

Running from Grace

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[0:00] Well, morning, church. It's good to see you all this morning. Have you ever been in a life or death situation?! Have you had some kind of diagnosis or some kind of wake-up call?

If you haven't, can you imagine being in one of those situations? Maybe going to pull out at an intersection and the car runs a red light and just misses, and you go, whoa, that could have been pretty bad.

A heart scare? Caught in an ocean rip? If you haven't been in a life or death situation, try to imagine it. But if you have, I'd be interested to know about it later.

What did you do in that situation? What did you do? I don't know if you all know that I surf on occasions, not as much as I used to.

That's actually me at Long Reef, surfing. And some random came up and said I took some photos. I didn't ask for photos to be taken and said, well, can you send them to me?

[0:59] So, anyway, that's me at Long Reef. Well, a few years ago, I went out with two friends at Green Island. This is Green Island.

Looks quite tranquil and picturesque. You can sort of see a channel there and there was rocks. So we went out on the rocks. But you can't gauge sometimes from the shore how big the swell is when you just look at it, unless you get perspective and someone's out there.

But no one was out. And so we jumped off the rocks and got swept back on the rocks. We jumped off, swept off. Eventually, the third time I jumped off, I should have taken the hint. I didn't notice that the other guys didn't get out.

And I started paddling out. And it dawned on me, it's a bit bigger than I realised. So I was literally paddling up the face of these giant 15-foot monsters.

It was terrifying. And just as I got to the top of them. So if you can't get perspective, because I'm six foot, if you lie on the ground, like that distorts how things look.

[2:00] But if you actually later lie on the ground and look up, and look up to the windows, that's what you're paddling up the face of. So I was paddling up the face of them and going, what's going on? And I looked back and no one was.

And I'd get out of the crest of a wave. I wanted to see, I'd do the sound effects with this. Another big wave, like further out. And I just kept paddling and paddling. So I was just paddling out to sea, basically, for 20 minutes, half an hour.

And so I was distressed, to say the least. And in my distress, I called to the Lord. And I just couldn't think of anything else to do but to pray.

And I was praying the Lord's Prayer. I just was like, nothing came to mind. Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. I just started praying the Lord's Prayer. But I was crying out to God.

At some point, I realised I have to turn around and try to get back in. So I tried to catch a wave and it wasn't successful. And it lifted me up and plunged me into the depths.

[3:00] And so I was dumped and I was getting worked. Currents swirled about me. Waves and breakers swept over me. I was tossed and turned and hit the bottom.

And just as my lungs were bursting, I was able to push off and get above the surface just to grab a breath of air before this happened. Another wave broke in front of me and buried me and pushed me down.

The waters engulfed and seaweed wrapped around my head. And this happened four times. I'd push up, get a breath, and get worked and pummeled.

And so I was praying just in my head because I was underwater. And I held onto my board. I grabbed my leg rope and I pulled it up. And I grabbed onto the end of my board and just prayed that

the next wave would spit me out.

And sure enough, God heard my cry and he heard my prayer. And I was spat out on the shore. My friends came running up to me.

[4:03] I haven't got this in the notes. And one was laughing. He said, that's the funniest thing I've ever seen. And you can, that slide can go now. Thanks, wouldn't you? The other one was like looking quite distressed.

Are you all right, mate? Are you all right? And I was like teary and I was like, I didn't drown. Anyway, we've been studying the book of Jonah. We've seen that Jonah was called to preach in the great city of Nineveh.

And he refused and he fled from God. God sent a storm to reclaim him. And that storm made things such that Jonah was thrown over the side of the boat into the ocean.

And he was swallowed by a great fish. The result, in the belly of the deep, in this life and death situation, Jonah cries out to God. He prays a prayer of faith.

He grasps the grace of God. And he commits to following him. That's what the book of Jonah is all about. God's grace. Grace for everyone.

[5:03] How did Jonah, who in this condition of utter despair, rebellion, cowering fear, how did it come that he was in this position, that he then goes to a position of faith at the end of the prayer?

It's by God's grace. He is a man literally at the bottom. In the prayer he says, From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help.

I've been banished from your sight. The engulfing waters threaten me. The deep surrounded me to the roots of the mountains. I sank down. My life was ebbing away.

