

## Jonah: Part 2

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[ 0 : 00 ] And we're going to be thinking about Jonah's prayer and Jonah's situation in a few minutes. And in Matthew chapter 12, we find Jesus referring to the sign of Jonah.

But before we get to that section, we're going to begin reading at verse 22. So Matthew 12, reading at verse 22. This is God's word.

Then they brought Jesus, a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute. And Jesus healed him so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, could this be the son of David?

The Savior, the Messiah. But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, it's only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons. Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, every kingdom divided against itself.

Will be ruined. And every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he's divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?

[ 1 : 08 ] And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house. He who is not with me is against me.

And he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. But anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Either in this age or in the age to come.

Make a tree good, and its fruit will be good. Or make a tree bad, and its fruit will be bad. For a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers!

[ 2 : 09 ] How can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him.

And the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.

For by your words you will be acquitted. By your words you will be condemned. Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.

He answered, A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign. But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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.

The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.

[ 3 : 16 ] For she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. Now, can you turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Jonah, which you'll find on page 927, if you're using the church Bible.

Last week we saw Jonah running from the call of God to go and preach. Jonah's in Nineveh didn't want his enemies to have any chance of God's mercy, so he runs in the opposite direction.

God sent a storm. Jonah recognizes it's from God. And he tells the sailors, Well, the only way you're going to be saved is if you throw me overboard, which they do.

And we'll pick up our reading, Jonah chapter 1 at verse 17. But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said, In my distress, I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave, I called for help, and you listened to my cry.  
[ 4 : 28 ] You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me. All your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, I've been banished from your sight, yet I will look again towards your holy temple.

The engulfing waters threatened me. The deep surrounded me. Seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down.

The earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed, I will make good.

Salvation comes from the Lord. And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. Now we'll leave our reading there.

[ 5 : 39 ] Now some of you will have noticed that our MPs this week have been discussing fake news. Describing fake news as a threat to our democracy.

That there is so much disinformation, it's hard to know what's true. Now, when we come to the Bible, when we come to stories like Jonah, how do we handle those stories?

Fact or fiction? How we read and receive any information is always going to be influenced by our view of the world.

And that's certainly true when we think about the Bible and when we think in particular about this story of Jonah.

So you read some books and the commentators will say, this is history. And you read other books and say, well, this is a kind of myth. Or it's like the parables that Jesus told. A nice story teaching us a point.

[ 6 : 37 ] Which is it? And I guess our worldview in large part will influence how we think about it. Do we believe, for example, in a God who creates and controls everything?

Is that God able to intervene in miraculous ways? Now, that won't just influence how we think about Jonah. That will influence how we think about Jesus and the life of Jesus because he worked so many miracles.

Is the word of God reliable when it teaches history? So there are times when the Bible is written in a poetic style and Jesus does tell parables, but here is a story presented as history.

So what do we do with it? It forces us to think, do I trust God and do I trust God's word? Significant when we read in Matthew 12 to think about how Jesus thought and understood the Jonah story.

So when people came to him asking for a miraculous sign, he said, I won't give you a sign other than the sign of Jonah. And what he meant by that was that his life, particularly his dying and rising, was a parallel to what happened earlier in the story of Jonah.

[ 7 : 57 ] That just as Jonah went into the belly of the fish for three days and three nights as if dead and then came out again as if he'd come back to life, Jesus said, I'm going to fulfill what was pointed forward to in the history of Jonah.

So Jesus certainly read it as history that taught and really taught about the mercy and the grace of God. So that's how we're going to think about it this morning.

We're going to think about it as an event that Jonah experienced that helps us to understand more of the mercy of our God. Specifically here, thinking about how God's mercy comes to the prophet Jonah.

So remember, Jonah was at best a reluctant prophet and at worst he was disobedient, running from God. But here he finds himself being saved by God.

So we're going to think about Jonah's situation and Jonah's prayer in order to discover some truths about God's mercy and about ourselves as those who need to know this God of mercy.

[ 9 : 05 ] So the first thing I want us to notice both in the events and in Jonah's prayer is the providence of God. It really stands out the extent to which God is in control in this story.

So the last time in chapter one, we see God sending a storm as a sign of judgment against Jonah's disobedience. We see further evidence of his control in verse 17 of chapter one.

