

Jonah: *He Answered Me*

Jonah 1:17-2:9

As we return to our journey through the story of Jonah, the prodigal prophet has been thrown into the sea. God's judgment against Jonah's rebellion and disobedience has been executed, and from the perspective of those on the surface, Jonah is dead. But death is not the end of Jonah's story. God's mercy is moving in the deep. Please stand and let us read Jonah 1:17-2:9: <sup>17</sup> And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup> saying,

"I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,  
and he answered me;  
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,  
and you heard my voice.  
<sup>3</sup> For you cast me into the deep,  
into the heart of the seas,  
and the flood surrounded me;  
all your waves and your billows  
passed over me.  
<sup>4</sup> Then I said, 'I am driven away  
from your sight;  
yet I shall again look  
upon your holy temple.'  
<sup>5</sup> The waters closed in over me to take my life;  
the deep surrounded me;  
weeds were wrapped about my head  
<sup>6</sup> at the roots of the mountains.  
I went down to the land  
whose 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.  
<sup>8</sup> Those who pay regard to vain idols  
forsake their hope of steadfast love.  
<sup>9</sup> But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.  
Salvation belongs to the Lord!"

My message this morning will fall under three subheadings: 1) A Descent into Hell; 2) Three Truths of Grace; and 3) He Answered Me!

### **I. A Descent into Hell**

We're going to spend a few weeks looking at Jonah's prayer because there is so much significance in every word and what these days in the belly of the fish point to. However, to get started, let's step back and think about what is revealed in this prayer regarding Jonah's experience.

I want us to begin by returning to the deck of the ship for just a moment. Remember the scene. The ship is being tossed about by a massive hurricane-like storm. The waves are several stories high. The rain is pouring down, the lightning is flashing, the thunder is deafening, the sailors are yelling to one another about what they must do. They are discussing how they must throw the prophet into the sea in hopes of being saved. With deep reverence and regret, they gently lift Jonah up on their shoulders and bring him to the edge of the rocking boat, and then...perhaps on the count of three...they hurl him over the side, into the towering waves that immediately sweep over Jonah and pummel him into the deep.

As we sift through Jonah's prayer, we can piece together Jonah's experience from that point forward. Beginning with vs. 3, Jonah first acknowledges that the sailors were not responsible for him being cast into the sea...that was God's doing.

"For *you* cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and *your* billows passed over me."

Jonah understands that God executed His justice against Jonah's disobedience. God sent the storm; God worked through pagan sailors; and God cast Jonah into the sea. God applied the waves and God sent the flood to surround Jonah. God is holy and just...death at sea is what Jonah deserves, and he acknowledges that it is against God, and God alone, that Jonah has sinned.

Church, don't miss this. When all the calamity and noise and distractions of life on the surface come to an end, it will be a very simple, non-complicated reality: it will be you and God. At that moment your life will be weighed and measured against God's law and God's justice, and Jonah is describing what that will look like for those who remain unredeemed. Our fate is spiritual banishment, away from the presence of God. Ironically, earlier in the story we learned that Jonah was seeking to flee the presence of God, remember that? Now, as he sinks into the deep, he is discovering what that is like, and it's not Tarshish. It's despair. It's what Jonah deserves. It's what we all deserve.

I have a friend who recently had a close call. It appeared that he would soon die, and it's a miracle that he is alive today. When I called to check in on him, he mentioned something that hit very close to home. He said that when he thought his life might end, he suddenly had a deep conviction that he deserved hell. Keep in mind that my friend is a profoundly committed Christian, and yet when he looked into eternity, he became keenly aware of his own sin.

There are those in our midst this morning, and millions throughout the world, who have had a brush with death or by some other means have had an encounter with the Holy that changed them forever, and this is the common thread that I hear from those stories: when God draws near...when you are exposed to the light of God's presence...when you meet God in the deep...you immediately know that you deserve hell, and that, should you end up there, your fate is sealed for all eternity. It is a level of despair that exceeds description. Dante must have had this experience before writing his epic poem entitled *Divine Comedy*. In the part of his poem entitled *Inferno*, Dante imagines the entrance of hell on which is a sign that that reads "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

A man named Bill Weise wrote a book several years ago about his experience entitled, *23 Minutes in Hell*. If you have ever doubted the existence of hell, I encourage you to read that book. Weise bears witness to the existence of hell, and it's very much what Jonah writes in vs. 4: Then I said, "I am driven away from your sight..." Nothing could be more horrifying than to be driven away from God's presence, to be abandoned by our Creator. This was Jonah's initial experience...it is an experience I would not wish upon my worst enemy.

