

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM, JONAH 2

A man, a fish, and God's Grace

◆**Intro:** It was 1944. Bert Frizen, an infantryman on the front lines in Europe reached the edge of the wooded area with an open field before him. The earlier shelling of the area was now quiet. Unbeknown to the Americans, a battery of Germans were ready and waiting in the hedgerow about twohundred yards across the field. Bert was one of two scouts who moved out into the clearing. When they were halfway across the battalion followed. Suddenly the Germans opened fire and machine-gun ripped into both of Berts legs. The Americans withdrew and there was a rapid exchange. Laying helpless beneath the volleying bullets, Bert noticed to his dismay a German soldier crawling toward him. Death appeared to be immanent; he closed his eyes and waited. Nothing. He opened his eyes to see the German kneeling at his side, smiling. The shooting had stopped. Troops on both sides watched anxiously. The German lifted Bert with strong arms, and carried him to his American comrades, then without a word, turned and walked back across the field to his own side. There was a silent, sacred moment of grace.

◆Grace is the center theme of Jonah's tale. In fact scholars who study the poetry say that 2:9 is the literary center of the whole book. And it's about *hesed*, the hebrew term for grace. Chapter two in Jonah is a song about the grace that the story of Jonah is all about, and the God who is the source of it.

◆**1. When you hit bottom, look up.**

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◆Jonah is a story in which the enemy of God, the disobedient prophet, gets carried back to safety by the person he's fighting (God). At this point Jonah is at the end of the proverbial rope. I told you last week that the writer has been careful to depict Jonah as going "down hill". He "descended" to Joppa. He "descended" into the hull of the ship. And now he's actually "going down" to the bottom of the sea (v6). He's moments from death ("grave" in verse 2 is "Sheol," the place of the dead.) Verse 4 says that he is banished further and further from God's presence. He's as good as dead. He's hitting bottom.

◆**A.** But that's not all bad. When you're at the bottom there's only one place to look and that's up. Or you could just not look at all, but that won't help. I say, look up to God because you're never too far gone, and it's never too late with the sovereign, gracious God. People frequently make the assumption that they are too far gone, they've gone too far, "there's no coming back from what I've done". They think "I've battled this or that for so long, there's no hope for me." A dying older man once looked me with worried eyes and said, "Pastor, everything I've done hasn't been on the up and up, if you know what I mean." I know what you mean. So I reminded him of grace in Jesus. People don't look up because they don't believe in grace. They believe in merit. Earning love. And if you teach your children that you only love them when they are good, they will have a hard time with grace and hard time with God. But that's not how love is. The

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thief that died on a cross next to Jesus hadn't kept everything on the up and up either. He was as far gone as Jonah was in the depths of the sea. And yet at the last moments of his life he looks over to Jesus, like Jonah looked toward the "temple" of God, and asks for mercy, and Jesus promises him they will be together in Paradise that very day!

◆**B.** Because salvation is by grace it is always available this side of death.(cf. v8-9) Here's another text of verse 8-9!

◆*"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." Ephesians 2:8, 9, NIV.*

◆ If God's salvation wasn't by grace it would matter a lot how well you've done, how moral you've been. But nobody earns grace no matter where they fall on the list of wrong things done. Grace is a free thing, a gift. And grace is the only way you'll ever get life.

◆In 1993 British police accused two ten year old boys of the brutal murder of two year old James Bulger. They pleaded innocence. However they responded to police questioning with notable inconsistency. When confronted with irrefutable evidence linking them to the crime, the climax came when one of the boys' parents assured him that they would always continue to love him no matter what. It was in the grace of that assurance that the boy confessed in a soft voice, "I killed James."

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◆ The first miracle of love (grace) is that it is not an earned reality. And the second miracle of love is that it is given to bad people. In Jonah's story God goes after even the worst of the worst; the rebellious prophet, and the notorious, evil Assyrians in another country. That's why Jonah had to sink to the bottom; only there did he realize that it was where he deserved to be, he was one of the bad people like the rest of us who deserve Sheol. C.S. Lewis reminds us that "We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved; we are ...rebels who must lay down our arms."

