

Praying in the Dark

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[0 : 00] Well, it's great to join you again for a second Sunday in a row, and it's great to be able to preach with you. It's been a while since I have, and I'm very much looking forward to preaching here on Jonah 2 as well.

This is a year, a brand new year we're in, 2016, and Jonah is a great little book to be going through as we're starting a new year because it is all about grace.

That's the theme that runs through it. And I hope that this is a year of grace for you, that you put yourself in the place of God's grace, under his grace.

There are many ways that we do that and can do that, and the Bible calls us to do, and that you will look for God's grace, that the eyes of your heart, as the Bible puts it, will be really open to the full measure of grace that God has for you because that is something to build your life on.

That's something to shape your life. It changes you, and it actually brings you to be a blessing in the world in the way that God intended us to be, in your conversations, in your relationships, in the things that happen in your mind as well.

[1 : 20] Now, grace is a powerful work of God in our life, and Jonah opens us up to that grace. It actually leads us into God's grace.

If you remember last week, if you were here, we heard about how wide God's love and his mercy is, and how God told Jonah about how wide that was.

And it was very uncomfortable and offensive, actually, when Jonah heard that vision. He was deeply disturbed because God said, go to Nineveh, that great city.

And that was a city, as we heard last week, that had caused really untold misery for Israel. They caused destruction. They caused a loss of hope.

And what they did was a lot of the problems of Israel stem from the way the Assyrians, based in that city, treated Israel. And here God is telling Jonah to call out that city because of its evil.

[2 : 33] Now, you're going to find out later on in Jonah that when God speaks judgment like that, when he speaks to his people, it is because he cares about them, and his desire and his mission is for there to be repentance and change and grace in their lives.

Jonah suspects this. He's very angry about it. He's disturbed. He is uncomfortable. And what he does is he runs as far away as he possibly can, not just from Nineveh, but from God's presence, it's said in chapter one.

He doesn't want to have much to do with a God who has mercy and love that is that large. Mercy and love that is undeserved, given to people who are undeserving.

And so God, throughout this book, has to teach Jonah. And he is a master teacher. You see it going all through this little book, God teaching Jonah, and I think us as well.

Because you see, Jonah, you would think, should know better. Jonah was a worshiper of God. He was a member of God's own people.

[3 : 53] He was one who was steeped in the law. He was fully educated in the law of God, what God's will is. And he was one who was called to be a prophet of God, to actually speak God's words.

You would think that that person is close to God, knows God well, is favored by God as well. But it turns out that Jonah needs to know and understand grace.

There's a relevance to each of us, too. I think many of you are Christians, maybe even Christians for a very long time. Some of you are not. But if you are a Christian, there is a bit of a vocational hazard in that, in that we can lose sight, or we can forget, which is happening with Jonah, the grace of God.

You see, for Jonah, he was a member of the Israelites. The Israelites were the chosen people, not because they were the greatest people in the world, or because they were particularly good or attractive or godly.

He said, God said, I didn't pick you because you were the best. You were the least. But he picked them because he loved them. They are a people made from grace.

[5 : 10] And you and I are as well. But my experience is that we all need to be taught over and over again what God's grace is.

And that's what's happening to Jonah here. And in fact, God in his power and his grace uses Jonah's runaway journey that we heard about last week to actually be a detour of grace, to actually prepare him to be a minister to the people of Nineveh.

Did Jonah expect that when he took off for the very opposite end of the world? Of course not. But God in his power made this a detour of grace.

And I don't know how many of you have been up to Grouse Mountain recently. I went up there with my family over the holidays. And we all were expecting, you know, a timetable and a route going up there.

But the direct route is completely ripped up. They're doing all kinds of drainage work. And so you get to a certain place and all of a sudden it says detour in a little orange sign.

[6 : 20] It says that way. And so you make your way through all these winding streets in North Vancouver, which is very unfamiliar to me. It's a foreign land up there in North Vancouver.

And I had to, I was driving, but in the end I just had to trust those orange signs because they weren't going the direction I would have thought. You're going to make it to Grouse Mountain. And I was just along for the ride.

And the thing about detours is that they are unexpected. And you have to trust that that detour that's very unfamiliar is actually a good route. And this is exactly what happens for Jonah.

He is completely blindsided. This is unexpected that there would be a detour. It was when that pagan sailor, if you remember last week, that captain woke him up with the same words that God used for him, arise, get up, and pray to your God because we're all dying, basically.

All of a sudden, Noah realized, uh-oh, this is a detour. It is a detour for his life. And my drastic initiative that I've taken to get away from God is actually an entrance into God's detour.

[7 : 38] He doesn't know it's a detour of grace yet. He just knows God's in charge of the storm. And what he tells the sailors, as you remember from last week, is that because he can only in this detour entrust himself into God's hands, just as I had to entrust myself to those signs on the detour, he had to give himself over to God.