It's the Lord who provides the fish to swallow Jonah, to save him, to rescue him from drowning. And then in chapter two in verse 10, God again commands the fish, this time to deposit Jonah on dry

land.

And then we find in Jonah's prayer that he too sees that God has been at work. I find the words of verse three particularly interesting. Look at verse three with me.

It says, you hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas. Now, if you were to look back at Jonah chapter one again, you would discover it was the sailors that threw Jonah overboard.

[10:08] But Jonah can see beyond the sailors and he can see God's bigger plan. He can see God's hand behind everything. And then in verse nine, as he concludes his prayer, says, I with a song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will make good.

Salvation comes from the Lord. He is in the belly of a fish able to say salvation comes from the Lord. He knows the sailors. He knows the storm. He knows the fish. All of these things are organized by God in order for Jonah to be saved, in order that he would know and appreciate the mercy of God in his life.

The presentation that we have in the book of Jonah that Jonah writes himself delivers to us is that Jonah has been unfaithful. But by contrast, his God, the personal promise-making God, has been utterly faithful at every point.

So God is in control. His providence is working all things out. And what they're showing us in the life of Jonah is both God's justice and God's mercy.

Jonah knew this. He knew this in the storm. He knew the storm was a sign of God's judgment. And he knew that he, the only way the storm was going to stop is if he was thrown into the storm.

[11:33] And he understands that his near death by drowning, that's God's judgment on his sin. But he also knows the mercy of God.

He knows that God has responded in kindness and compassion by rescuing him. Not because Jonah has deserved it. It's clearly undeserved kindness from a loving God.

And so the events of Jonah's life show us the justice and the mercy of God and the interplay between them. Now there are lessons for us in Jonah's story and in Jonah's prayer.

First of all, there's an encouragement to us to remember that whatever our circumstances and we understand with Jonah that they are planned by God.

And so they become for us a chance to pray to him, to cry out to him, to invite him into that situation that he's already aware of, confident that he knows us and that he cares about us.

[12:42] That was hugely hopeful for Jonah and it can be hopeful for us. To learn from Jonah in moments of crisis. Sometimes when we know we've done the wrong thing we can just turn inward and we can just feel bad about ourselves and we never go to God.

Or we can turn our back on God thinking, well this has turned out really badly so I want nothing to do with God. Rather like Jonah, we've got this invitation to turn upwards upwards to God to seek him, to turn from our sin and to turn to him for mercy.

Now just as Jesus would have us understand in Matthew 12, Jonah's story helps us to reflect on the story of Jesus. And we need to understand that our hope of being heard in a crisis, our hope for receiving mercy rests entirely on the providence of God in sending Jesus.

In planning from all eternity to send Jesus to be our Savior. And in the story of Jesus we see both the justice and the mercy of God being worked out on the cross.

In the providence, in the plan of God, Jesus went to the cross in order to satisfy God's justice against sin. Not the sin of Jesus, but our sin.

[14:04] And Jesus didn't just face a near-death experience, he actually died. The wages of sin the Bible says is death. The cross reminds us of the judgment of God and the seriousness of sin.

But the cross of Jesus also reminds us of the mercy of God because Jesus dies there to secure our hope of forgiveness and mercy if we put our trust in him.

that we look to the cross and we see there is Jesus paying the debt, cancelling the debt for my sin. That he faces death in order to gift us new life as an act of great grace.

So we see in the story of Jonah, the God who is in total control, the God who can use the events of our lives in a sense to wake us up to our needs, our need to find mercy from the Lord Jesus.

And there's an invitation for us to pray like Jonah did. So that's the providence of God that we see in this chapter. We also are reminded of the presence of God.

[15:21] Read with me again from verse 2 as Jonah's prayer begins. He said, In my distress, I called to the Lord and he answered me from the depths of the grave.

I called for help and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas and the current swirled about me.

And then in verse 4, I said, I've been banished from your sight, yet I'll look again towards your holy temple. Now, I'm going to guess many of us, basically, we're British, we've been through school, secondary school, we'll have studied at some point Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.

Or at least you'll maybe remember it from the movies or maybe you've seen it in the theater. Well, the part that I want us to think about is the part where Romeo kills Tybalt accidentally.

You know the story about rival families. And the sentence that is delivered on Romeo because of that is that he is banished from Verona, the place where he lives.