While physically in the depths, he is also spiritually far from God. Jonah is representing something that we have all experienced, a spiritual condition at the bottom.

A condition of feeling buried in the depths. Buried far away from where we need to be. And it seems like there's no way to get out. And we can know what that's like.

[6:09] Jonah was in that condition physically and spiritually. And yet we see Jonah beginning to rise. Jonah has faith. Jonah calls out to God.

He remembers God's gracious promises and commits himself to following God. The story of Jonah is the story of every human heart. That we run away from God.

And then at some point in our life, there's a wake-up call. A major disruption occurs. And we often... Actually often, it's when we're disrupted.

And if we're really honest about ourselves, that's when deep down we're tested what we really believe about God. How many times have people cried out to God in times of extreme distress? Jonah's drowning. And then he finds himself in the stomach of a huge fish for three days. He's in discomfort. He's forced to wait. He's in acids. He's somehow getting some oxygen in there.

[7:12] So we've got a lot of time to think and question. Running from God's got me nowhere. Running to other things of this world to solve my problems or to alter my situation haven't just got me nowhere.

They've got me at the bottom of the sea in the stomach of a fish. I can't get any lower than this. Jonah's in a difficult, unpleasant life and death situation.

But God is there. God is interrupting Jonah's life to save Jonah's life. Jonah cries out to God and the Lord hears his prayer of faith. What are your interruptions?

Jonah says, Faith begins when, like Jonah, we recognise our state before God.

There's nowhere else to turn when we remember God's grace. From the depths of the grave I called for help. In my distress I called to the Lord and he answered me.

[8:42] Now here's a religious leader, a professional preacher, a prophet who received direct revelation from God, who's been running from God's grace, and it's all because he can't comprehend God's grace.

His fears, his racial problems, his lack of perseverance, it's all tied to his blindness, to the far-reaching reality and the uniqueness of grace.

Here in chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, Jonah, at the climax of his prayer of faith, in the depths, in the belly of the fish, he finally understands grace.

He gets it. He says, Salvation is of the Lord.

And at that point, the fish releases him, which is to show that the storm and all the misfortune has been sent by God to bring him to this realisation.

[9:41] Those who cling to worthless idols, created things, and I'm going to just sort of say in the West, it's our job security, life achievements, future-proof bank balances, earthly relationships, hobbies, addictions, even self-righteous good deeds.

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs because salvation is of the Lord. When he comes to this understanding, Jonah's physically released from the depths because at that point, he's spiritually released from despair.

Trapped in a life-and-death situation, there's nothing he can do to save himself. Jonah cries out to the Lord. Verse 7, He remembers the Lord. He has faith that only a gracious God can rescue him. And once he grasps grace, salvation is of the Lord, he is saved. Once saved, Jonah commits to be a burning and shining light for God, ready for anything.

We'll hear more about that next week. Now let's apply this to ourselves right away. Let's think about this very personally. If it's true that Jonah, a person who talked directly with God, who received revelation from God, a prophet of the Old Testament, if Jonah can be blind to grace, it's even more likely that all of us in this room are blind to God's grace to one degree or another.

[11:21] That's the point of the book, to know and understand the depths of the meaning of God's grace. And until we get it the way Jonah had to get it, we'll be like him, virtually locked up, not seeing and reaching our full potential in Christ.

Last year I did the Camino Trail. Before I did, I landed in Madrid and I went to the Palace in Madrid. It was ridiculous. It was so opulent. I'd go upstairs and go down corridors and it's all sort of guided. Every room was different and every room had different marbles and woods and imported things and opulent, extravagant. But you'd get to an end and think of this must be it and then you'd round another corridor and there'd be another whole corridor and more rooms.

Grace is like a huge palace. As you go from room to room and down another corridor and upstairs, just when you think you've seen it all, you turn the corner and there's an entire new hallway full of unexplored rooms.

Every time we find a new wing in the house of God's grace, we are lifted. We're brought into a higher level of life and depth of understanding of God's immense love and mercy.

[12:37] Even though that's the way we grow our entire lives, by finding more and more wings and unexplored rooms in God's grace, the big change happens in the beginning. The first time we really grasp God's grace is the moment we have the big change.

It's what makes Christianity different from every other religion. It's the teaching of God's grace. God's grace is the essence of the gospel. Unearned, unmerited favour of God.

