

From the Belly of the Fish

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 0 0] And in Exodus 33, he then tells Moses he's going to send an angel that will lead them to the promised land. He says, I won't go with them myself because they're stiff-necked and I might destroy them on the way.

And the people hear what God has to say. They're devastated for they want God to go with them. And Moses intercedes for them yet again. And God relents yet again.

And in Exodus 33, verse 14, he tells Moses that his presence will go up with his people incredibly. Now, what God does in these two chapters is that he shows chesed.

Can you understand that? This is what he does. Let me explain. You see, he acts in this surprising, unobligated, overwhelming love. You see, God is under no obligation to relent.

He does not have to change his mind at this point. He would have every right to walk away from this. He has every right to act in judgment and in fierce anger. But he refuses.

[1 : 0 6] Instead, mercy triumphs over judgment. In the Old Testament, that disposition of God is his chesed. And when God reveals himself to Moses in Exodus 34, verses 6 to 7, he uses these exact words.

So, here's the end of this encounter between God and his people. And God and Moses says, give me a revelation of you. And God does. And look at what God says.

Exodus 34, verses 6 to 7. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in, do you remember how to say it?

Chesed. Okay. Abounding in chesed and faithfulness. Keeping chesed for a thousand generations. Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

Friends, this is the God of Israel. He is this God who has this nature at the core of his being.

[2 : 2 0] Now, the reason I've told you this word to start off this sermon tonight is that in my view, this word is a key to understanding the book of Jonah. It is a word that undergirds the message and the purpose of this book.

And it is used at one very important point in this very chapter, which we will get to. So with that all in mind, let's go back to Jonah, or turn forward to Jonah, in fact, and let's remember what's happened so far.

Now, you should have an outline of my talk for tonight, and you'll be able to see where I'm going. So you might remember Jonah's story began on that fateful day when the word of the Lord came to him in chapter 1, verse 1.

In other words, God spoke to him. God called him for a task, and Jonah heard God speak, and he knew what God wanted, and he couldn't handle God's word or he couldn't handle God's will.

And so Jonah fled. Do you remember he's a sort of anti-prophet? You know, he does exactly what all the prophets didn't do. That is, they should have, when they heard God's word, they often argued.

[3 : 27] They often eventually caved in and did what God wanted, but not Jonah. Jonah disobeys God. He flees from God. He doesn't argue with God. He doesn't complain. He just goes.

And by so doing, he invokes God's anger, and he puts others at risk. And as the result of his disobedience before the God of all the earth, innocent sailors are put at risk of losing their very lives.

But as we saw, that doesn't stop Jonah. He fails to respond. He doesn't pray. He doesn't turn back. He refuses to give up his right to choose his own way, which he thinks is much better than God's way, and therefore he leaves the sailors with only one choice.

And remember, this is where we ended up last week. They must get rid of him. And so they do. Reluctantly, they throw him into the water, and God acts again. He provides this great fish to swallow Jonah.

And that brings us to chapter 2. And chapter 2 takes us into Jonah's mind, as it were, into his being, into his feelings, and it expresses what he thought and what he felt while inside this fish.

[4 : 32] Let's have a look. First of all, he records some feelings of sinking and drowning. Look at them in verses 3, 5, and 6. Now, friends, I want you to notice the impact of what Jonah says here.

Ask yourself, who does Jonah regard as being responsible for his situation? Who cast him into the sea?

Was it the sailors? Or was it God? Look at verse 3. It makes it very clear, doesn't it? It was God. God did. The sailors are merely agents of God's anger, just as this fish is merely the agent of God's rescue.

Now, look at Jonah's feelings. They're here as well. Chapter 1 told us he wanted to flee from God's presence. But verse 4 tells us the other side of the story.

And this is an amazing thing, which I think captures a lot of things about Christian existence as well. Look at Jonah 2, verse 4. Then I said, I am driven away from your sight.

[5 : 58] How shall I look again at your holy temple? Now, the temple was the sign and the symbol of God's presence among his people. In other words, can you see what Jonah's saying? He wanted to run away from God's presence.

