

(2) Grace abounding

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[0 : 00] The reading today is taken from Jonah 2, page 936 of your Bibles. I am driven away from your sight, yet I shall look again upon your holy temple.

The waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me. The weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land where the bars closed upon me forever.

Yet you brought up my life from the pit. O Lord my God, when my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord. And my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord. And the Lord spoke to the fish, and had vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. Dave, thanks very much for reading for us. Please do keep the Bibles open.

[1 : 23] Jonah, chapter 2. Page 936. Well, last week we started this series of foretalks looking at the book of Jonah.

And we saw, I think, first and foremost, that it is a book about God. In chapter 1, the key verse is verse 9. As Jonah says, I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land. God is the sovereign God. He is in charge of every aspect of his creation. And in chapter 2, the key verse is also coincidentally, verse 9.

As Jonah declares, salvation belongs to the Lord. That is to say, God is a God of compassion. God is a God who loves to save and rescue.

It is the compassion of God that is the very heart of this chapter. But perhaps before we get there, the obvious question we need to ask of Jonah, chapter 2, is can we really believe that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish for three days and three nights, and then rather inelegantly deposited on a beach, still very much alive?

[2 : 52] The house we're staying in on holiday in Wales this summer had in its bookshelves a book with the title Great Escapes.

And it was about great escapes. And one of them was the story of James Bartley, who was a sailor on a whaling boat in 1891. He fell overboard in the South Atlantic.

He was apparently swallowed by a whale. And when, a couple of days later, that same whale was caught, and his former comrades thought to themselves, or perhaps this is the whale that swallowed him and opened up the whale, there he was still alive.

Now, who knows whether or not that really happened. But I take it that in the case of Jonah, anything is possible for the God of Jonah, chapter 1, verse 9.

For the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land. The God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, who himself healed the sick, calmed the storm, and raised the dead.

[4 : 04] Because, of course, the whole point about a miracle is that it is a miracle. It is miraculous. The argument which says, well, this sort of thing doesn't usually happen, therefore it can never happen, is simply anti-supernatural prejudice.

Besides, in the book of Jonah, Jonah is clearly presented, isn't he, as a figure of history. The book itself reads as a historical account.

And the Old Testament as a whole regards Jonah as a figure of history. So, if you turn to the outline on the back of the service sheet, I've put 2 Kings, chapter 14, 25 there.

I referred to it last week. It locates Jonah during the reign of King Jeroboam II in the 8th century BC. But above all, Jesus spoke of Jonah as a figure of history.

And specifically of his spending three days and three nights in the belly of a fish. Again, the references are there on the outline to look up later.

[5 : 12] Indeed, Jesus compared Jonah with himself by way of his own death and resurrection, as we will see next week. Well, if you want to ask more about whether or not Jonah is a figure of history, then do ask later.

But for now, we're going to notice three things about God's compassion. The first is that God's compassion is a gracious compassion for those who don't deserve it.

Now, last week we left Jonah, didn't we, having been thrown overboard and swallowed by this great fish. And chapter 2 starts with a flashback to what happened between chapter 1, verse 15, when Jonah had been thrown overboard, and chapter 1, verse 17, when he's swallowed by the fish. And as we look at that flashback, it is a chilling description of Jonah as he finds himself drowning, facing not only death, but also facing God's judgment.

So have a look with me again at verses 3 to 6. As Jonah says of God, verse 3, For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me.

[6 : 29] All your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, I am driven away from your sight. Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple. The waters closed in over me to take my life.

The deep surrounded me. Weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.

Jonah is facing death, verse 3, cast into the raging storm, surrounded by water as waves break over him. Verse 5, drowning, the waters closing over him, surrounded by the deep as he feels he has reached the land of no return.

Verse 6, It seems that death itself has claimed him forever as its prisoner. He feels himself in a fortress from which there is no escape. But notice, will you, that Jonah also faces not only death, but he also faces the judgment of God.

Did you notice how in verse 3 he sees God's hand of judgment upon him? He knows that it is God who has cast him into the sea. He speaks, verse 3, of your waves, God's waves.

[7 : 47] The waves that he sees are the means of God's judgment upon him. In verse 4, which has not been translated well in this translation of the Bible, he literally asks, How can I again look upon your holy temple?

A rather different meaning to what we have here. How can I again look upon your holy temple? For he knows he is about to be excluded from God's presence forever.

Now the amazing thing about this chapter is that God hears Jonah's cry and he rescues him. Because it is totally undeserved.

And for those of us who are perhaps thinking, well, this is just what I thought the vengeful God of the Old Testament is like with all this talk of judgment, why the New Testament assures us that all of us also, like Jonah, face death and judgment.

Turn on, will you, to Ephesians chapter 2. We're going to come back here a number of times in the next quarter of an hour or so, so it is worth turning to it. Ephesians chapter 2, page 1175.

[9 : 02] And it might be worth keeping part of the service sheets in it. Ephesians chapter 2, page 1175. And just see how the Apostle Paul describes what all of us are by nature like.