In Colossians 1 verse 6, Paul writes this, The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world, just as it has been doing among you since when? The day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

The day you understood the grace of God is the day you were born again, the day you crossed over that line and became a Christian, as opposed to simply being a religious person or a moral nice guy or girl.

When we grasp this truth, it's a game changer. Martin Luther, 500 years ago, 1500s, was a professor studying the scriptures.

[13:46] On close examination of the scriptures, he had a lightning bolt moment that turned him from a timid monk to unstoppable. We are saved grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone.

salvation is all the work of God. These statements became the catchcries of a movement that protested the religious doctrines and hierarchy of the day, sought reform and changed the Christian landscape that impacts us today.

Whether Luther understood, sorry, when Luther understood the grace of God, he was totally changed. His career, his reputation, his safety became insignificant compared to his newfound clarity.

History is full of people who have been impacted by God's grace. Since this is a prayer about grace, let's consider grace for a moment. Grace in the Old Testament means favour.

In that case, to find favour means to let into a place that you don't have the right to be. favour is given to an undeserving person by a non-obligated person.

[15:05] In verse 6, I sank down, the earth beneath barred me in forever, but you, Lord, my God, brought my life up from the pit. This is cosmic generosity.

Jonah's done nothing to deserve this. The gospel says, you cannot possibly get to God on your own efforts or earn your own way there. God lets us all the way into his family, all the way into his heart, all the way into his palace, and there he meets our needs.

He answers our prayers. He guides us. He interrupts and he disrupts to bring us to him. The events of our life are for our own good, even though we may not see it at the time.

God's grace is in the storms, and the storms bring us to God. And God alone brings peace. Are you restless like Jonah? Is it because like him you don't fully comprehend God's grace?

Three scenarios. Imagine you're an employer and a group of people have worked for you for a few weeks and you pay them their salary. That's not because they not only deserve it, it's because you're obligated to do it.

[16:26] So that's not grace. Imagine you're part of Sunday Kids and one of the leaders decides they're going to step down and retire for a time. You all get together and take them out for lunch after church and you buy them a present.

That's not grace either because on the one hand, while you're not obligated to take them out for lunch and buy them a present, they're still deserving of it. So it's not pure grace.

How about this one? Imagine you've got a neighbour who won't give you the time of day. Their music is too loud and when you ask them to turn down the music, they turn it up louder.

But when you turn on your music, there's a knock on the front door because they've notified the police that your music's on. But when you get sick, sorry, when they get sick, you start to run errands for them.

You bring meals to them. They don't deserve it. You're under no obligation, moral or legal duty to do it. That's grace.

[17:32] Grace is not something we deserve and it's not something that God is obligated to give. So grace is received when we understand it. Remember when Paul said, on the day you understood grace was the day that the gospel began to bear fruit in you.

The day we understand grace is the day we both understand how little we deserve it and we understand the height of God's mercy. So there's three responses to this. There are those people who have such a low view of their sin that they think their sinfulness isn't all that bad that it's actually quite inconsequential.

They don't like people saying their spiritual failures failures and to them judgment and punishment. That's a little bit harsh, isn't it? They don't grasp grace because in essence they're self-righteous and they've convinced themselves they're good.

They go to church. They've donated to charities. Sometimes they've helped the less fortunate. God has a record of their good deeds. They don't need grace because God's actually obligated to save them.

They think they're rich when they're actually spiritually poor. They can't see how much of a life and death situation they are in. And then there's those people who know how sinful they are and their spiritual failures, self-doubting and broken, but they believe they're so far gone from God that his mercy couldn't possibly be powerful enough and sufficient enough to deal with the mess that they made.

[19:05] They can see they're in a life and death situation and they think they can do something about it. And so they seek to balance out the equation, to strive to put things right.

Maybe if I do this, God will forgive me. Or maybe actually they think they're too far gone. It's all too hard and they give up. I'm just going to sort of stay the best I'm in.

They haven't understood God's grace either. Then there's the people who not only see this is a life and death situation, they are evil and sinful and spiritual failures.

But at that time, they see the height of God's grace. They see the power of his mercy and it's like looking at the world with both eyes open. You know that when we have only one eye open, we have no depth perception.