In vs. 5 Jonah continues to describe his descent: 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...

It seems to me that Jonah is describing his soul's descent into Sheol...the place of the dead. In fact, according to vs. 1, Sheol is where Jonah finally calls out to the LORD: "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress...out of the belly of Sheol I cried..." So how are we to think of Sheol?

Old Testament scholar Philip Johnson writes: Sheol is at the opposite theological extreme to Yahweh, and the dominant feature for its inhabitants is their separation from Him.<sup>1</sup>

Bryan Estelle, in his commentary on Jonah, writes: Sheol is used to describe human fate. It is a place to which one does not want to go, an 'unwelcome fate.' Sheol refers to a place of divine punishment, a curse often wished on the ungodly. Human language is strained to the utter breaking point to adequately encompass the suffering Jonah has to endure at this point.<sup>2</sup>

Now, I know you have a lot of questions. Are we to think that Jonah actually died and went to hell...to the land whose bars close upon a person's soul forever? Didn't God rescue Jonah from death? Isn't Jonah still alive when he prays to God while in the belly of the great fish? If Jonah did end up in Sheol, would God still hear his prayer in the place of the dead? Can souls damned to hell actually cry out to God and be saved?

You are asking very good questions. My scholarly, theological answer is: I don't know. I don't know if Jonah died physically before being rescued by the great fish. I don't know if Jonah actually descended into Sheol or if his use of those terms is to be taken metaphorically. However, if we take the text at face value, it sounds as though Jonah is describing a near-death experience where his soul's perspective in the spiritual realm extended beyond the limits of his physical body.

Think what you will about near-death testimonies, the evidence is undeniable that over 9 million people in America, having been pronounced clinically dead, testify that they went on seamlessly in the spiritual realm. According to these testimonies, even though their bodies were dead, these

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Bryan Estelle in *Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy: The Gospel According to Jonah*: P&R Publishing, 2005; p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

individuals still had their thoughts, their memories, and they felt as though they had some kind of a body. And for the vast majority of these reports that I've read or heard, these souls knew they were in the presence of God. For some, being in the presence of God was comforting; for others, it was horrifying, but the testimony of nine million souls who clinically died but then came back to life agree on this singular report: human souls are capable of having experiences in the spirit realm apart from our dead bodies, and sometimes those souls return to the bodies and the bodies resume living.

Is that what happened here? I don't know, but it sounds like it to me. Simply taking Jonah at face value, it sounds as though he drowned for a time and that his soul then "went down to the land whose bars closed upon him forever"... he found himself in "the pit"...in "the belly of Sheol" where he then cried out to God. All of this may have happened moments before the great fish swallowed Jonah, or even after the fish swallowed Jonah. The point here is that Jonah experienced utter despair in the deep. He got what he deserved, but that was not the end of Jonah's story.

Church, hear the good news of Jonah's testimony when he writes: "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and He answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit." Jonah's testimony is that he cried out to God in the deepest darkness...from the very pit of hell, and God answered him. Jonah was saved when he did not deserve to be saved.

Which begs the question: why did God save Jonah? What changed from the moment that Jonah was hurled into the sea to the point when God brought up his life from the pit? The only answer that we can state with any kind of assurance is that Jonah experienced the unmerited grace of God.

## **II. Three Truths of Grace**

Many people talk about God's grace, but far too often that grace does not translate into a life-changing power. In his book entitled, *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer explains that there are several 'crucial truths which the doctrine of grace presupposes, and if they are not acknowledged and felt in one's heart, clear faith in God's grace becomes impossible.'<sup>3</sup> In his prayer, Jonah comes to deeply acknowledge three of the most essential truths about God's grace.

The first essential truth we must grasp is what Packer refers to as "moral ill-desert". It's coming to the heartfelt conviction that we deserve God's wrath and divine justice. I once heard a gifted Bible-teacher say, "I deserve hell on my best day when I've preached my best sermon. On my very best day I could never live up to God's standard of holiness and right living." This is what the Reformers referred to as "total depravity." It is the conviction that we are incapable of a righteousness of our own.

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Keller in *The Prodigal Prophet*, p. 73.

