

Grace at the Bottom

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[0 : 00] Well, Dwight Schrute says that our world needs a spiritual revolution. Dwight Schrute, of course, if you have seen the classic TV show *The Office*, is that nerdy, quirky character at the paper company, Dunder Mifflin, who has all kinds of quirks and crazy things that he does and that happened to him.

And Dwight Schrute is played by the actor Rainn Wilson. And Rainn Wilson recently came out with a book this year called *Soul Boom, Why We Need a Spiritual Revolution*. And I read it recently, and in the intro, he describes his own spiritual journey from adolescence into adulthood.

Growing up in Seattle in the 1960s and 70s, he says that his childhood was filled with two things, art and spirituality. His mom was an actress in experimental theater.

His dad was a painter of abstract art and an author of science fiction novels. They were the classic hippie family in the 1960s and 70s.

[1 : 13] His parents were also members of the Baha'i Faith. The Baha'i Faith is a religion that incorporates practices and insights from all the different world religions. And so they would have these gatherings at their home in Seattle with Buddhists and Sikhs and Muslims and Mormons and Christians.

And they would pray and meditate and study holy texts from all sorts of faith and spiritual traditions. And so Rainn Wilson says that he grew up with lots of influences of spirituality on his life.

But despite growing up with lots of spirituality in his life, he, as he became older, he walked away from all of it. He walked away from it for a time until later in his life as an adult, in his late 20s and 30s, when he says that he hit the bottom of his life.

He experienced a lot of pain and hardship and difficult things. He experienced struggles with mental health and depression. He experienced addictions to drugs and alcohol.

And it was being in that place in his life at the bottom that started his own spiritual journey. And it's part of what led him to write a number of books, including his most recent book, *Soul Boom*.

[2 : 29] And this is what he says in his book as he thinks about our culture. He says, Culture, rather than being political or economic or legislative, is primarily spiritual as well.

And perhaps the key to healing the world's chaos and pain lies on a spiritual path. Perhaps there are spiritual tools and religious concepts out there that can help us on a societal level as well in our own spiritual transformation.

And this insight from Dwight Schrute, also known as Rainn Wilson, lines up very well with our study of Jonah. The world needs a spiritual revolution, and we need to experience spiritual transformation.

We are in a series where we're looking at the book of Jonah. And last week, we looked at Jonah chapter 1, where we saw that God calls Jonah, a prophet in northern Israel, to go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

But what we see is that for a variety of reasons, Jonah runs from God in direct disobedience to him in the complete opposite direction, and he finds himself headed west on a ship to Tarshish across the Mediterranean Sea.

[4 : 10] And as he's in the middle of the sea, God sends a storm into his life. And it's in the middle of the storm that Jonah learned something about God and has an encounter with his mercy and his grace.

At the beginning of chapter 1, we see Jonah running from God. And at the end of chapter 2, which we just read, we see Jonah singing about God's love and about his mercy.

And somewhere in the middle, somewhere between him running and him singing, something happened in Jonah's heart. He had some sort of experience with God that transformed him. And so what happened in the belly of the fish?

And how did it happen? And how can we experience the same thing? How can we experience a spiritual transformation in our own lives? And so that's what we're going to be looking at this morning. We're going to be looking at Jonah's transformation and our transformation.

But before we do, raise your hand if you are in elementary school. Who here is in elementary school? Awesome. You should have received some papers and some colored pencils on the way in.

[5 : 15] If you haven't, they're there for you in the back. And so hopefully you have those, and you've got a few different things that you can do. You can color some stuff in and draw some things. And if you'd like to draw a picture, if you'd like to draw a picture on one of the pages, I want to give you a picture to draw.

And I would encourage you to draw a picture of a large fish or a whale and draw a picture of Jonah inside the whale. But don't just draw Jonah.

Draw him praying a prayer to God. So if you want to draw a picture, that's a picture to draw. And if you do draw it, I want to see it after the service, okay? So come show it to me.

All right. So we're going to look at two things. We're going to look at Jonah's transformation, and we're going to look at our transformation. Jonah's transformation starts with a storm.

And that's what we looked at last week, that Jonah's story shows us something really important, that storms in our life are not always the result of sin and disobedience, but sometimes they are.

[6 : 20] In a fallen world, lots of people who love and trust and obey and worship God suffer greatly. And it has nothing to do because of their sin or disobedience, but because they live, we live in a fallen and broken world.

