

(Jonah) the Depths of Hell - Part 2

by John Vissers

The sermon emphasizes the reality of God's grace and the importance of faith in receiving salvation, using the story of Jonah as a illustration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Duration: 37:14

Scripture: Jonah 2:8

Topics: "Jonah", "Grace", "Salvation"

Description

John Vissers explores the profound themes of grace and salvation in the story of Jonah, emphasizing that true salvation comes from the Lord. He draws parallels between Jonah's experience and the teachings of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians, highlighting that both emphasize salvation by grace through faith. Vissers recounts the transformative experiences of Martin Luther and Augustine, illustrating how God's grace surprises and redeems those who are lost. He encourages believers to recognize their dependence on God's mercy and to respond to His call with faith and good works. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a commitment to live out the purpose for which God has saved us.

Transcript

We want to read two passages tonight. I want to read from Jonah, chapter two. We're continuing in our series tonight in the book of Jonah, so I would invite you to turn there, where we're just going to read the end of chapter two tonight, verses eight to 10, and then I'd like to go to the New Testament as well this evening and read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians in chapter two and also reading there verses eight to 10.

In Jonah, chapter two, this is the end of Jonah's psalm, Jonah's prayer, his prayer of deliverance. At verse eight, he says, "Those who cling to worthless idols "forfeit the grace that could be theirs. "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, "will sacrifice to you.

"What I have vowed, I will make good. "Salvation comes from the Lord." "And the Lord commanded the fish, "and it vomited Jonah onto dry land." And then in Ephesians, chapter two at verse eight, the apostle Paul writes, "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith. "And this not from yourselves, "it is the gift of God, not by works, "so that no one can boast.

"For we are God's workmanship, "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, "which God prepared in advance for us to do." Amen, and may God bless to us these readings from his word tonight. Let's pray

together, shall we? Father, we do thank you for your word this evening. We thank you that it is a light for us, a guide, that it is your truth, that it is the infallible rule of faith and practice.

We pray this evening as we consider your word that you would speak to us. We pray that you would lighten our path, guide our way, show us how we should live, what we should believe, and how day by day we might be more faithful in the pathway of discipleship. To that end, we commit this time to you and pray that by your spirit, you would take the spoken word as we seek to expound the written word and point to the living word of Jesus Christ in all of our lives.

For it's him, it's to his name that we want to give all the praise and glory tonight. For the sake of Jesus, we ask it, amen. In 1515, a long time ago, a young monk started teaching his students from the book of Romans and from the book of Psalms.

He started to give a kind of chapter by chapter exposition through the book of Psalms and through the book of Romans. He wasn't running from God. In fact, he was trying to find peace with God.

He was trying to find peace for his anguished soul. He felt somehow that he never could be good enough to be accepted by God, and he felt somehow that no matter what he did, God did not love him, that God did not accept him. And finally, after months of teaching, after months of exposition through the book of Romans and through the Psalms with his students, Martin Luther came to the realization that God did love him, that he was accepted by God, that he was justified by grace through faith.

He came to realize that salvation comes from the Lord. And this is what he wrote. This is how he described that experience.

He said, Night and day I pondered until I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. And he goes on to say, there upon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. He says, the whole of Scripture took on new meaning for me.

And whereas before the righteousness of God had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. You see, Luther came to realize, he came to understand that salvation does indeed come from the Lord. He came to understand that God loved him and that he was accepted because of what Jesus Christ had done and that what he had to do was trust and rest in that reality.

And 479 years ago this week, this past week on the Eve of All Saints Day in 1517, two years after Luther started in to this exposition in the Psalms and in Romans, he posted a list of statements that he wanted to debate with other church leaders, with other priests and pastors, with other theologians of his day. 95 statements that he wanted to make, that he wanted to debate in which he came to express this experience that he had come to in his own life, that salvation comes from the Lord. He wanted others to too enter into that experience and he believed that the church of his day had lost sight of that fact.

And so he took these 95 statements and he posted them on a door on the church in Wittenberg and what happened of course is history because that document became the spark that really lit a religious spiritual revolution, a revival, a renewal that spread from Wittenberg throughout Germany, throughout all of Europe and that has changed the face of Christendom ever since. And it started with someone who was apprehended in a fresh way by the grace, by the sheer grace and by the sheer mercy of God. It changed his life and it changed the lives of many others.