Now, I know this kind of thinking has become very unpopular within our “therapeutic” culture. Many of us have been encouraged to think positively about ourselves and to set aside any notion that we are guilty of sin and deserving of God’s justice. I get it, and for the record, I truly believe that Christians who are saved by grace have the truest and most encouraging reasons to think positively about themselves and to live a life of joy and freedom. However, we should not think that freedom and joy require us to reside in the state of denial. To deny our sinful qualities and our own evil is to adopt a narcissistic self-image that does not square with our human experience. We are all pretty messed up people when it comes right down to it, particularly as we consider the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Who of us has not committed murder in our heart or adultery in our heart? Can anyone claim to be without sin? We will never know and be changed by God’s unmerited grace until we first accept our moral ill-desert. As Paul writes in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.” And that doesn’t end well. Again, Paul writes in Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death...”

So, did Jonah understand this profound truth? Well, even before he is hurled over the side, Jonah begins to take responsibility for his moral condition. He volunteers to be thrown over because he knows that his sin against God put all the men on the ship in harm’s way. But then, once Jonah is hurled into the sea, his prayer reveals his acceptance of this crucial truth: “*you* cast me into the deep...” Jonah acknowledges his moral ill-desert. His sin is against God, and God is just in casting him into the deep.

Secondly, we must come to believe in what Packer refers to as “spiritual impotence.”<sup>4</sup> Not only must we admit that our sin is deserving of God’s justice, but we must also deeply accept that we cannot repair or cleanse ourselves. Again, admitting our powerlessness to save ourselves requires a degree of humility that runs counter to our nature. We are a “fix it” kind of people. Many of us truly believe that if we strive to do what is right, if we give our money away, if we serve the poor, if we follow the rules to the best of our ability, we can make things right or earn favor with God. Many people truly believe that they can atone for their sins by doing good deeds. And Church, let me be the first to say that generosity and serving and sacrificial living for the sake of the common good should very much describe the lifestyle and impact of the local Church. But we should not think for a second that our striving is somehow going to make things right with God. We should not think that our good deeds will outweigh our evil deeds such that God will have no choice but to invite us into heaven. We must accept our “spiritual impotence.” We cannot atone for our sin against God. God must atone for our sin against God. Apart from God’s singular and costly intervention on our behalf, we are without hope. Within the belly of Sheol, Jonah understands the hopelessness of his situation. His spiritual impotence is made clear as he states, “I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me *forever*...”

Timothy Keller writes:

Jonah realizes that he stands condemned and permanently barred for his sin and rebellion, and there is no possible way to open those gates himself or make good his debt. We are “barred” from God, and the doctrine of grace resonates deeply only if we admit we cannot save ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Keller, p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Keller, pp. 75-76.

The third truth we must grasp to experience life-changing grace is the costliness of God's forgiveness and saving grace. Note that in vs. 4, having discerned that God had every right to turn His face away from Jonah, the prophet writes, "...yet I shall again look upon your holy temple." Later in vs. 7 Jonah states, "When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple."

We have to remember what took place in the temple. Keller explains:

Jonah knew that it was over the mercy seat in the temple that God promised to speak to us (Exodus 25:22). The mercy seat was a slab of gold over the top of the Ark of the Covenant, in which resided the tablets of the Ten Commandments. On the Day of Atonement, a priest sprinkled the blood of the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people on the mercy seat (Lev. 16:14-15).<sup>6</sup>

Jonah's last hope was the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb whose blood was thought to atone for the sins of God's people. It was the costly sacrifice of an innocent life that made it possible for sins to be forgiven, and so Jonah cries out to God in the temple. He appeals to the Mercy Seat of God, and God answers him with grace and salvation.

Church, can you see how this story of Jonah points so powerfully to the Gospel? Like Jonah, we will all deserve to be chucked over the side due to the storm of our disobedience. Our sin has condemned us, and we are incapable of making things right with God. And yet, as we look to the cross, we see Jesus, the Unblemished One, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world, and we remember the immeasurable cost of God's grace for sinful people. Forgiveness is costly. Grace is not cheap. And that truth must be held deep in our hearts if we are to ever truly be changed by the unmerited grace of God.