But if we are in a place in our lives where we are running from him, if we are living a life in direct disobedience to him and to his word, sometimes the most loving and gracious thing that God can do in our lives is to send a storm into our lives, to wake us up and to help us to see our sin and to help us to see our need for him and his mercy.

And this is what happens to Jonah. God sends a storm into his life, and as we looked at last week, he realizes the storm out in the middle of the sea is because of him. And so he decides to save the lives of the sailors, that he's going to plunge himself into the heart of the sea so the storm can stop. And Jonah is headed his way down into the bottom of the sea when God rescues him through a large marine creature. We don't know if it was a whale or some other really big fish, but he's rescued by a large fish.

And he prays this prayer in Jonah chapter 2 in the belly of the fish. Chapter 2, verse 3, For you cast me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas. In the flood surrounded me all your waves and your billows passed over me.

[7 : 41] The waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me. The weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.

The way that people imagined in the ancient world, the way that people imagined Sheol or the land of the dead is they imagined it as a place that when you entered it, that the bars of the gates locked behind you.

And so therefore, the land of the dead was not a place that you could escape from or return from. And Jonah says, that's where I was going. That was where I was headed. The bars of the gates were about to lock behind me.

And similar to Rainn Wilson's story, Jonah is at the lowest point in his life. He's at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. Seaweed is wrapped around his body.

He knows he's about to die physically, and he also knows spiritually it's the farthest from God he's ever been. He's experiencing the natural consequences of his sin and disobedience, separation from God.

[8 : 45] And in that place of great need, Jonah turns to the Lord in prayer. In verse 7, he says, When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you in your holy temple.

At the literal, spiritual, and physical bottom of his life, Jonah cries out to God. And this is a turning point, not only in this story, but in Jonah's life.

Because in this moment, Jonah realizes that not only is he in need of rescue, but that he can't rely on anyone or anything else.

He can't rely on wealth or status or success, not in being a good religious or moral person. He can't rely on his race or nationality or culture.

That even he, a prophet from Israel, God's prophet, is in need of divine mercy. And it's this realization that brings about spiritual renewal in Jonah's heart.

[9 : 45] And we see that renewal happen throughout this prayer in Jonah chapter 2, but we see it specifically in verses 8 and 9. In verse 8, Jonah prays, Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

What's an idol? Well, there's a lot that we could say. In the ancient world, an idol was often a literal statue that people would bow down and worship the God who was represented in the statue.

But we can also think about an idol as whatever is at the center of our lives, whatever we put at the center of our lives as a functional savior, as a functional savior.

A functional savior that gives us meaning, that gives us purpose, that gives us identity, that gives us significance. And it's also a functional savior that we turn to whenever we realize we're in need of rescue, whenever we realize that we are in need of outside help.

It's whatever we turn to whenever we're trying to find comfort, whenever we're trying to find relief, whenever we're trying to find escape, wherever we're trying to find a way out.

[10 : 58] That's what an idol is. It's a functional savior. And Jonah realizes that at the bottom of the sea, he realizes something about idols. He says he realizes that his functional savior, his functional saviors, can promise him a lot of things, but they rarely ever deliver.

Idols promise, but they can't deliver. We might look to money or a career or success or even a marriage to give us a sense of ultimate purpose and meaning. We might look to things like food or alcohol to help us find a sense of relief or comfort or escape.

But when you realize that you are at the rock bottom in your life, when there is seaweed wrapped around your head, you realize those things can't actually rescue you.

When you're drowning, it doesn't matter how much money is in your bank account or what your resume says. Idols, like money and success and comfort, are great motivators.

They can get you to work hard and do lots of things, but they're terrible saviors. They're terrible saviors. Verse 8, Jonah prays, those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

[12 : 18] Now, this word, steadfast love, is a big word in the Old Testament. It's the Hebrew word, hesed. And this Hebrew word, hesed, is this rich, multifaceted word that we see all over the Old Testament.

It can refer to a number of things. It can refer to acts of kindness towards someone who's in need. It can refer to the spousal love between a husband and a wife.

And both of these things refer to God's covenant love, his covenant loyalty to his people and his faithfulness to love his people and to keep the promises that he has made to them.

This is God's steadfast love, his hesed. Perhaps one of the best descriptions of God's steadfast love comes from the Jesus Storybook Bible by Sally Lloyd-Jones.

And in the Jesus Storybook Bible, she describes God's steadfast love as his never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.

[13 : 25] It's God's never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love. It's the kind of love that we all long for because it's the kind of love that we were made for.