[16:27] And as Friar Lawrence delivers that message to Romeo, he gets all poetic and all angst and he talks about it as a fate worse than death because he's banished from the presence of his Juliet.

To be far from the one that he loves is a sorrow worse than death. The presence of God is something precious to his people to know that we are close to God.

And that's crucial actually to understanding the whole storyline of the Bible. I'm going to look at it very shortly. The grand story of the Bible is about God acting so that his people might be with him forever to enjoy his presence.

But as we think about Jonah's experience here in the storm, we get a feeling that he's feeling the absence. So in verse 2 he talks about distress, he talks about in the depths of the grave, the loss of God's presence is like a death.

In verse 3 there's the idea of darkness. In verse 4 this idea of banishment. There's despair at the sense that he can't feel that God is present with him because of his disobedience.

[17:45] But then he cries out to God and he knows God is with him. This has happened because Jonah has run from God. He doesn't want to obey God and so he decides to go running and he's found that life has turned out badly as he's trying to move away from the presence of God.

So as I was saying this is a really important theme in the Bible. So just to give us a quick sketch of that, in the book of Genesis when Adam and Eve are created we see that they're very much created in order to enjoy life with God in the garden of God.

Made for the presence of God to enjoy knowing God. Sin turning their back on God means they are banished from the garden, they're banished from God's place.

It's like a death has occurred but they're banished with the promise of restoration. A saviour will come who will fix this mess, who will restore relationship.

Then you get to the book of Exodus and you find God's chosen people and they're slaves in Egypt and God sends Moses and he comes and he's present and he acts in miraculous ways in order to rescue them not just as an end in itself but so that they might become the people of God.

[19:04] And you get these wonderful pictures, you get them following God, the pillar of cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night. They've got the ark of God, God's throne with them.

They have the tabernacle, God's address on the earth in the middle of their community. God has saved them to be present with them to bring them joy, to bring them ultimately to the promised land where God promised once again to live with his people.

And if they would be obedient to God, they would know blessing but they're disobedient and that leads so often to exile and to absence. And so there's this longing in the Old Testament for God and his people to be together and then there's the promise of Jesus coming.

Jesus who's announced as Emmanuel, the God who is with us. And here we see the grace of God as God comes down to dwell, to live among his people.

And salvation is a restoring of that relationship, bringing us back into the presence of God. We see that really clearly when Jesus is on the cross and there's a thief beside him, saying to Lord when you remember me when you come into your kingdom.

[20:21] And Jesus turns to him and says today you will be with me in paradise. With Jesus is what makes paradise, paradise. And that's the picture as we get to the end of the Bible.

Revelation 21, you get this new creation picture and God dwelling with his people forever is the end of the story. That's the great hope of the Bible.

God's great gift is himself. And so Jonah's hope for mercy rests in God being present with him and for him.

So we see the language in verse 4 said despite being banished yet I look again towards your holy temple. Verse 7 When my life was ebbing away I remembered you Lord and my prayer rose to you to your holy temple.

Why the temple? Because that's where God is. That's where God is present, where God accepts sacrifices, where God hears prayer. And so the mercy of God in Jonah's life is that God comes to be present to save him.

[ 21 : 27 ] And what we discover as we look at the Bible is it's God being present. That's how we are saved. God coming down to us is how we are saved. And that's also why we are saved. The goal of our salvation is that we would be present with God.

The goal of Christianity isn't simply that our lives would change and get a little bit better. Though they will, it's not simply moral improvement, though as the spirit comes to reside in us, change will come.

The goal of Christianity is that we would know and enjoy God forever with him. Nothing less. That's what we're being offered.

And the story of Jesus reminds us of that. Jesus, who eternally enjoyed fellowship with his father, experiences that sense of absence on the cross.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? So that we might never have that experience. So we might know and enjoy God's presence forever.

[ 22 : 35 ] God is the gospel. He's our great hope. And we're reminded of that in the story of Jonah. Further, Jonah reminds us in his prayer of the grace of God.

Verse 8, those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. Now, we're in the middle of the sea here as Jonah prays.

So picture a ship battered by a storm that begins to break up, begins to sink. Crew, sailors begin to go overboard.