It's pretty hard to judge. If you look with two eyes, you suddenly have depth perception and through those two eyes, I see my sinfulness and I see God's mercy and I see his grace.

[20:11] It's cosmic generosity and we're changed by it. Jonah was changed. It's the way you become a Christian to see those two things, your own depravity and the grace of God and when you do, you change forever.

When the two come together, it's like a chemical reaction. you're literally born again. Understanding the grace of God is the way we grow and that's how Jonah grew.

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. There's nothing we can do to save ourselves. There's nothing in all of creation that can save us.

We can't earn God's favour and we don't deserve it. So smash any idols you've made for yourself. Salvation only comes from the Lord.

Notice, in order to be invigorated by God's grace, Jonah looks to the temple in verse 4 and verse 7. I will look again towards your holy temple.

[21 : 15] I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. The reason Jonah looks at the temple is because in the temple there was the mercy seat and the mercy seat was the place where they sprinkled the blood of a perfect white lamb sacrificed.

And underneath the mercy seat was the Ten Commandments. The law that demands that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and that we love our neighbour as ourselves.

So it demands an ethical life of greatness, compassion, integrity, courage, purity, generosity and self-sacrifice. And we all know we fall far short of that.

But over the top the blood is sprinkled and Jonah knew from the temple that God's grace exists in spite of our failings because God's received the payment of a substitute.

Jonah didn't just look to the depths of his sin, he began to put his hope in the substitute. He didn't know what we know. Jonah himself is a picture of the one who can pay our punishment.

[22 : 27] When Jonah was thrown into the ocean, the ocean of God's anger, it says, the seas stopped raging and the sailors were saved. When Jesus was raised up on the cross, he was actually thrown into the seas of God's anger.

And when we look to him, we are saved. Jesus himself actually says this of himself in Matthew 12. No sign will be given except the sign of the prophet Jonah because just as Jonah was in the stomach of the sea creature for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.

Do you know how to receive grace? Admit the depth of your sin and trust the substitute Jesus Christ. Unless we see the depth of our sin, what Jesus did for us will not thrill us.

Unless we see what Jesus did for us, we will not have the strength to admit the depths of our sin.

Salvation comes from the Lord. In Romans 10, everyone, grace is for everyone, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved.

When you receive God's grace, you lose your bigotry, self-righteous judgment, cynicism, messed up, internally your brokenness is healed, you become a person of joy, free of religious obligation and keen to bear fruit.

[23 : 55] You find yourself like Jonah, committing. Jonah cries out to God, God hears his prayer, Jonah receives God's grace, Jonah commits to God's calling.

In verse 9, Jonah vows to make good his pledge. Next week, we'll see how he does go to Nineveh and he proclaims the message to repent and relent. Hear more about that next week.

But when he initially commits, he's actually still in the fish. He's not out of the deep. At that point, in essence, he's saying, Lord God, no matter what comes, it doesn't matter.

I give you everything. I put it all on the altar, everything that I have and all that I am. I'm willing to go to Nineveh, willing to do anything you want. I commit myself to you.

Salvation is of the Lord. And here we see there are some essentials for growing in our faith, having head and heart knowledge, but then putting that into practice.

[24 : 59] Jonah remembers grace at the mercy seat and acts on it. The more we remember and understand the gospel, the more we live out the gospel. Knowledge grows through commitment, living out what we believe.

Faith is an ongoing process of preaching the gospel to ourselves and to others and putting it into practice. Do we recognize without Jesus the life and death situation we're in?

There's nothing, and let's break that into two words, there's no thing you can do to earn God's favor. So this is a wake-up call.

Are you at the bottom, all the way down the depths? Or have you closed the door to God's grace? Open it up again. Go down corridors. Explore further. Stop running from God.

Two weeks ago, Nick said, he can always overtake you and he will overtake you. If you're in the depths, cry out. Worried, anxious, scared, remember the gospel.

[26:01] Run to grace and last week we learnt from Ash, a loving father has his arms wide open ready to embrace us. The gospel will lift you up and transform your life. No human being is so good they don't need grace and no human being is so bad they can't find grace.

Salvation is of the Lord. Let's pray. Gracious Heavenly Father, we give thanks for your gift of grace. As we cry out to the Lord Jesus for our salvation, hear our prayer and may the grace of God flow in our lives.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.