And it's at the bottom of the sea that Jonah's spiritual sight becomes crystal clear. He realizes it's not just that all of my idols and functional saviors can't rescue me from the bottom of life.

It's also that they can't fulfill the deepest longings of my heart. The deepest longings of my heart for the steadfast love of the Lord, his never stopping, his never giving up, his unbreaking, his always and forever love.

And Jonah ends his prayer in verse 9 with a shout of praise. And he says, salvation belongs to the Lord. Salvation belongs to the Lord.

And this prayer is Jonah's journey of repentance. Repentance. Repentance involves turning from our sin, our disobedience, but also turning from our functional saviors that we look to to fill our

hearts, to fulfill the deepest longings of our hearts.

[14:35] And so repentance involves turning from our functional saviors and turning to putting all of our hope and all of our trust in the steadfast love of the Lord. And this is what produces spiritual transformation in Jonah's life.

It's repentance. It's not new insights about what he can do to find salvation. But it's the realization that salvation has come and found him.

That salvation has come and found him. And this is the central message of the whole Bible. That salvation belongs to the Lord. That though we have all run from God in direct disobedience to him and are eternally separated from him, that in Jesus Christ, God has come running after us in steadfast love and done everything necessary to reconcile us back to him.

Salvation is not 50% things that we do and 50% things that God does. It's 100% all from him.

Salvation belongs to the Lord.

That's the gospel. It's the central message of the Bible. It's the heart of our faith. And this is what Jonah realizes in the belly of the fish. And so he, after three days and three nights, he comes out onto dry land.

[15:58] And you have to imagine that those first few breaths of fresh air that he breathed were incredibly sweet. After being three days and three nights in the belly of a large fish, he comes out onto dry land with a mind that's renewed with fresh insight about God.

He comes out with a heart that is renewed through repentance and worship towards God. And his will is renewed in love and obedience towards God. And this transformation in Jonah's life is the journey of spiritual transformation through death and resurrection.

Through death and resurrection, the storm takes Jonah down to the place of spiritual and literal death. And at the bottom, he comes to the end of himself.

He acknowledges his need. He cries out to the Lord in repentance. And the Lord rescues him and the Lord renews him. Down in death and up in resurrection.

Down in death, up in resurrection. And that's the key to Jonah's spiritual transformation. And that is the key to our spiritual transformation. So that's what we're gonna look at.

[17:12] Secondly, is our transformation. How do we experience the kind of renewal and the kind of transformation that Jonah experienced in his life? How can we experience God's grace in a way that causes us to pray and to sing Jonah 2 prayers?

Well, we experience it by experiencing death and resurrection in our lives. Author Paul Miller wrote a great book on this called *The J Curve*. And if you can imagine the shape of a J, the shape of a J goes down and goes up.

The J starts here and it goes up. And the J curve is a picture of how the New Testament talks about how our relationship with Jesus not only rescues us, but transforms us.

And we see this all over the New Testament. But we see it in places like Philippians 3.10. So in Philippians 3.10, Paul says, I want to know Christ.

What does it mean to know Christ? To know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow attaining the resurrection from the dead.

[18:28] Did you see the J curve? He says, I want to know Christ. And knowing Christ takes me down in suffering, down in death, and up through resurrection. That's the J curve.

Paul's logic is, if Jesus rescued me through his death and resurrection, then that is also how Jesus changes me, by his spirit. Through his death and resurrection, as I participate by the Holy Spirit, by grace through faith, in his death and resurrection in the present.

That's the Christian life. Another way to say it is that the same grace that rescues us is also the grace that transforms us.

The same grace that rescues us is also the grace that transforms us. So what does this, what does that practically look like in our lives? Well, I think there's a thousand different ways in our lives to experience spiritual transformation through death and resurrection, to follow the J curve in our lives. There's a million opportunities every week to experience that. But we're gonna look, I just wanna look at one. And I wanna look at one example that we're all familiar with.

[19:47] Conflict. Conflict. And you're like, can we use a different example? Can we use, I don't wanna talk about conflict right now, because I'm in the middle of one. No, we're gonna talk about it, because here's, if you can figure out how to apply the grace of the gospel in the middle of conflict, I

think you can learn to apply it in virtually every aspect of your life.

Because conflict is such a difficult thing. A situation, a conversation happens at work, or at home, or at church, or on social media, God forbid.