Well, as we come to the book of Jonah tonight, we come to this ninth verse and what we discover there is that the prophet declares that salvation comes from the Lord. That salvation comes from the Lord. In the midst of his flight from God, Jonah was apprehended by the grace of God.

Now it's not quite the same kind of experience that Luther had. Luther was trying to be accepted by God. Jonah on the other hand was running from God, was in flight from the presence of God but nevertheless he was apprehended by the sovereign grace of God at a critical moment in his life.

And he experienced a revival of his own soul. He experienced a renewal of his own faith. He experienced afresh the call of God to his life.

He was transformed from a delinquent to a penitent. From a prodigal to a prophet once again. And he confessed his complete and absolute and utter dependence on the Lord for his deliverance.

And in these words, in that one brief statement, he points to the reality that this happened because of what God had done for him. Because of what God had done in his life. He acknowledges that salvation is God's business.

He was expecting death. He believed that the end was imminent but rather what happened is he was surprised by the saving grace of God. And I wanna suggest to you tonight as we think together into this text and as we reflect together on it that that's how it is in our lives when God moves in.

He surprises us often with his mercy. His mercy because we don't get what we deserve. That's what mercy is, not getting what we really deserve, death and judgment.

And he surprises us with his grace because we do get what we don't deserve. That's what grace is. Getting what we don't deserve, salvation and eternal life.

And when the hound of heaven moves in on our lives, it is surprising. It is surprising what God can do. It was surprising to Jonah.

It was certainly surprising to Luther and it's been surprising to many godly people who've experienced this in their own lives. And that's what we wanna look at together this evening in this last few verses of the second chapter of the book of Jonah. Now, what I wanna do this evening is a little different than a straightforward exposition of Jonah.

Because what I want to do is to think with you, what I want to do is to think about Jonah's experience of salvation in the light of Ephesians chapter two, verses eight and nine. Because Jonah's experience, I wanna suggest to you this evening, points forward to the heart of the New Testament teaching concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ. It points forward to Paul's teaching on salvation.

And what we find here in the ninth verse of the second chapter of the book of Jonah is the heart of the gospel in this Old Testament book of prophecy. And I wanna suggest to you that it's this message that we need to hear afresh from the story of Jonah today, particularly as perhaps we cast an eye tonight backwards to the Reformation and to the mark that it's left on us as the people of God. Now, the first thing I want us to be reminded of is simply this truth, that Jonah was saved by the grace of God.

Jonah was saved by the grace of God. In our last study, you will remember how Jonah experienced both the judgment of God and the salvation of God. Jonah, you will remember, had run from God.

The Lord had come, the word of the Lord had come to him. He had received a call from God. He had received a commission to go to Nineveh to preach to that great city because the Lord had a message for them.

The Lord had a work of grace that he wanted to do in the lives of the people of that great city of Nineveh. But you'll remember, of course, that Jonah didn't want to go and we talked a little bit about the reasons for that. His narrow-minded nationalism and his ethnic prejudice and his truncated worldview made him really a bigot because he didn't want to share the blessings of God which he and the people of Israel had received with others.

He didn't want to be responsible to bring the message to the people of Nineveh. And so you'll recall he boarded a ship for Tarshish heading in the opposite direction and it's not long before a storm comes up and it's not long before he finds himself being thrown overboard by the sailors on that ship when they found out that he, Jonah, was responsible for the storm that they were all experiencing. And so Jonah's out into the ocean, but God is not finished with Jonah yet because the Lord sent a great fish to swallow Jonah.

And what we learned last time is that Jonah called out from the depths of the ocean, from the precipice of death itself, facing death, facing hell, facing God's judgment, and he calls out to the Lord. He understood his crisis as a consequence of running from God and he was trapped. And he knew now that there was nothing that he could do.

He knew now that he was incapable of saving himself. He knew that he was in a predicament from which he could never extricate himself. He was facing death in his flight from God, but he was unable to extricate himself from this situation.

