

Running from Grace

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[0 : 00] There's a man sitting here worried that he has sinned too much. A woman sitting here worried her hidden sin will be revealed and God will not love her anymore.

There's a person here worried that God doesn't love them because they can't love themselves. They have no reason. There's a child in kids' church who's unsure how God the Father could love them.

They're unsure how God the Father will treat them because of how their own father treats them.

There's a parent angry with themselves because they were not patient or gentle or loving with their children.

There's a man and a woman exhausted from pushing themselves to obey God because they're scared that he doesn't love them. These are all hypothetical people.

And yet, they are all us, ordinary people, that feel like they're sinking down to rock bottom, trying to earn, to deserve and to be worth God's favor.

[1 : 10] What each of them desperately need to know is God's grace. Jonah is one of those people.

He is jealous of God's grace and love. He doesn't want any other city like Nineveh to have God's grace and love. He has made God into his own version of God who will only show grace and mercy to those whom Jonah decides.

So when God sends Jonah to preach to Nineveh, he runs, even on a ship heading in the opposite direction. God sends a storm and Jonah is thrown overboard.

His life is sacrificed for the lives of the sailors. Jonah isn't that different to us. He too needs God's grace and love.

It just takes him being thrown into the ocean, down to rock bottom, to realize that. What is it going to take us to realize that we need God's grace?

[2 : 29] As we come to God's word this morning, let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, as we come before you today, we come before you in desperate need.

Help us to know your grace. Amen. Jonah was thrown into the ocean at his insistence in the middle of this divine storm.

He was sacrificed so that the lives of the sailors might continue, so that they might live. And it's likely that he was thrown into the ocean, fully expecting to die.

Because who would expect what God did next? Have a look at verse 17 of chapter 1. Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah.

And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Often when we think of the book of Jonah, we think of that big fish. The fish only gets three verses though.

[3 : 26] He's just a bit part player. The book of Jonah really is a book about Jonah seeing God's grace and mercy and Nineveh and God's grace and mercy.

It takes going down to the depths of the ocean in the belly of a fish for Jonah to know God's grace personally. Ever since God told Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh, he has done the exact opposite. Jonah has been going down the whole time. He went down to Joppa. Down to the ship. Down into the ship. And now he's gone even further down.

He's metaphorically gone down to hell itself. Jonah is going down to the depths.

And all of this imagery presents a picture of a watery grave. He was as good as dead until God sent that big fish.

[4 : 45] But for how long? How long was he going to survive? It was only a temporary salvation. It's a radical mercy by God that he's alive even in the belly of the fish.

But he's going to need another act of God to save him. That would only come when he was all the way down to the bottom. The rock bottom.

Until he couldn't be lifted up by his own sense of self-sufficiency. But instead when he could depend on God's saving grace. Because there was a fatal flaw in his character.

And it got him sent to rock bottom. So that his complete failure could be seen. So that he could begin to change. Now there are different types of rock bottom experiences in life.

I'm going to try and describe two of them. There's two different kinds of rock bottom experiences I think we can have. There are absolute rock bottoms. And there are crisis induced rock bottoms.

[5 : 49] Let me try and explain these two. Absolute rock bottoms are when a person. Because of an action or an act has lost everything.

Here Jonah he's in the belly of a fish. He has lost absolutely everything. And from this position of rock bottom. He cries out in desperation.

Because all he has is God at this point. He is unable to solve his situation. Verse 5. The engulfing waters threatened me. The deep surrounded me. Seaweed was wrapped around my head.

He is down in the depths. He may as well be dead. This truly is a crisis. This truly is rock bottom. You may have experienced this.

You may have seen someone experience this. It's the type of rock bottom that you see when someone has gone bankrupt. They have nothing left.

[6 : 48] When someone has gone to jail. When someone is convicted of a crime. It's like Job in the Old Testament who lost everything he had. That's the first type of rock bottom that we can see.

The rock bottom where everything is gone. There's another type of rock bottom. Which is... I'm going to describe it as crisis-induced rock bottom.

It's where a crisis causes the bottom of our life to go out. It's a crisis that comes when maybe there's a health scare.

When there's a diagnosis of cancer. And you still have family. You still have friends around. But you have that feeling of hitting rock bottom. Maybe when a family member dies.

And you're confronted with your own mortality. Maybe when your sin is revealed publicly. It's that moment that you just want everything to change. You want to put your head in the sand.

[7 : 49] You just want to run. That moment of crisis. So there's two different types of rock bottom.

The rock bottom when everything is gone. And the rock bottom when we're just confronted with the reality of life.

And we need to flee. They're different. But what is unique is that it leads us to say something has to change. Jonah's rock bottom moment.

It's different to Job's rock bottom moment. It's different to the Apostle Paul's rock bottom moment when he was confronted with Jesus. We all have different experiences of what our rock bottom is.

And we can experience different levels of crisis. High and low throughout our lives. What is important is not what kind of crisis or rock bottom that we have in our life.

It's not important how big it is. The most important thing is how do we respond when our life is down in the dumps. When our life is in crisis.