Ephesians 2, verses 1 to 3. And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Can you see what the Apostle Paul there is saying? All of us, verse 1, are by nature dead. It's what we've been thinking about this morning so far, isn't it, in our meeting together. Spiritually dead. All of us, verse 3, face the wrath of God on the judgment day.

Like the rest of mankind, there are no exceptions. And what sort of life is it that brings such a verdict? Why, it's the life, isn't it, of verse 2.

Living like everyone else, with scant regard for God and his purposes, opposed to God, following our own desires, in short, living just how I want to live.

[10 : 32] Because to live like that is a scandal in a world where God is the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land, the God whom each one is accountable.

Now, we live, don't we, in a culture which doesn't want to hear of God's judgment, will be called extremists, will be told it's offensive, will even be labeled occasionally fundamentalists.

But without a clear understanding of the reality of death and judgment, we will never grasp the depth of God's compassion. It is the bad news of judgment that makes the good news of God's compassion such very good news indeed.

At the start of the summer, my father-in-law was diagnosed with prostate cancer. A series of tests brought the good news that had been caught early and could be treated fairly easily.

Now, that is good news. But it's the bad news, knowing that he had prostate cancer, which can be so hard to detect until it's too late, that makes the good news such very good news.

[11 : 52] Similarly, it is the bad news that we all face to judgment that makes God's compassion so very, very wonderful. And notice, we'll be back in Jonah chapter 2 that it is not the compassion that waits for us to take the first move.

God hounds Jonah. Jonah. He sends the storm. He is willing to take Jonah even to the point of death so that he'll come to his senses.

The compassion of God acts. When I'm on the run from God, he'll stop me in my tracks, turn me round, and bring me to repentance and faith and trust in him.

And that will be the testimony of many of us here this morning. That's certainly my testimony, my experience as a teenager. Just listen to how the Christian author C.S. Lewis describes how he became a Christian.

In 1929, I gave in and admitted that God was God. I knelt and I prayed. Perhaps that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England.

[13 : 07] and I did not see then what I now see to be the most shining and obvious thing, the divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms.

The prodigal son at least walked home on his own two feet. Who can sufficiently adore that love which will open the gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape.

That plumbs the depths of divine mercy. A gracious compassion for those who don't deserve it.

Secondly, a unique compassion that rescues from death and judgment. Because the wonder of this chapter is that God hears Jonah.

he answers his cry. It's there, isn't it, in verse 2, he answered me. He heard my voice. And verse 6, yet you brought my life up from the pit.

[14 : 19] After all, we'd have thought God has every right, wouldn't we, to turn a deaf ear to Jonah. It's exactly what Jonah did to God in chapter 1, so surely God has every right to do that to Jonah here in chapter 2.

But he doesn't. He has compassion on him. And we'll see over the next couple of weeks that God's compassion is very much at the heart of the whole book.

We saw that last week, didn't we? God's compassion on the sailors. We see it this week, God's compassion on Jonah. We'll see it next week, God's compassion on the great city of Nineveh.

The point being that God is the God who will rescue anyone from death and judgment who cries out to him for mercy. In fact, I wonder if you noticed that Jonah is so gripped by God's mercy that in verse 8 he fires a warning shot to anyone who is tempted to turn their back on God.

Verse 8, those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. Now that word vain contains two words that have been sandwiched together in the original Hebrew.

[15 : 36] The first is the word breath because any other God apart from the living God is just that, a mere breath, nothing to them.

The other word is emptiness, there's nothing there. But to trust in the God of the Bible, the God who has revealed himself fully in Jesus Christ is to trust the God of heaven and earth, the God who saves, who has compassion, who rescues from death and judgment.

To trust in any other God is simply to trust in a vain idol. Whether it's the God of career to put that first, or the God of lifestyle to put that first, or the God of family to put that first, or any other so-called God, it is empty, it cannot deliver, like a breath, death, it is there, but it's not there, it's empty.

A warning perhaps to one or two of us. And again, Ephesians 2 shows us that the testimony of Jonah is the testimony of everyone who has put their trust in Jesus.

Flip back again to page, whatever it was, Ephesians chapter 2, I'll tell you when I get there, page 1175, Ephesians chapter 2, verses 4 to 6, the Apostle Paul continues, but God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses, made

us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved, and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

[17 : 23] Everyone whose trust and confidence is in Jesus can say I've been rescued from judgment and death by the death of Jesus on the cross in my place, and I've been raised to a new life through the resurrection of Jesus with a certain hope of heaven.

We too can say with Jonah salvation belongs to the Lord. You see, Jonah chapter 2 is here to stop us taking God's compassion for granted.

It was the German literary critic and poet Heinrich Heiner who said, God will forgive me, it's his job. And that is how many of us naturally think, isn't it? Oh, I know I haven't lived a perfect life, but somehow I'm sure I'll manage to scrape into heaven, God will forgive me, it's his job.

And there may be some of us in danger of taking God's compassion for granted. Assuming, perhaps, that we will get to heaven. So let me ask the obvious question, have you cried out to God for mercy as Jonah did?