Church, this is where we must pause and apply this story to our own situation. Let me ask you a simple question: has your life been radically changed because of your experience of God's infinite, unmerited grace? If not...why not? Which one of these truths have you failed to accept? Perhaps you have too high of a view of yourself, and you personally don't think you deserve hell on your best day. Perhaps you feel that you've done a lot of good in your life to the extent that God will have no choice but to acknowledge that you've been a good person who deserves heaven. Perhaps you have taken God's grace for granted, as though it cost God nothing to dismiss your sins and welcome you into His presence. Take a moment and be honest about your heart. If any one of these three truths is missing, you have yet to grasp the life-changing power of God's infinite grace that rescues souls from the despair of Sheol. You may be proudly religious, or you may be completely self-absorbed with little concern about facing God when you breathe your last. Whatever the case, I encourage you to spend some time this week reading Jonah's prayer. Take his experience and his testimony to heart.

A time is soon coming when we will leave the surface and enter into the deep. We will all face God's judgment and justice, and at that time, the only thing that will matter is God's infinite,

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-77.

unmerited grace. That grace is available for those who will humble themselves and cry out to God for salvation. This is Jonah's testimony, but this story points beyond Jonah. Jonah's story is a sign that points to Jesus.

Jesus is the unmerited grace of God for sinners condemned to the deep. Jesus entered into the belly of the earth for three days and three nights. The creed states that he descended into hell, but not because He deserved hell, but because hell was the price to be paid for the world's sin against a holy and just God. Jesus descended into hell to endure God's justice against sinful souls like me and like you. It's the blood of Jesus shed on the Roman cross that covers our sins and purchases our forgiveness. Thus, Jesus is the only name under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Even Jonah's salvation is due to the death and resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus does not die on the cross, Jonah is doomed to the godless existence of Sheol, as are we all.

Church, if you understand the deep, unmerited grace of God, you will shout those words spoken by Jonah in vs. "O LORD, my God!"

### **III. He Answered Me!**

The turning point in a human life comes about when we reach the end of ourselves and discover God's infinite grace in the place of our deepest darkness. For most of us, that will involve some kind of a crisis that reduces us to a place of desperation. As Keller writes: We find grace not at the high points of our lives but in the valleys and depths, at the bottom. No human heart will learn its sinfulness and impotence by being told it is sinful. It will have to be shown—often in brutal experience. No human heart will dare to believe in such free, costly grace unless it is the only hope. It is a combination of hard circumstances, insight from the biblical gospel of atonement for sin, and prevailing prayer that can move us to wonder and amazement, even in the darkest, deepest places.<sup>7</sup>

Most of you know that my story has some Jonah-like qualities to it. I was in my third year at Princeton Seminary when I lost my way. I came to a crisis in my faith. I was covered up in sin. I was literally battling darkness and despair. I cried out to God one day, "I want to see Jesus," and ten minutes later, in a short little chapel service, the LORD showed up. When the LORD came near to me, I experienced the profound dread of His presence. I saw my sin like a black tar that covered every aspect of my life, and I knew right then that I deserved hell. I agreed with God's judgment, and I felt like digging a hole right through the floor to escape the light of His holiness that revealed my sin. I instantly knew there was nothing I could do to make things right with God...I was at His mercy. However, the LORD did not leave me there. I soon felt a love wrap around me like a blanket...a love that was tender, forgiving, and understanding. I knew that I was in the presence of my Savior, and I knew that I was forgiven at a horrible cost. That moment changed my life forever.

My testimony is very similar to Jonah's. I was in the deep, covered up in darkness that I deserved. I cried out to the Lord, and He answered me! He lifted me up from the pit; I have been saved by His grace...a grace I could never deserve. I'll never forget how my heart cried out,

---

<sup>7</sup> Keller, p. 79.

“My LORD and my God!” that day! I was led to worship, even though my life circumstances remained a mess.

Church, when you experience God’s grace, you worship God...even if your circumstances remain dire. Notice that Jonah cries out in vs. 6, “O LORD my God!” and promises to make sacrifices, and he makes vows in vs. 9 even before the fish spits him out onto dry land. Salvation...the restoration of our relationship as creatures to our Creator...is more important than the temporary circumstances of our earthly life. Even before his circumstances are changed, Jonah declares, “Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

Church, that is the central point of the whole Bible. We are souls who need saving, and salvation belongs to the LORD. We do not and cannot save ourselves. That central truth and experience of God’s unmerited grace should lead us to experience joy and freedom, no matter the circumstances of our lives. Come what may, like Jonah, we are souls who have been redeemed by God’s unmerited grace. When we were in the deepest darkness, we cried out to the LORD, and He answered us! Great is the LORD, and worthy to be praised! Amen? Let us pray.