And it appeared as though all was lost. It appeared as though everything had come crashing down around him. But what happened? God moved in.

God was not finished with him yet. God sent this fish to swallow Jonah up. He saved from the ocean and Jonah is ultimately saved.

And as it says in verse 10, spit out back onto dry land. And I want to suggest to you that Jonah had an experience, a deeply profound experience of the grace of God in his life. And Jonah's experience points to the reality of that truth of the gospel.

You see, though we are lost on account of our rebellion against God, and though we are far from the presence of God on account of our flight from God, and though we have sold ourselves into slavery, into bondage, the bondage of sin, and though we find ourselves in situations and in life and in sin unable to extricate ourselves, though we find ourselves in crisis, the surprising thing is that we can, in fact, be saved. And that's precisely the message of Jonah. It's precisely the message of the gospel.

When all hope appears to be lost, God mercifully provides for us and for our salvation. And that's precisely what the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2, eight and nine, for it is by grace you have been saved, and that not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one can boast.

Paul here reminds us that we cannot save ourselves just as Jonah could not save himself. Jonah couldn't do it. Luther couldn't do it.

And we can't do it. Because our situation, our crisis, is so serious that we're unable to extricate ourselves. Like a person drowning in the ocean, we need someone to throw us a lifeline.

It's this point that Paul, in fact, makes in his argument in the book of Romans. If you read the book of Romans and you look at chapters one to three, the apostle Paul there in chapters one to three outlines the crisis of humanity in sin. He describes the judgment under which we all find ourselves, the crisis in which we all live.

And it applies equally to Jews and to Gentiles, those with the covenant with the Word of God and those without. And we're in this crisis, unable to save ourselves. And then in chapter three of Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul begins to unfold what God has done.

And into this crisis comes the person of Jesus Christ. In his life and in his atoning death on the cross and in his resurrection, he makes possible for us what is never possible for us on our own. That is to be rescued from the chaos, from the crisis of sin.

Because Jesus rose on the third day, we can experience this life-giving grace and this salvation. What does grace mean? Someone has defined it with an acronym which I'm sure many of you have heard before. Grace is God's riches at Christ's expense.

God's riches at Christ's expense. I like to think of God's grace as God's glorious surprise. Not only is it a gift, you know, we think about salvation as a gift which is a wonderfully appropriate way to think about God's salvation, but it's also a gift which is unexpected.

You know, a lot of times when we think about a gift today, we think about gifts in terms of those gifts which we expect. At Christmas, we expect to receive gifts and the only surprise is opening them to see what they are. Or we expect a gift at our birthday and we only need to unwrap it to find out what it is.

But the grace of God is not only a gift, but it's a gift that's not only undeserved, but it's a gift that comes as a surprise. It's unearned favor. It's something we don't deserve.

And there's nothing, not one thing that we can do to make this happen because God takes the initiative. We are dead in our trespasses and in our sins. As Paul says later in chapter two of Ephesians, without hope and without God in the world, but God comes to us and surprises us with his grace.

The hymn writer puts it so well. Not the labor of my hands can fulfill thy laws demands. Could my zeal no respite know? Could my tears forever flow? All for sin could not atone.

Now what we need to understand is that this understanding of the grace of God cuts across the grain of everything that we think in our culture today about what it means to be fulfilled, about what it means to find salvation. We think somehow this is something we have to do, that we have to find self-fulfillment, that we have to come to some kind of self-realization. But you're not a Christian until you come to the point of realizing the reality of your need, the reality of your crisis, the depths of the crisis in which you find yourselves because the fact of the matter is that you cannot save yourself.

You might think, of course, that your situation isn't that bad after all. I mean, after all, I'm not a criminal. I live a pretty good life.

Certainly the goodness of my life must count for something. But the awful truth, as it's revealed to us in Scripture, is that we are unfit for God's presence, unable to do God's will, unrighteous before God's law, and insensitive to God's word. You see, what we need to understand, and what Jonah came to understand, is that his problem was not just the particular things that he did, but the problem was his condition in his flight from God, the misery of his condition without God.