And what he's saying here is, even though I wanted to run away from your presence, I cannot bear to be away from your presence. I want to be there where you are. You see, I can't bear the thought of what it would be like to be without you.

Those are the two sides of Jonah's feelings about God. On the one hand, he wants God to leave him alone and he wants to flee as far as he can from God's presence. And on the other, this is a prospect he simply cannot bear and he longs to be back in God's presence.

Let me just tell you personally, I've experienced exactly this in my own life. I found myself one day running from what God wanted me to do and telling God I didn't like it.

Can you see the ambiguity in it? You're saying to God, I bring to you my problem. I want to get away from you. You see, you know that there's only health and safety with God, only security with God, and you don't like what God is wanting you to do, which is where God's presence is fully found in his will.

[7 : 15] So there's this double-sidedness to what Jonah says here. Now look at verse 7. As my life was having a way, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you into your holy temple.

This, I think, is a crucial verse in Jonah's experience. In the Hebrew language, to remember something doesn't generally mean just to bring it back into memory. No, you see, to remember is to do what God did when the ark was floating above the water for 40 days in Genesis chapter 8.

And it says, And the Lord remembered Noah. And what? From that moment on, the waters begin to recede. In other words, God didn't just say, Oh, I'd forgotten for a little while that Noah was there.

No, he said, I see your situation, Noah, and I am going to do something about it. It's exactly the same word that's used when Israel in Exodus cries out to God and it says, The Lord remembered the covenant he had with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

You see, it means to recall something and to act upon it. And I think that's what is meant here. Jonah tried, you see, to flee from God's presence, but he knows God is everything to him.

[8 : 27] So in the belly of the fish, he brings God back into focus and he remembers God. And he acts. And he calls upon this God and his prayer comes into the very presence of God himself.

And what about God? What does God do with this recalcitrant, reluctant prophet? Does he keep on judging? Does he keep on being angry? Well, have a look at Jonah 2, verse 2.

He answers Jonah's prayer for deliverance. Listen to Jonah. He says, Well, look, I called out to the Lord in my distress and he answered me. And out of the belly of Sheol, I cried.

And you heard my cry. Now take a look at verse 9. It tells us why God answers. He answers because he's a God who's into deliverance and rescue.

He is the God of deliverance. Salvation belongs to him. So there's the story. Now what I'd like to do is return to that word that we learned at the beginning.

[9 : 28] Let's return to Chesed. Do you remember what it means? Do you remember how I defined it? Remember the story? It is God's spontaneous, unexpected, undeserved and surprising love.

It's what God does when really you don't deserve it. It is what God does when you least expect him to do it in one sense. It's what God does when you've been like Jonah and suddenly you remember him.

And all of a sudden he does this amazing, unexpected thing and gives you his spontaneous kindness. It is what happens in chapter 3 verse 2 when really this prophet should be cast aside on the scrap heap of prophets.

And God calls him a second time. That's what this word is. And it's mentioned in verse 8. Let me read it to you. First let me read it to you in the NRSV.

Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. Now let me tell you, I think it's an unfortunate translation built up on some scholarship which I'm not convinced about.

[10 : 35] You see these words, their true loyalty, makes great use of the word that we have learned. It makes great use of this word, chesed. That's why the NIV translates it in a slightly different way.

Let me read to you from the NIV. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. The ESV uses the very same word that it uses to translate Exodus 34 that we read.

It translates verse 8 this way. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. Now another translation might be this way.

Those who worship vacuous nothings forsake the steadfast love that could be theirs. Friends, can you hear what Jonah is saying? Think about it.

Think about it. He's reflecting on his own experience. He's saying there's a temptation you see of people in relation to God. The temptation is that when things get hard, we desert the worship of the true God and run after other gods, run after vacuous entities, run after things that perhaps are no gods at all.

[11 : 47] We run after vacuous nothings. And what Jonah is saying is, if we do this, friends, then we desert our only hope. You see, friends, our only hope in this world is a God who treats us better than we deserve.