[8 : 53] Getting out of rock bottom might be something that we try and fix ourselves. There's a health scare. And so it's new fad diet. It's exercise.

All done in an attempt to not hit that crisis again. It's a grasping for control. You know, I was scared before and I don't want to be scared again.

So I'm going to take control of the situation. It's that I'm going to pull myself up by the bootstraps. I don't know if you have boots that have straps. But it's that idea of I'm going to take control and everything's going to be okay.

I'm going to work really hard. But the reality is in life, there is always another crisis coming. There will always be something in the future.

Whether it's another global financial crisis. Whether it's going to be a severe storm that damages a house or a property. You lose your job. You recover from one health scare only to be hit by another.

[9 : 53] Something will always come along to remind us that we are not in control. Our moment of rock bottom, our biggest moment of rock bottom hit in 2011.

Alyssa and I had lost our first pregnancy. We lost our first baby. It was utter grief. We didn't know why we'd lost this little baby.

And we spent days in tears. Unsure why God had let this happen. I was at Moore College studying to be a pastor.

And there was a part of me that cried out, God, I'm doing everything to serve you. I'm studying so I can become a pastor. Where is your blessing? Why has this happened?

That rock bottom moment sent us to God in prayer. Confused? Angry? We had many questions.

[10:56] When we got pregnant a second time with Isaac, we were terrified. What is going to happen? Is the same thing going to happen again?

Are we going to make it to full term this time? And we realized that in life we are not in control. Only God is in control.

And all we had was to depend upon God. That rock bottom moment sent us to God in prayer and dependence. That even though his love is unearned, undeserved, he still chooses to show us grace and love.

Love to one such as us. Let me encourage you not to miss out on a rock bottom moment in your life. God might be using it to give you an opportunity to draw closer to him.

Not to depend upon yourself. Some of us here right now might be in a crisis moment. We might be in a rock bottom.

[12:04] Where it feels like you're stuck. All seems lost. Life is crippling like it was for Jonah. Let me encourage you.

Come to our Heavenly Father in prayer as one who loves and shows his grace to us. We must hand over these moments to God to actively say, God, I am fearful.

I am terrified. I don't know what is going to happen. I don't know what's going to come from this. I don't know what tomorrow is going to look like, let alone the next hour. But you are in control.

And regardless of what happens, you have shown your love to me at the cross. Now, if we don't, we just risk these crisis moments, just rocking the boat. It'll send us down.

We'll recover. We'll hit rock bottom again. Instead of depending upon God. For Jonah to be brought up out of this situation, he needed help.

[13:03] Being cast down to rock bottom doesn't necessarily bring Jonah closer to God. But it gives him an opportunity now that everything has been silenced.

There's nobody else talking. He can't go anywhere. Can't do anything. I have no idea what he's eating at this point. He's left alone with God in the belly of that fish.

He's all alone. He can't run. And in his prayer, he comes to understand and to draw closer to God.

At the climax of Jonah's prayer, the thing that gets him spat out of this fish, out of the land of the dead, and back into the land of the living, is God's grace.

It takes the whole prayer to get there. Have a look with me at verse 7. 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 turn away from God's love for them. And then in verse 9, salvation comes from the Lord. Jonah, in his rock bottom moment, remembers the Lord.

[14:14] He remembers who he is. He is a God of love. He is a God who brings salvation. No one else. And this love is a special love. It's not the love between a husband and a wife.

It's not the love of friends or family members. This is a totally different kind of love. I know very little Hebrew. I know this word.

This word for God's love here is hesed or hesed. Other translations use the word steadfast love. It is a gracious love.

God's gracious covenant love. Where he says, I will love you despite you. It is God's gracious love where he stays faithful to us regardless of our rebellion.

I will show grace to you unmerited favor even though you do not deserve it. This is a loyal love which cannot be shaken.

[15:15] And this is the climax of Jonah's prayer. He describes God as the one who shows love, which is a gracious love. This is God's grace. And this really is the climax because Jonah in the belly of the fish, he dwells on the God who shows grace to people like him.

Here at church, we often talk about God's grace. We sing songs like amazing grace. It is so important for us to know what it means.

We actually need to feel it in our hearts because it's only God's grace which brings Jonah back from this rock bottom moment. And it's only going to be God's grace that pulls us from a rock bottom.

It's crucially important that we know at least three things about God's grace. At least three things. First, God's grace is undeserved. Second, it is unearned. And thirdly, it is costly. Firstly, undeserved. We don't deserve anything good from God. This is really hard to hear.

[16:28] I find this hard to hear for myself because we have such an entitled mentality. I deserve good things to happen to me. I deserve the raise, the good marks at school, the happy family.

Not because I've done anything to deserve them, but it's just expectation. This makes God's offer of grace and love unnecessary.

Even an insult. God, I don't need your forgiveness. I don't have any problems. I can't fix. And if your God has problems with me, well, he can come and deal with me himself.

Jonah's prayer recognizes that he deserves God's punishment. In verse 3, he describes who is responsible for this situation. To God, he says, you hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas.