And in fact, he does it in an extreme way. He tells the sailors, literally, throw me into God's merciful hands at his mercy, and he will decide what will happen to me.

And chapter 2 is all about what that detour is, that it is a detour of grace. Because chapter 2 in Jonah is a personal prayer of thanks.

It's in the dark. It's in the belly of a fish that he is thinking the prayer and saying the prayer. It's actually in the water as well. We're going to hear in this chapter 2. But it is a time when he is understanding that this detour is life-changing for him.

At first, he actually thinks it's life-ending. So what he vividly describes himself as a person who is facing death in the most vivid way you can imagine.

[8 : 58] This is what we were reading. And it's not just a physical death. It's a spiritual death as well. Look at verse 3. He has rebelled against God. That's what he told the sailors, if you remember, too.

I'm here because I'm running away from the presence of God. So verse 3 says, For you, God, cast me into the deep. This is his prayer. Into the heart of the seas and the flood surrounded me.

All your ways, your billows passed over me. And then I said, I'm driven away from your sight. I'm spiritually dead. And I'm physically dead as well.

Verse 5. 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 mountain. That's as far deep as you can go in the water. And I went down to the land whose bars close upon me forever. That's a watery tomb. And there's no hope for him in this world.

[9 : 58] That's what he is expressing here. There's no effort. There's no power. There's nothing on earth that can get him out of that terrible predicament.

In fact, he knows there's only one person who could possibly save him. And that person, God himself, Jonah has made his enemy.

He is God's enemy. He has decided that. But in that facing of death, he prays to God because there's nowhere else to turn.

In fact, verse 1 says he actually shouted to God. And he cried out in his distress a very simple prayer. And it was probably just two words. It was probably help me. It wasn't thought through theological.

It was just help me. It's God's storm after all. And to Jonah's amazement, and this is a psalm that he wrote that's full of amazement and thanksgiving, God saves him.

[11:02] And he does it in the most unexpected way through a very large fish that God appointed. It is a creature that God decided would save Jonah.

And Jonah says, God answered me. You heard my voice. And when God answers, when he hears the voice, there is power that comes into Jonah's life.

And they are the power of God's grace. There are two yet's in verses 4 and 6 that speak of God's grace, which actually reverse Jonah's situation completely.

That's what the yet is. I'm facing death. I'm at the doors of death. I will die. I shall again look upon your holy temple.

And then in verse 6, Yet you brought my life from the pit, O Lord my God. It's complete reversal. He goes from being somebody who is an enemy of God to one who looks upon God in his holy temple.

[12:05] He's in the very presence of God. And in verse 6, he is one who's losing his life. And now he is brought up. His life is brought up from the pit.

And he knows God as my God. You see, what Jonah is praying here, and what you hear, is someone who is gripped by the gospel of grace.

And I think this is such an important thing for each of us to hear. No matter how long you've been a Christian, and if you aren't a Christian yet as well, it is so important for us to somehow be gripped by the gospel of grace.

The way that happens is what happens with Jonah. He knew his sin. He had rebelled completely. Yet God had completely and utterly saved him by his grace.

And there is only one reason God would do that. You know, Jonah has stripped away all of the reasons that he could commend himself to God. So there's only one reason left in chapter 2 for God saving Jonah.

[13:14] It is because of his undeserved love. Because of the wideness of God's mercy. Because of the depth of his grace for Jonah.

And this is love that is far beyond anything that Jonah could possibly have dreamed of. Or that he had a notion of about what God was about. So you see what's happening for Jonah here in chapter 2.

His heart is changing. His mind is changing. And the thing that I like about the book of Jonah is that it's not a perfect change. It's very up and down.

You're going to see that there's a lot of change still to have take place in Jonah's life. In chapters 3 and 4. But what you see happening here is he's beginning to take to heart God's vision of very big grace.

And very wide love. So he knows now that he is just like the Ninevites. Because he deserves death as well.

[14:19] He is just like the Ninevites because he can only be saved by God's powerful work of grace in his life. It has to be undeserved. And he's like the Ninevites because God has pursued Jonah.

Just like God is pursuing the Ninevites by sending Jonah to them. And it's all because of one reason. Because of a love that God has that comes, that originates from God, that is greater than can be imagined.

And Jonah knows that God hears the prayer of even the very worst sinner. And the most imperfect prayer for the very worst reasons, God hears those prayers.

And in hearing it, he will pour grace into people's lives. Jonah's experienced it. If it will happen to him, it could very well happen to the Ninevites.

So it's only now, at this time in the belly of the fish, having been saved from certain death, that Jonah knows that he's completely dependent on God's grace.