We sang about it in this previous song. Our only hope in this world is a God who treats us better than we deserve.

Our only hope is a God who is chesed. You see, a God who is surprisingly, spontaneously, gracious and overwhelming in kindness.

This is what lies under God's rescue of Jonah. In my mind, this is why he turns back to God, even though he doesn't like God's command. That's why he longs for the presence of this God.

He knows this God has this nature. And he knows that to forsake this is to forsake everything. It is to forsake the richness of being in his presence.

[12 : 52] For at the core of his being, God is gracious, kind, merciful, overwhelming and surprising in love. And he cannot forsake that for anything.

Now with that in mind, I wonder if you might reflect upon the similarities between this chapter tonight and the chapter last week. Do you remember the sailors? Do you remember the experience there?

Can you notice how the experience of Jonah is actually similar to that of the mariners, the sailors back in chapter 1? Can you see it there? Both face a crisis. From what? The sea or in the sea.

Both cry to the Lord and acknowledge his control over the world. Both are saved. Both offer praise and thanksgiving.

You see, at this point, can you see what the point is? You've got Gentiles. This is what happens to them. You've got Jews. This is what happens to them.

[13 : 54] Can you see what's being said? God's overwhelming love is not discerning. It is not discerning. God saves all who call upon him, whether they be Gentiles or Jews.

This is what verse 9 is about, I think. Salvation belongs to the Lord. Because he is a rescuer. Because he is this, salvation belongs to him.

Undergirding his desire to save and rescue is a fundamental disposition of his character. Towards surprising, spontaneous, unearned grace and kindness.

Now, with that in mind, I want to make some observations from the New Testament. And I'll just get a glass of water. You see, when we come to the New Testament, the Hebrew word kased lies, I think, behind two Greek words.

And one of the Greek words is the Greek word for love. And the other Greek word is the one that is translated most often for grace. And the New Testament, I think, agrees with the Old Testament.

[15 : 13] That is, love. Love or grace is at the very guts of God's nature. You see, God's nature to have mercy, to act in generous and spontaneous and surprising generosity, lies at the very core of his being.

And in the New Testament, what the New Testament does is it says, remember how I told you a story to show you what this was like in the Old Testament? Well, the New Testament does exactly the same. It says, come and I'll take you and show you a story that shows you what this is like.

And the New Testament tells us that what it is like is when God sends his only son Jesus into the world to die. The just for the unjust.

God acts beyond obligation. You see, he acts, though, according to his nature. Turn in your Bibles with me to Romans chapter 5.

Romans 5 and verses 6 to 8. And I want you to see what Paul says there. Remember, he's telling a story.

[16 : 28] He's telling us what God is like and he says this. For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, you see, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person.

Though, you know, perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But here's the overwhelming, surprising, unexpected and incredible thing that happens.

But God, he proves his love for us that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. Can you hear it? Can you see what is being said?

This is overwhelming and surprising and just out there. God's word is clear. God's view is that we were like Jonah, disobedient to him.

But God did what he did with the mariners and with Jonah and with Israel back in Exodus 32 to 34. He acted in this overwhelming, surprising, unexpected and obligated love and grace.

[17 : 35] Out of grace and in love, he sent his son into the world. And out of grace, that son died our death for us.

Later on, the same author makes the same point that's made in the book of Jonah. Look in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 10. So chapter 10, verses 9 to 13.

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

The scripture says no one who believes in him will be put to shame. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek. The same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call upon him.

Did you hear the language? It could almost be Jonah 1 to 2 summarized, isn't it? Couldn't it? You see? There is no distinction between Jew or Greek. The same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call upon him.

[18 : 53] For everyone, everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Can you see it? It is spectacular and amazing.

Paul is clear. God's generosity is for all. There are no exceptions. Salvation belongs to him.

Deliverance belongs to him because at the core of his being is grace and kindness and cassette. You see, there is no... There is no... This is the great thing that God has done in Jesus Christ.