In the 1974 film Chinatown, Noah Cross, one of the main figures there, says this. "Most people never have to face the fact "that at the right time, in the right place, "they're capable of anything." Let me say that again. Most people never have to face the fact that at the right time, in the right place, they're capable of doing almost anything.

And of course, if you look at our world today, you see that to be true, how evil is manifest. And what Jonah discovered and learned, and what we all need to discover and learn, is that God's grace is all that is possible to save us from the reality of this situation, the reality of our life apart from God. Only God can cut through that predicament.

Only God can save. Salvation comes from the Lord. But secondly, notice then that Jonah, I suggest to you, was also saved through faith.

How did Jonah respond to the work of God in his life? He believed. He trusted. He had faith.

In the midst of the judgment, he called to the Lord. Notice the language in the second chapter of Jonah. It says, he looked toward the holy temple of God.

He remembered the Lord while his life was ebbing away. In verse eight, he says that those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. He sings a song of thanksgiving to God.

He will offer a sacrifice to God. Why? Because salvation comes from the Lord. You see, Jonah came to the realization he knew that he deserved to die.

He knows that he should have been left in the ocean to drown but having experienced the saving grace of God in his life, he now responds with faith. He trusts in the Lord. He puts his full weight down upon the promises of God and that's what faith is.

It's putting your full weight down upon the promises of God. He relaxes in the grace of God. You see, faith is not something we give.

It's not something we trade, as it were, in exchange for our salvation but rather faith is the means through which we receive that salvation. Calvin has a wonderful picture of faith. He describes faith as empty hands, empty hands with which you reach out to Christ and with which you cling to Christ.

Faith is nothing more than clinging to Christ and to his cross for what he has done for you. That's why the hymn writer says it this way. Nothing in my hands I bring.

Simply to thy cross I cling. You see, faith is that which enables us to cling to Christ for our salvation. That's why Paul says we are saved by grace through faith and even this faith is not from yourselves but rather it is the gift of God.

You see, faith is not the power of positive thinking. It's not mustering up enough energy to kind of believe in God but rather it's trusting in the grace of God. It's relaxing in what God has done.

Faith, according to the writer of Hebrews, is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see and faith is defined by its object, by the Lord Jesus Christ and by what Christ has done for us. On the evening of May 24th, 1738, a young burnt out pastor, missionary named John Wesley went to a meeting, very unwillingly, to a meeting on Aldersgate Street where he heard someone reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans and this is what he wrote in his journal. He said about a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed.

I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation and an assurance was given me that he had taken my sins away, my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. You see, what Wesley experienced in his own heart, what strangely warmed his heart was the reality that the grace of God could be his, that he experienced it in his own life, that his sins could be forgiven and that what he simply had to do was trust in the reality of the grace of God. Martin Luther emphasized this by saying we are justified by faith alone and faith, he said, is the means through which the holiness, the righteousness, the perfect obedience, all that Christ has done for us is counted to us so that when God looks at us, he doesn't see us in our sinfulness, in our weakness, in our disobedience, but what he sees in you and what he sees in me is the perfect obedience and the perfect holiness of his own Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Lord and that's what justification means.

It means that what Christ has done, who Christ is, is counted to us and we are saved, we are justified by God's grace through faith. It is credited to us. And so in this way, we begin life over again.

Jonah trusted in what God had done for him. Are we willing to trust in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ? And then thirdly, as we close tonight, notice that Jonah was saved for something. Jonah was saved for good works.

Jonah was rescued from the ocean for a purpose. God still had a job for him to do. The call had never been taken away.

God still had a task for him to fulfill, to go to Nineveh, to preach to the great city, to preach repentance, to preach judgment so that people would respond. You see, Jonah was saved from that ocean. He was saved from the belly of that fish so that he could finally exercise the call and the commission which he had earlier refused.

You see, Jonah was not saved simply for his own sake. He was not saved simply so that he could feel better about himself. He was not saved simply as an end in itself, but he was saved in order to fulfill the purposes of God for his life.

And that's what the Apostle Paul means in verse 10 of Ephesians chapter two. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. You see, the fact of the matter is when you look at Jonah's story, what you discover is that God had a work for Jonah to do before Jonah knew about it.