There's disagreements. We're at odds with someone. Emotions are rising. There's tension. There's anxiety. Maybe even there's anger. What's happening?

I'll tell you what's happening. Death. Death is happening. And for many of us, including myself, conflict feels like death, doesn't it? Especially for those who are conflict avoiders.

And I'm a conflict avoider. Conflict feels like death. Why is that? Because it's a storm. And the storm of conflict is taking you down to the bottom.

[20 : 57] It's taking you down to the bottom of the J-curve. And it's at the bottom of the J-curve that many of us freak out. We freak out because it doesn't feel good, because it feels like death.

But we shouldn't freak out. We shouldn't freak out because it's at the bottom of the J-curve. It's in the middle of death that we are transformed and where we experience God's grace.

Because at the bottom, we have a choice to make. Does salvation belong to me? Does salvation exist in one of my functional saviors?

Or does salvation belong to the Lord? And here is where the rubber meets the road in the Christian life. Even though many of us would say salvation belongs to the Lord. Even though many of us would say, Jesus Christ has saved me from my sins.

We've trusted Him for eternal salvation. Even though many of us would say salvation belongs to the Lord, there are still parts of our hearts, there are still blind spots where the reality of grace has yet to sink in.

[22 : 02] At the bottom of the J-curve, we're all tempted to say, salvation belongs to me. And to turn to strategies, turn to functional saviors in our life. And in my own life, when it comes to conflict, some of the functional saviors that I have been tempted to turn to are the idols of power and control.

If I can just control the outcome, if I can be in charge, if I can win the argument, then the tension will end and then I'll have escape. And the idols, the functional saviors of power and control, seem to offer a way out.

They seem to offer a way of salvation. But turning to our functional saviors of power and control can lead us to do lots of crazy things. They can lead us to defensiveness and criticism of the other person.

They can lead us to lie and distort the truth. They can even lead us to manipulate or even dominate other people. And all of these things can become embedded patterns in our lives that end up being the way, the default way that we relate to other people.

Now, if you approach conflict like this in your life, it may benefit you at first. It may offer some rewards and benefits at first. But eventually, if this becomes the default pattern in your life, it'll bring chaos.

[23 : 26] It'll cause breakdown in your relationships. It will lead you to burn bridges. It'll lead you to be hard and cynical. It'll lead you away from relationships of love.

Why? Because the idols of power and control can promise, but they can't deliver. They can promise, but they can't deliver.

They're functional saviors. They're terrible saviors. They can't actually rescue you. So what's the alternative? The alternative is to say, salvation doesn't belong to me, but salvation belongs to the Lord.

The alternative is repentance. Repentance involves turning from our functional saviors and believing at the bottom of the J-curve that salvation belongs to the Lord.

Even though part of us wants to win. Even though part of us wants to have control. What do we do? We look at Jesus and we see that the one who has all authority and power in heaven and on earth laid all of it down.

[24 : 45] We see in places like Philippians 2 that though he was God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself.

He emptied himself of power and authority. He became a servant and he experienced utter powerlessness through death on the cross. And it was through that death, it was through that humility, it was through that powerlessness that salvation came into the world and into you and me. And Philippians 2 says that God exalted him to the right hand of the Father. That in the name of Jesus every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father and that in Jesus

Christ and in his exalted resurrection we ourselves share in his power and glory and authority over sin and death and evil.

That's the gospel. And so because therefore salvation belongs to the Lord and because we share in Christ's authority and power we can afford to give earthly power away.

We can afford when we're in the middle of conflict to give control away because in Jesus we have access to all of the power that we could ever long for.

[26 : 03] And so repentance means turning away from seeking salvation in ourself and turning towards seeing salvation in the Lord. And we can give power away, we can approach the other person with humility, we can be open to receiving feedback, even criticism and critique, we can approach the situation not trying to control or manipulate the other person, but by seeking the good of the other person, by putting the other person's good in front of our own, by seeking to love, by seeking to reflect and even experience ourselves the steadfast love of the Lord.

And if we do that, we can, maybe not instantaneously, but through a process, we can, by the power of the Spirit, experience a real-time resurrection. We can experience growth, we can experience change, we can even experience a deeper, closer relationship with that other person.

But it's at that bottom, it's at the bottom of the J-curve that we learn to pray Jonah 2 prayers. When a storm comes into our life and we cry out and we acknowledge our rescue and we wrestle through our own temptations and we wrestle through our own tendencies to pursue functional saviors.