It is the very core of the Christian message. And friends, what I want to do tonight is to close by speaking to you who are Christians already.

You see, I wonder if you can see the implications of what we've found here. Can you see the implications of what we've found here and what we've found in the rest of the Bible? You see, if God is like this, if God is love, then God's heart will inevitably be directed where?

[20 : 00] To salvation, won't it? You see, if we have been overtaken by this, if we have been overtaken by God's spontaneous and generous love for us, then we too will have hearts directed at the salvation of the world, won't we?

We too will long for people, whether Jew or Gentile, to come and know and love the Lord Jesus Christ. Friends, God's heart is what energises evangelism.

It is what energises Christian mission. It is what drives and energises us as individual Christians. And so if you have understood this, if you have understood God's great grace in Christ, it must be what energises and motivates you.

Let me convince and persuade you of this by taking you to the words of a man who knows all about grace. Come with me into 2 Corinthians. This man had been a persecutor of God's people.

This man was himself a Jew. He was of God's elect people. And yet he discovered that he had been God's enemy.

[21 : 21] And God acted in amazing love to him. He surprised him with overwhelming grace. He revealed his son to him.

He spectacularly confronted him and forgave him. And in 2 Corinthians 5, we hear what he has to say to us. Look at it with me.

Verses 14 to 21. Hear it. Let it resonate with you. For the love of Christ urges me on. Because we are convinced that one has died for all.

Therefore all have died. And he died for all. So that those who live may no longer live for themselves. But for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore.

We regard no one from a human point of view. Even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view. We know him no longer in this way. So if anyone is in Christ. He is a new creation.

[22 : 21] Everything old has passed away. See, everything has become new. And all this is from God. Who reconciled to us. Who reconciled us to himself through Christ.

And has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is that in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. Not counting their trespasses against them. And entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

See, we are ambassadors of Christ. Since God is making this appeal through us. We entreat you. On behalf of Christ. Be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.

So that we might become the righteousness of God. Can you think of anything more surprising? More overwhelming? More unobligated?

More incredibly loving? Then this one should take him who knew no sin. And make him sin on our behalf.

[23 : 25] So that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Friends, that is overwhelming love. And that love compels us.

Can you see that verse 14? God has been loved by this very great love. And this love urges him on. It impels him. It drives him.

It compels him. It absorbs him. It drives him outward. Friends, let me tell you there is a danger for this church here at Holy Trinity. Our danger is that we sit waiting for the world to come to us.

Our danger is we sit here and wait and wait and wait for them to come in through the door. We know that we teach the Bible well. We know that we know and love the gospel.

But friends, we cannot wait for the world to come to us. We must go to it. We need to become more outward looking and evangelistic. And such texts as Jonah 2 drive us that way.

[24 : 25] And 2 Corinthians 5 drives us that way. Drives us to vigorous, energetic, sacrificial evangelism and church planting. You see, friends, Jonah knows the God of Israel. He doesn't like sometimes what he knows.

But he knows it. And he knows that he's this God of Chesed. And he knows that this is the God of the Old Testament. And this is the God who has revealed himself in the cross in the New Testament.

He has ensured that salvation is available for all. We cannot keep this a secret and lock it up in the walls here. We cannot but give our lives that others might know.

God's love compels us. So let's pray that it might compel us individually. Compel us as a congregation. And compel us as a whole church.

So let's pray together. Father, we are overwhelmed that for our sake you might take him to be sin who knew no sin.

[25 : 35] So that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Father, this is beyond comprehension.

And Father, we pray that you would compel us to bring this great message of Christ to the world. Father, we pray that we might not be like Jonah.

Father, that is, we might not be people who know that you are like this and yet we want to keep it to ourselves. For Father, we know there is a world out there that worships vacuous nothings.

And that were they to continue that way, that they forsake the grace that might be theirs. Father, we know that grace and we have experienced it.

And so we pray that you would drive us into the world in order to announce to that world that there is redemption and reconciliation in Christ. And we pray this in his name.

[26 : 53] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.