Jonah understood that he was the guilty one. And it was God who punished him. And it was right because he didn't deserve anything good from God. Like Jonah, to understand God's grace, we must understand we don't deserve it.

[17:36] It is totally unmerited. Now, second, we must know that we cannot earn God's grace. Again, this is hard for us to hear.

How many of us like admitting that we can't do things on our own? To be told, you can't earn God's grace.

It almost sounds like a challenge. Really? Haven't you met me? I'm a real hard worker. I can earn God's grace. I can do that. I've earned everything else in my life.

I'm a professional. I've got everything great. I can earn that. I can do that. That's fine. That's a great challenge. I'm going to read my Bible and pray every day. And then he'll have to do what I ask.

We saw from Jonah, he thought he could be self-sufficient from God. He thought he could run from God and have his own version of God. But he ended up at the bottom of the ocean in the belly of a fish.

[18:34] Totally helpless. Even if he managed to pry open that fish's mouth and get out, he was just going to be somewhere far worse. Eaten by something far worse.

He had not earned any of God's grace. Rather, Jonah had only earned punishment. God's grace is there once we realize that we don't deserve it.

But also how much we depend on it as an unearned gift. And for God to show grace to us, it cost him something. God's grace to us is very costly.

Twice, Jonah mentions God's holy temple in verse 4 and verse 7. He says he looks to the holy temple. It's not heaven that he looks to.

It's not specifically to God. It's something about God's temple which draws his eye. Because it's in God's temple that God has promised to dwell.

[19:35] If you imagine God's temple that was built, there was a number of different levels that you could go into. And the high priest is the only one that could go into the holy of holies, the central place in the temple.

He could only go in there once a year. And he could only go in there with the blood of an animal. He could only go in there with the blood of an animal or his blood would be shed. And in the center of the temple was the Ark of the Covenant.

This big gold box which had the Ten Commandments. And on top of the Ark of the Covenant was this big slab of gold called the mercy seat.

And it's on this seat that blood was sprinkled. And it was to show that Israel's sins were paid for by the blood of someone else.

So Jonah in the depths of the sea, totally alone, dependent on God just to live another hour, casts his eyes to the place where his sin is dealt with.

[20:48] The place where there is no condemnation. The place that God's loving grace is seen. But it's only through the death of another.

Just like Jonah sacrificed himself so that others could live when he was thrown into the water, so too an animal was sacrificed to pay for Jonah's sins.

God's grace is undeserved, unearned, and it is costly. Jonah realized this at his rock bottom. Our rock bottom could be a low one like Jonah's, or it could be a high one, a crisis where we reconsider

everything in our life.

For Jonah, he reminded himself of God's awesome, undeserved, unearned, and costly grace to him. We don't look to the temple.

We don't have a big slab of gold here in the middle of church. We have a new symbol. We look to the cross, where the one who deserved life had it taken, so that it could be given to us who do not deserve it.

[22 : 01] He who had earned God's love by perfect obedience, gives it to us who cannot earn it. And he pays that costly price of death so that we can be free.

Casting our eyes to the cross where Jesus died and bled for us is the antidote to despair when we are at rock bottom. God's grace becomes endlessly wondrous, endlessly consoling, beautiful, humbling, and uplifting when we believe and grasp onto and hold onto these three truths.

That God's grace to us is undeserved, unearned, and costly. There is a risk that we run of becoming familiar with the phrase, God's grace, and that it loses all meaning to us.

And we can pay lip service to God's grace. We can sing of amazing grace, but not let it penetrate our souls. A funeral I was involved in a couple of years ago of an elderly Christian woman, the family wanted the song Amazing Grace sung at her funeral.

Fairly common, wonderful song, great song to sing, seems fairly normal. But one of the family members who wasn't a Christian didn't want this song to be played because it has a line, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch.

[23 : 43] A wretch like me. And this man didn't want his mother to be referred to as a wretch because he loved her so much. He didn't get that she was a wretch and she knew it.

She was a lovely Christian woman who knew that she was a wretch and she depended upon God's grace. Jonah has hit rock bottom in the belly of the fish and realized that God's grace is all he had. Undeserved, unearned, costly. And when he grasps this, God instructs the fish to spit him out back from the dead only by God's grace.

To the man who is sitting here worried that he has sinned too much, God says in his grace, you could never have earned my grace.

Take it for free. To the woman sitting here worried about her sin being revealed, God says in his grace, you do not deserve my love, but I will take away your hidden shame on the cross.

[24 : 53] Come to me. To the person worried that God doesn't love them. God says in his grace, I love you, though it costs the life of my son.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we come before you as wretches. no reason that you should love us, but Lord, you have chosen to love us so much, even though your grace to us is undeserved, unearned, and so costly to you.

Father, to us today, help us to hold onto your grace. And Father, for us here who are in a place of pain and difficulty, of rock bottom, of crisis, Lord, help us to call out to you, to put our trust in you who control all things.

This we ask in the name of your son, Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.