When Jonah got the call, he refused and he ran, but God intervened anyways, saved him, brought him back to life as good as dead in order that he could exercise the call, exercise the commission, do the task, fulfill the work that God had called him to do. And that's true of all of us. When God surprises us with his grace, when God moves into our life, it's because he has a purpose.

It's because he has a plan. It's because he has for us something to do. We are created in Christ Jesus to do good works, to fulfill the purpose for which God has created us.

There is a greater end in view, the glory of God. In the Old Testament, the people of God, Old Testament Israel often forgot this. They had this idea that they were chosen by God, that they were special and they kind of reveled in that and forgot that they were chosen to be a light to the nations.

And the tragedy is that many Christians, many well-meaning Christians, many evangelical Christians in North America today, think about it, oh, it's me and Jesus. And it's a kind of individual piety which makes us feel good and we forget the fact that God has called us for a purpose, saved us for a purpose. That's why the apostle Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 2, 9 and 10, echoing this Old Testament theme, but you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people, a wonderful word, but now you are the people of God. Do you remember how the text ends? Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. God's mercy and grace has made us the people of God and with that comes a calling, a commission, a purpose, a task to be done.

You see, when you stop running from God, when you become a Christian, a new life begins. Good works is never the basis of salvation. The New Testament makes that abundantly clear.

It is never the basis of our acceptance by God. It's not as if what we do makes God love us anymore, but it is the fruit of a life that's been invaded by the grace of God. It's the fruit of a life that has trusted in the work of God in one's life.

In the summer of AD 386, a long time ago, a young man, a philosophy teacher, a kind of fellow who had misspent his youth and young adulthood, he sat weeping in the garden of a friend. His life was in ruins. He'd been living with a woman.

He had fathered a child by this woman. He had tried all kinds of different philosophies and different ideologies and his life was a wreck and he sat in the garden in the backyard of a friend crying, wondering whether he should break with his old life and take up a new life. He was struggling with whether he should become a Christian.

He was struggling with whether, in fact, his mother, Monica, had been right in raising him to be a follower of Jesus, which he had chucked, which he had thrown out, much like Jonah had run from God. There Augustine sat in that garden, struggling, anguish in his own soul, running from God in one way and yet realizing that he had about come to the end. He heard someone yell or some children playing in the yard next door and they were playing with a scroll or with a book and one of them said, take up and read and he took that as a word from the Holy Spirit to his life at that point and there happened to be a scroll, a book of the letter, Paul's letter to the Romans and so he took it up and he read it and this is what he read.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts. And Augustine said, no further would I read, nor had I any need because instantly at the end of this sentence, a clear light flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away. Augustine had come to the end of his flight from God and Augustine's life was invaded by the grace of God, surprising him, he trusted in Christ alone for his salvation and of course he went on to become one of the most significant church leaders, bishops,

theologians, pastors, leaders in the history of the church.

What does it mean to be a Christian? And much of what I've said tonight is not news at all to most of you, it's the basic gospel but here we see it in the experience of Jonah. It means to be saved by the grace of God. It means to be saved by the grace of God through faith in what God has done for you, through faith in Jesus Christ and it means to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, to respond to the call, to the commission of God upon your life, to live a new life in obedience to the will and to the word of God.

What it means is that rather than running from God, you run to God and cast yourself on the mercy of Jesus and from that point forward, you run in step with the spirit of God. Have you made that commitment in your life? If not, may I invite you to make it this evening and to say with Jonah and to say with Augustine and to say with Luther and to say with Wesley and to say with many, many, many of God's people throughout the history of the church, salvation comes from the Lord. Let's pray together.

Gracious God, our Father, we are reminded tonight of the riches of your gospel in the experience of Jonah and we are reminded of how profound is the reality of this gospel, that while we were dead in trespasses and sins, that while we were without hope and without God in the world, that while we were in the midst of our own chaos and crisis, into that situation stepped, came the Lord Jesus Christ and how we praise you for him tonight. Help us by faith to trust in Christ and to trust in him alone, perhaps for some of us the first time, perhaps for many of us recommitting ourselves to him, to new and greater obedience to his will and help us to hear and to receive your call and commission to us, we pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen.

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