[18 : 39] If we haven't, I think it's just worth stopping for a moment and asking why not? It may of course be that it's never occurred to us that we need to do that, that we need to be rescued, in which case will we learn from Jonah that actually all of us face God's judgments, that all of us are by nature on the run from God.

Or perhaps we don't think it's important. But how could it not be important if God sends his son to die, that we might be forgiven and reconciled to him?

Well, it may just be that we don't think God could be interested. it. We can't quite see how God would ever have us back. Well, wonderfully, Jonah chapter 2 shows us that God will rescue anyone who cries out to him for mercy.

But notice with you that there's also good news here in Jonah chapter 2 for those of us who are Christians already. Because remember, Jonah was a believer, a Bible-believing prophet.

Last week we saw, didn't we, the enormous gap, the disconnect between, on the one hand, what Jonah says he believes, and on the other hand, what he shows he believes by the life he lives.

[20 : 00] And I guess that's something many of us could relate to, the gap between what we say we believe and how we live. We all sin, we all continue to sin, despite knowing God's goodness to us in Jesus.

And there may well be some of us who are on the run from God in a particular way, or there's been some specific act of disobedience, or perhaps far from running the Christian life, we've practically dropped out of running the Christian life, the Christian race.

And we can very often find ourselves asking the question, well, does God's mercy include me when I'm such a failure as a Christian? compassion. And Jonah chapter 2 assures us that the answer is yes.

A gracious compassion, a unique compassion, thirdly, a dynamic compassion that changes lives. In other words, God's compassion is not a compassion which allows me to carry on living the kind of life which I want to live.

It is not a compassion which leaves me unchanged. Perhaps you've heard people say something like this, how can you talk of God's compassion and not be willing to sign up to an inclusivist agenda which accepts everyone into the church regardless of the lifestyle they lead?

[21 : 26] It's increasingly common, isn't it, to hear something like that. So I went back in July, a Christian registrar in the London borough of Islington who had refused to register civil partnerships won her court case.

She was branded, wasn't she, in some sections of the press, a religious bigot. Now the message of Jesus is for everyone, whoever you are this morning, whatever your background, but God's compassion is not a compassion which leaves us as we are.

Have a look at Jonah chapter 2 verse 9. As Jonah says, Jonah says, but I, with a voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you what I vowed I will pay.

Do you notice how Jonah does exactly what the sailors did at the end of chapter 1? Do you remember how they feared the Lord? They made vows, and here in chapter 2 verse 9 we see Jonah doing a very similar thing as he offers sacrifices to God and promises to do exactly the same thing in the future.

The point being, you see, that God doesn't simply rescue Jonah for his own sake, no, he rescues him to send him to Nineveh, which is what we'll see him doing next week.

[22 : 42] So in chapter 2 verse 10, he's unceremoniously dumped on the beach. We're not told what the holidaymakers made of it as they watched the proceedings. And then in chapter 3 verse 1, Jonah's hardly had a chance has he to dry himself off when once again God's word comes to him, arise, go to Nineveh.

And Ephesians chapter 2 tells us exactly the same thing, that we are not saved for our own sake, we are saved for service. God wants to change us and use us.

So turn to Ephesians 2 for the last time. Ephesians 2 verse 10, for we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Not saved by good works, but we are saved for good works. In other words, those of us who are Christians have not been saved by God, only for us then to get on with life as if nothing has happened.

Jesus hasn't died for us so that we might just live like unbelievers with perhaps a few kind of cosmetic changes around the edge. No, God's compassion is a dynamic compassion, a compassion that changes lives.

[24 : 07] God is not content for us to stay as we are. He is in the business of change. I was reading recently of a woman who was given a vase as a retirement present.

She passed it on to her grandson when she died, who no doubt apparently he kept it next to his television. Perhaps he used it to keep his remote controls in or as a bin to throw his Mars bar wrappings in or whatever.

Anyway, he was encouraged to have it valued, so he took it along to the auctioneers bonhams, as a result of which it sold in 2006 for 92,000 pounds.

In fact, he was told that it had been made for the emperor of China 200 years ago, and that it might have fetched a million pounds if his grandmother hadn't cleaned it so much that all the gold had been rubbed off.

The point being, of course, that if only she had realised just how valuable that vase was, it had changed her life, and she'd have been a millionaire. Well, when we find ourselves begrudging the change that Jesus wants to bring in our lives, or perhaps when the Christian life has become rather joyful, or when we find ourselves reluctant to serve others at church, or perhaps not inclined to speak for Jesus and stand firm for Jesus, while we need, don't we, to ask the question, do I value God's compassion, or am I simply taking it for granted?

[25 : 48] Because surely once we have grasped the compassion of God, a gracious compassion that rescues from death and judgement, why it will change us, won't it? And it will empower us to live for Christ and to do so in every area of our lives.

God's Why don't we have a few moments of quiet and then I shall lead us in prayer. But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your wonderful compassion in Jesus Christ, a gracious compassion for those who don't deserve it, a unique compassion that rescues from death and judgement, a dynamic compassion that will not leave us as we are.

Heavenly Father, we're sorry when we take your great compassion for granted, and we pray that we would indeed be those who are transformed by your grace and compassion.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[27 : 32] Amen.