

“Finding Grace in Strange Places”

Jonah 2:1-10

06.13.21

Introduction

We have this phrase “hitting rock bottom.” It is a difficult place to be, but we also acknowledge that when we hit rock bottom, there is only one way to go, and that way is up.

It’s usually in those circumstances that we begin to gain some perspective and recognize our mistakes and failures.

In movies we see people hit rock bottom as they check into run down motels, or on a bus ride home after losing all their money in Vegas or spending the night in jail and having to call someone to come bail them out. In the story of Jonah, the main character hits rock bottom when he is cast overboard and finds himself in the belly of a fish.

Digging Deeper

Jonah chapter two chronicles this experience of the prophet plummeting to the ocean floor. If you look at it carefully in your Bible, you’ll see that the words of Jonah are offset in this chapter to indicate that it fits the meter of Hebrew poetry. It is a psalm of thanksgiving because God has saved him from drowning. The language is rich and dramatic. Jonah not only gives praise to God for saving him, but he also acknowledges his rebellion, he speaks words of repentance, and vows to be a changed man.

That often happens at rock bottom, doesn’t it? We make promises. “God, if you just get me out of this mess, I will go to church every Sunday. Even on holiday weekends!” But it is important to notice that God allows Jonah to remain in the belly of the fish for three days and nights, and I think we are supposed to understand this as an act of grace.

Theological Reflection

The story of Jonah reminds us that grace is a strange option that usually takes us by surprise. We usually think about what we want and what we deserve. What we want is pretty obvious. We want comfort, security, and pleasure. On the other hand, what we deserve are the consequences for our actions. We are usually much better at determining what others deserve, but when we hit rock bottom, we gain enough perspective to realize that things could be much worse.

In the story of Jonah, the prophet of God *wants* to be on a ship to a tropical location (i.e., Comfort, security, and pleasure). And from the ancient biblical perspective, Jonah probably *deserves* to die (i.e., “That’s what you get for running from God”). But instead of giving Jonah what he wants, or giving Jonah what he deserves, God gives Jonah what he needs, and Jonah needs some perspective.

Another name for this is grace. Grace does not give us what we want, and it does not give us what we deserve; instead, grace changes us into the person that God wants us to become.

I think one of the biggest flaws in the American concept of God is that we have been given the impression that God exists to give us comfort. But when we survey scripture, God gives comfort to the poor, the oppressed, and those who mourn. God does not give comfort to those with self-afflicted problems. Instead, God gives us grace so that we can change into the person God wants us to be.

And sometimes grace looks weird. Sometimes grace seems uncomfortable. Sometimes grace is spending three days and three nights in the belly of a fish to gain a little perspective.

At the end of chapter two, the fish vomits Jonah onto dry land, and he goes to Nineveh, but as we learned last week, little has changed. Jonah physically goes where God wants him to go but his heart is still far away from Nineveh.

This happens all the time with our kids, doesn't it? We ask them to go clean their room. They put up a fight. They refuse. They try to run away from home. Then once they finally go to their room, they stomp their feet the whole time with a scowl on their face as they viciously throw toys into the toy bin. (Obviously, I'm not talking about my own children—I've just witnessed similar scenes on T.V.).

Jonah's attitude of contempt makes it kind of hard to believe his confession in 2:9 when he says, "But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you." And so witnessing Jonah's ministry in Nineveh, it should not surprise us at all that at the end of the story he is sitting east of the city beneath the hot sun after the wind has blown away his shelter and a worm has eaten his shade.

Sitting east of the city, God does not give Jonah what he wants (ironically, he wants to die), and God does not give Jonah what he deserves (Jonah deserves the judgment that he is wishing upon Nineveh); instead, God gives Jonah grace to change into the person God wants him to be.

Invitation

There is so much irony in this story because God appoints this prophet to go to a foreign nation and proclaim the way of YAHWEH, the God of Israel. The people of Nineveh repent, but at the end of the story, the prophet of God still needs to repent. I think the story of Jonah teaches us that the life of faith is about a life of repentance. Sometimes we get the impression that repentance is something we do once in our lives when we become a Christian; or it is something that people need to do when they've done something really bad—but the reluctant prophet reminds us that our human tendency is to resist the will of God and run in the opposite direction.

Repentance involves recognizing our need every day to be changed from our stubbornness and brokenness so that we look a little more like Christ, and unfortunately there are days we look more like Jonah than we look like Jesus. In those moments, God will not give us what we want, and thankfully God will not give us what we deserve, but God will always give us the grace that we need to become the people that God wants us to be.

Reference Tools

Allen, Leslie. *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*. 1976. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Limburg, James. *Hosea-Micah*. 1988. Louisville: John Knox Press.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is one thing that you missed the most during the pandemic that you've been able to do or look forward to doing in the near future?
2. What is your overall impression of Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish? Do you think it was authentic? What questions does it raise for you?
3. Pastor Jonathan claimed that God does not give comfort to those with self-afflicted problems. Instead, God gives grace to help them change into the person that God is calling them to be. How do you feel about this statement? How might you relate to this concept of grace in your own life?
4. Does God want Jonah to repent of particular sins, the general posture of his heart, or both? How does this story help shape your understanding of repentance?
5. In light of this week's discussion about grace being "what we need," how have you experienced God's grace recently?
6. How can we pray for you this week?