But in prayer, we seek salvation not in them, but we seek salvation in the Lord because salvation belongs to Him. And in Jesus, we already have access to everything that we long for and need.

And we trust Him by the power of His Spirit to bring about a real-time transformation, a real-time resurrection in our lives and in our relationships. And I think it's important to clarify, this is not a technique, this is not a recipe, this is not a formula, but this is a sovereign work of God's Spirit in us.

[28 : 02] But it's through prayer and it's through spiritual disciplines that we open up ourselves to that sovereign work of God's Spirit in us, to change us and transform us through death and resurrection.

The same grace that rescues us is also the grace that transforms us. And somebody who experienced that was a man named John Newton who is famous for writing the hymn that many of us know called Amazing Grace who, like Jonah, had an encounter with God's grace while on a ship in a storm at sea.

And this version of John Newton's story comes from the website of Geneva College. Following in his father's footsteps, John Newton began his career by joining the British Royal Navy.

And as a Navy sailor, Newton became known for his arrogance and his immorality and his insubordinate behavior as a sailor.

And later in his life, reflecting on his early days as a young man, Newton would say about himself, I sinned with a high hand and I made it my study to tempt and seduce others.

[29 : 21] And this became a pattern in his life and he would eventually try to escape his military duty. He would eventually try to escape his post as a sailor, but he was eventually caught by Navy officers and he was caught for being a deserter and he was arrested and flogged and put in irons and he was chained to the deck of a Navy ship.

But chained to the deck of a Navy ship, Newton convinced his commanding officers to let him go by assigning him to be a captain of a slave ship. And he would spend years sailing up and down the African coast searching for slaves to capture and eventually to sell for profit.

And on one journey, one of these journeys, Newton and his crew encountered a storm that swept some of his men overboard and left others with the likelihood of drowning. And at first, Newton was convinced that he was too great of a sinner, that he had sinned too greatly for God to rescue him and save him.

And yet, as the storm kept raging, he thought he was going to die. And he finally gave in to believing what he had heard in the Bible as a young child, that God saves sinners, even sinners like him.

And with both hands fastened onto the wheel of the boat, Newton cried out to God saying, Lord, have mercy on us. And after 11 hours of steering the ship and bailing water, the crew found safety when the storm finally died down.

[30 : 49] And it was in this moment that Newton's heart was changed, that he was converted by God's grace. And it was a moment that he would later refer back to, it was a moment that would later inspire him to write the famous hymn that we all know.

And while Newton's views on slavery didn't change overnight, eventually he became convinced that to be saved by God's grace meant to be against the slave trade. Newton was eventually ordained as an Anglican pastor and he began to lead his own church and he started writing and publishing essays and books against the slave trade.

And one of the people who read his works was a young member of Parliament named William Wilberforce who led the legal fight against slavery in England. And years later as Parliament was debating this issue, one of the people who stood on the floor of Parliament to testify about the horrors and the evils of slavery was John Newton who testified about it firsthand.

God changed him from a man who was the captain of a slave ship to a man who was actively working towards abolishing slavery. And as he got older Newton began to lose his memory and although his thoughts were limited Newton said he could always remember two things.

That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great savior. The same grace that rescued John Newton and converted him was also the grace that transformed him.

[32 : 18] It was the grace found not on the mountaintop. It was grace found at the bottom. Dwight Schrute says our world needs a spiritual revolution.

Do you want to experience spiritual transformation in your life? Do you want to experience greater depths of God's grace? The place where you can experience it is at the bottom in death and resurrection.

And the good news for us is though sometimes it does take hitting rock bottom for us to experience that. We don't all have to wait to hit rock bottom. We don't all have to wait to face a storm like Jonah did.

We don't all have to wait to face a storm like John Newton did in order to experience the depths of God's grace. Why? Because there's all sorts of mini storms that come into our life on a daily basis. Like conflict. Like failure. Like criticism. Like anger. Like suffering. That can take us down into death and up in resurrection.

[33 : 23] Because it's there where we see that salvation belongs to the Lord. The one who died and the one who was raised for us.

Let's pray. Our God and Father thank you for the grace that transformed Jonah at the bottom of the ocean.

Thank you for the grace that transformed John Newton. Thank you that the grace that rescues us is also the grace that transforms us. Lord, I pray that you would help us in the middle of the storms in our life to follow you on the path to death and repentance and resurrection.

Would you do that sovereign work of your spirit in us? Would you teach us to pray at the bottom? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.