What's their hope of salvation? Where does that salvation rest? Primarily on clinging initially to something that's going to keep them afloat. And here is Jonah in his prayer reflecting on the importance of choosing the right God to cling on to for salvation, for hell.

And this is something that runs a kind of counter to our culture because we are taught, the messages that we hear so often are taught to be self-sufficient, to be all that we can be, to rely on our own natural resources.

[ 23 : 53 ] And so that can often be our tendency. I'll place my hope in my own gifts and abilities, my financial reserves, even the family or the friends that God has put around me. And we need to recognize that those are all a gift from God and absolutely can give us strength and help when we face a crisis.

But ultimately, as Jonah presents us here, God himself is the only one to cling to who can give us help both in life and in death and beyond death.

Jonah says to cling to an idol is to miss grace. If we make something or someone else rather than the true God, the center of our life, the thing that we place our hopes and dreams on, we'll miss the salvation of God.

We'll miss this free offer of his love and his mercy extended to us in Jesus. And Jonah appreciates that as he looks around. Maybe thinking about some people in Israel who turned away from the true God to worship idols.

Certainly thinking about the pagan nations all around Israel who are worshiping idols. and he understands that in the end their hope is futile because it's not in the true God.

[ 25 : 15 ] This God who reveals his character to his people. For example in Exodus 34 is a God who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

God who shows his grace in sending his own son Jesus to be our substitute. He can be helpful for us to reflect on the question that Jonah's prayer poses to us.

Who is it or what is it that we cling to in a storm, in a crisis in our lives? Where do we automatically go? Is it the God of grace and mercy or is it to someone or something else?

God? Now we saw this last week in Jonah's story. We see it again here. There's a point of tension in his story. There's a disconnect between what he knows and how he lives.

So he just said here that the only place to find hope is in the God of the Bible. That he appreciates grace and mercy for himself.

[ 26 : 24 ] He recognizes that that's life-giving. But what we see in his story is how slow he is to extend that grace and mercy to others, particularly to the people in Nineveh.

Even, and when we get there a couple of weeks, he delivers the message, the people turn to God in repentance, and their city is saved. Jonah is miserable because he doesn't want his enemies to enjoy the same mercy and grace that he has found.

There's a gap between what he believes and how he lives. I think that's a challenge for us as Christians. So something for us to think about as a church, are we, as those who have received grace from God and the Lord Jesus the Savior, are we extending grace and forgiveness and mercy and kindness to others?

Do we pray and speak and act so that others might know that grace in Jesus for themselves?

Would people come into our church gatherings or where we meet together and think, here are the people who are full of grace and love?

The last thing that I want us to note is that in Jonah's experience having reflected on the providence of God and the presence of God in his life and the grace of God, we see his thankfulness in verse 9 to God.

[ 27 : 45 ] God, we have a song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.

Think of Jonah's shoes for a moment. You find yourself, you've just been thrown overboard, having faced a terrible storm. You're sinking into the depths, you've got seaweed wrapped around your head, you're near to drowning, and then you get swallowed by a fish.

And you find yourself in the darkness and the sting for three days. How would you be feeling at that moment? It's wonderful to see that Jonah is full of thanksgiving.

He sees in this experience God's rescue despite his own disobedience. He appreciates that God has shown mercy to him while he was on the run from God.

And so we've got this language of offering sacrifices and vows. This is not a one-time thing. He's saying to God, in view of what you have done for me, I want my life to be patterned on thankfulness.

[ 28 : 56 ] Because you have saved me, I want my life to be full of thanksgiving. Because in God's providence, he'd receive mercy and not just judgment.

He has discovered the presence of God is this hope and salvation. He's received the grace of God as a gift he didn't deserve but gratefully receives.

The point is this, God's mercy in giving us Jesus to be our Savior should lead us to live lives marked by thankfulness. As Paul says in Romans 12, I urge you in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices.

Holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. As we reflect on what God has done for us in Jesus, we recognize he's done everything to save us from ourselves and from our sin and from eternal judgment that we deserve.

that he invites us to come to him to receive forgiveness and mercy and love and salvation for now and forever and in light of that, in light of all that Jesus has done for us.

[ 30 : 16 ] Let's pray that our lives will be marked by this kind of thanksgiving. That we'd reflect on the cross and the resurrection and think how that should transform our lives and our attitudes.

That with God's help, Jonah's response in verse 9 would be ours too.