapter 4 rather than rejoicing in God's abounding mercy to the lost? What chapter 2 seems to be lacking is a deep repentance of sin. Chapter 2 is lacking an acknowledgement of Jonah's own wrongdoing.

How many times have we cried out to God in our distress for Him to deliver us from our circumstances, yet we too lacked a heart of true repentance? Perhaps we had a change of perspective at one level, but the deep-seated attitudes of our heart persist. Through the story of Jonah God will help us to see that we need more than outward obedience. We need a heart that is realigned with God's own heart—a heart that breathes compassion because it has drunk deeply of God's undeserved mercy.

We may struggle with repentance, but praise God, that He does not relent of pursuing us with His mercy. God was not finished with Jonah when the fish vomited him out on dry land for a second chance at obedience. God continued to pursue Jonah in chapter 4, even after he preached in Ninevah. And God will continue to pursue our hearts until they resemble His.

God's sovereign hand is over your life. And whatever is presently happening in your circumstances is not nearly as important as what God is seeking to do in *you* through those circumstances. God is able to deliver. But He is more interested in changing you. The heart requires deep searching.