[15 : 29] And it's only now that he is ready to go to Nineveh and extend God's grace. And speak to them on behalf of a God of grace.

Of a God who loves in the widest way imaginable. He is only now ready to be a missionary to Nineveh. And as I said at the beginning of our sermon, Jonah is very, very relevant to you and I this evening.

Because if you believe that Jesus died for you on a cross for the forgiveness of your sins, to take away those things that separate you from God, if you believe that Jesus rose again in power to actually bring you into the life of God, to know God as your father forever, if you believe that, then you have received grace upon grace.

And like Jonah, you have contributed nothing to that salvation. except for your sin. And that might be a big contribution for you. It has been for me.

Certainly it was for Jonah. You contribute your sin. And that is it for salvation. God saves us because of his love, because of his grace.

[16 : 51] And we are called to know this salvation in our lives, that it belongs to God only. It can only originate in him. That's what verse 9 is about.

And like Jonah, we need to be gripped by that grace, to understand the depths of it, how far gone we are, and how far God brings us by bringing us into his very life.

We need to be gripped by that grace so that we can be ministers of that grace in this world to other people. God is a missionary God.

And God extends grace to people. And the nature of that grace is that it overflows. It can never be stagnant. It is living water, Jesus says.

It has to flow out into the world. And in order for that to happen, we need to be gripped by the grace of God. And I think that if you are like me, you can very easily lose sight of that grace.

[17 : 55] My vision of God's love and his grace, and that love for other people, that wide vision, is like a cataract that spreads over my spiritual eyes.

So, I can get tunnel vision fairly quickly because I forget the grace that God has poured out on me. I don't know if that's your experience, but it is something that afflicts Christians.

And this is why we need our church family so very much. We need to hear the gospel of grace over and over again in sermons, like you're doing tonight.

But also, we need to meet together throughout the week. to hear God's word, to share that with each other, to live it out in one another's lives, and to strengthen one another to arise, as God has said in Jonah, and go into the world as well.

The importance of meeting together is that we know God's grace in our lives, that our eyes are cleared. In a sense, we're giving surgery to our eyes to take away the cataracts that don't allow us to see the wideness of God's love.

[19 : 10] So, this is what we are about as Christians gathered here together. Open our eyes to the wideness of God's love and his mercy. So, I invite you for 2016, tonight, in this week to come, to allow God to take you on a detour of grace.

To teach you, to show you, to remember again the grace that he has lavished on you personally. And you all have very different stories about how God's grace has been poured into your life by God.

But they are stories that speak of great power. of God loving you in a way that is incredible. Jonah has lifted, has been lifted out from a pit.

But you and I have been lifted out as well. Listen to Ephesians 2. It tells us that God being rich in mercy, having a very big vision of love, 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 that power of God's grace to make this change in you, which is incredible, has to be an immense power to make that kind of difference.

[20 : 35] Dead in trespasses, alive with Christ. It's huge. I don't know where you were, maybe you were probably in bed, when the earthquake hit on Tuesday night.

I've talked to at least two people who scolded their husbands when that earthquake hit and said, what are you doing to the bed? What are you moving furniture around tonight?

But, when I felt that earthquake, it was just immense power. It was like a hand, a huge hand, hitting the side of our house and moving it.

That's what it felt like. And, as I was preparing the sermon, I was thinking, that immense power that I've never felt that much before is a microcosm.

It's just a small thing compared to the power of God's grace, the power of his saving work bringing you from death to spiritual life forever.

[21 : 36] It's as though what God has done is stretched out his hand from heaven and has reached into your life, has moved you to be alive with Christ.

That is power. That is a power that reaches into all of the world. nothing can be separated from it. Nothing can be beyond that power.

Even the most unlikely person in the world is the subject of God's grace. And we need to know that in our own lives that the people that we walk with and talk with and see, people who may be very different to us as well, they are people that God is potentially pouring his grace into their lives.

His power is reaching to them. And so in this new year, God calls you and me to arise and really consider whose life you will affect by that same power that has saved you, by that same message that has utterly changed your life, your future, your relationship with God and with other people as well.

Who will you share that with? Will that grace that God has poured out on you, will that shape you and your relationships? This is a desperate need in the world that there are relationships shaped by that grace that we have received from God in our own lives.

[23 : 04] So how will you extend that grace into your home, into your place of work, or to those who are hurting or outcast in this world? Well, may God in his power by his Holy Spirit be your perfect teacher this year, just like he is with Jonah in this book.

Pray that he will lead you into the life of grace, that he will clear the eyes of your heart to see the grace by which you have been saved and that your life is changed and transformed by that grace.

In fact, that grace is the center of your life every day, even through all the ups and downs that you will see. May God, in his wide mercy and his love, overflow into the lives of those around you.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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