

“The Depth of God’s Grace”

Introduction: Back in the late 70’s, during my college years, I played trumpet in a rock band which played for events in the Twin Cities area like high school dances, college parties, girl scout jamborees, etc. I also, on occasion, sang some back-up vocals which pop into my head at the oddest times! The most recent happened last week when a song we did by the Bee Gee’s surfaced in my mind while studying Jonah 2. The song is called “How Deep Is Your Love.” Each verse ends with the statement: “It’s me you need to show,” and then the refrain begins, “How deep is your love? How deep is your love? I really mean to learn....” and on it goes.

My hunch is that these vocals popped into my head this week because as we move on to Jonah 2 this morning, it’s all about God showing Jonah, and Jonah beginning to learn, how deep God’s love truly is, not only for a wicked people called the Ninevites, but maybe even more significantly, for Jonah himself.

As pastor and writer Mark Buchanan has observed:

The real puzzle of Jonah—its perpetual source of wonder and doubt—is this: why is God so deeply concerned about, not just Nineveh, but this man Jonah? This sulking, griping, stingy, self-absorbed little man—why him? Why would God pursue him to the ends of the earth, to the bottom of the sea, to the outskirts of Nineveh? (Christianity Today, 11/15/1999, p. 91)

How deep is God’s love? What are the depths of God’s grace, his undeserved favor for you and me? Like Jonah, we need to learn, and experience, the depth of this love because it is the essence of our relationship with God, and with others; it is the essence of living a truly human life.

In a later letter, sent to the church in Ephesus, Paul prays this for his readers:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. [Eph. 3:17-19]

Certainly, in the advent season, as we ponder the mystery of the incarnation, we bring to mind the incredible depths God went to become a human in Jesus, and to love us by living our life and dying our death. Paul describes it this way in Philippians 2:

Who [Jesus], being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! [vv. 6-8]

Learning of and experiencing in a deepening way the love God has for us is an ongoing, lifetime Journey. How can our friend Jonah help us along the way?

I. Swallowed by a Fish

A. As I read 1:17, another song comes to mind, this one by The Newsboys. Our daughters used to sing it while running through the house. It’s called simply “In the belly of the whale,” and it recounts

the huge fish that God provided to rescue Jonah after the sailors had tossed him overboard, per his instruction, in order to still the violent storm that God had stirred up. Jonah, recall, refused to heed God's instruction that he go to the wicked city of Nineveh and "preach against it" (1:2). He refused, we said last week, not because he was scared but because he didn't think such an evil, non-Israelite people, were deserving of God's mercy. He refused because he thought he knew better. So, instead of heading east to Nineveh, he ran the other way, booking passage on a ship that was heading west to Tarshish. But God sent a raging storm which the sailors, try as they might, could do nothing about. Out of love, it seems, Jonah instructed them to toss him overboard, substituting himself for them so that the sea would destroy him not them. We considered how that substitutionary, sacrificial love pointed ahead to what Jesus has done for us, as we made our way to the communion table.

B. But God wasn't done with Jonah. As Jonah descended to the deep, to the realm of the dead, to a place at the bottom of the ocean where seaweed became wrapped around his head, God provided this huge fish to miraculously rescue Jonah himself from death. Here, many readers get hung up. God provided who, to do what?! To be sure, being swallowed by a huge fish and living within it for three days and nights is certainly not a normal occurrence! As one commentator (Sinclair Ferguson) quips, one hopes there may be provision for fish to speak in God's new creation so that this poor creature can finally explain to us what happened! Actually, as Tim Keller suggests, the only way we know what happened to Jonah is because he must have someone. Ultimately, if God can raise someone from the dead after being in the grave for three days and nights, the remarkable event to which Jonah's time in his watery grave of the fish points, then using such unusual means to keep Jonah from drowning is certainly possible.

C. The real puzzle, perhaps, is why God is so deeply concerned, not just about the Ninevites, but this man Jonah? Why would God pursue this disobedient, reluctant, griping, self-absorbed little man to the ends of the earth and the bottom of the sea?! Why, for that matter, would God so pursue us? Simply put, he pursues us because he loves us and because it is his plan to use us to share this good news with the world. But to share God's grace with others, we first need to have experienced it. Jonah began this journey of experience "in the belly of the whale."

## II. In the Belly of the Whale

A. Think about it. In the belly of this great fish, Jonah gets three uninterrupted days to reflect and pray. No phone calls, tweets, texts, or emails down there. No kids or spouses to interrupt. No work responsibilities or projects to do around the house. Just Jonah, and God. And here's what Jonah was primarily pondering. By his own theology, as we saw last week, Jonah deserved to die. He deserved divine justice. "You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas," Jonah recounts to God. Jonah saw God's sovereign hand behind his being thrown overboard and knew he had it coming to him. However, he then had to reckon with what else God had done. It's summarized in the conjunction, in the little word "But" in v. 6b. This conjunction is one of the most powerful little words in the Bible. As Cynthia Hale, a very dynamic Afro-American preacher from the Atlanta area put it, at a conference I attended at Duke Divinity this past October, "conjunction, conjunction, what is yo function?!" Well, the function of this little conjunction is to declare that God did not give Jonah what he deserved; instead, he showed his grace upon Jonah, he brought Jonah's life "up from the pit," scooping up Jonah from the bottom of the sea and eventually causing the fish to vomit Jonah out onto dry ground.

B. What can we learn from Jonah about how we might experience God's grace? A couple of thoughts come to mind.

1. First, we often need to reach bottom, to the place where our schemes and resources have been exhausted, when we come to the end of ourselves and we realize there is no other way, before we are willing to recognize, and reach out to receive, God's amazing love for us, and to know how completely dependent we are upon him (cf. the sailors!). Commentator Peter Craigie notices that the text depicts Jonah on this downward track from the very beginning: He goes down Joppa to find a ship on which to flee; he goes down into the hold of the ship to grab some sleep; he goes down into the sea all the way to the "roots of the mountains" (v. 6a). Craigie writes, "not until he was all the way down, finally stripped of his own buoyant self-sufficiency, was deliverance possible." It takes a death, Jesus would later say, in order to rise from the depths to new life (Ma. 10:39).

2. Second, as we begin to experience the grace of God bringing us up from the depths, we need to understand that it's not a one-time life-preserver but a lifeboat which we will need to continue our journey deeper into the heart of God. As Paul's prayer in Ephesians implies, the width and length and height and depth of God's grace take a lifetime to explore and experience, and we can be quite tempted to revert back to our old, self-sufficient ways. Jonah will discover this when he finally heads off to Nineveh in the next chapter, seemingly now inspired with good, grace-filled intentions, but then coming to recognize (or, at least the readers come to recognize) that he still has some old skin to shed and even more grace is needed (cf. Gal. 3:3).

For today, know that the book of Jonah is not about a big fish, but about a big God, a God whose grace is deep enough to swallow all our sin and launch us forward into new life. May we come to know and experience this grace in ever deepening ways.