◆ **C.** God often lets us hit bottom just so that we will look up to him for grace. Some folks wonder why God lets even his own, – Jonah was God's prophet! –, hit bottom before helping them. I'll bet many of us here have turned a face toward heaven at times and said, "Why are you letting this happen to me?!" Didn't God *know* where Jonah was heading when he left home for Tarshish instead of Nineveh? Couldn't he have just tripped him a little, given Jonah a flat tire, broken his camel's leg or something to clue him in sooner. Probably a few reasons:

- ◆ 1) sinful people often don't listen until they hit bottom.
- ◆ 2) God wants us to know just how massive grace actually is. It stretches fully as far as the very bottom and back. The bottom is where it becomes abundantly clear that there is nothing you or I contribute to our salvation. Grace is all God and none of me!

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◆ *We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. (2 Corinthians 1:8-9).*

◆ Listen friends, finding God, getting saved, forgiveness for sins, receiving blessing –it's all gift, plain and simple. The Bible says, "what do you have that you have not been given?" Take Adam and Eve. Before they sinned and brought it into the world, they experienced the goodness of God, but that wasn't because they deserved it. You can't deserve as a "non-being" to be created and given life in a lavish garden. And after the Fall into sin, we cannot say that their repentance constrained God to give them grace. It's not a magic formula that forces God's hand to save you when you confess and believe. Even your believing and repenting is a gift God gives you so that you might be saved by him!

◆ Acts 11:18 ... "God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

◆ Acts 5:31 *God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.*

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◆ Grace is not constrained, determined, forced or caused by anything outside God's own good will. Not by our good record, not by our heritage, not by our repentance, or even by our decision to believe on Jesus Christ. Every good step and every good thing is all grace from a good and sovereign God!

◆2. When you hit bottom, look into the Word.

◆ Here's something interesting: this truth comes back to Jonah as he's nearing death at the bottom beneath the tossing waves. Jonah knew his scriptures as you can tell from his psalm here. If you've read the Psalms you probably notice it sounds very much like:

◆ *"The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears." Psalms 18:4-6 (cfv1, 5)*

◆ "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy." Psalms 130:1, 2

◆ "Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me." Psalms 42:7

◆ So Jonah knew what God was like, and sinking into the darkness of the deep, the eyes of his heart looked in God's direction once more.

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◆ "I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple.'" Jonah 2:4

◆ **B.** Get into the Word. Learn everything you can about God and what he's like. That way it can come back to you when you are hitting bottom, like it did for Jonah. Teach your children the truths of the Scriptures. If a time comes when they run from God, the Holy Spirit can bring the Word back to them even while they are sinking. When you are sinking, search the Word of God for what God is doing in you. God is always working toward your spiritual maturity (sanctification). Hebrews 12 says...

◆ *"And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?" Hebrews 12:5-7, NIV.*

◆ **3. Get to the bottom of yourself as quickly as you can.** The sooner you do the sooner resurrection can happen. In Sumerian mythology it took 3 days and nights to return from the realm of the dead back to the land of the living. So to people of Jonah's day, surviving three days in a fish in the sea would be a deadman's resurrection! What Jonah experienced was about as close as you can get to an actual resurrection from the dead.

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◆ And he is well aware that it's no accident. God is his salvation, the fish is just a tool. God threw him in (v3), and God pulled him back up (6c). The story starts with God (1:17 God provided a fish.) And the story ends with God (2:10 God "spoke" to the fish). God is sovereign over everything: Jonah, the storm, the sea, the fishes -all of it. Jonah is alive because the sovereign God had no intention of having his prophet perish. No, he was going to go to Nineveh because the sovereign God had no intention of having Nineveh perish either!

◆ **B.** To help ourselves learn this and truly marvel at grace we would do well to practice. When you walk out and get in your fancy vehicle, tell yourself there is no reason why you should be able to afford it. It's all grace. You should not think "well I'm a good citizen and I've worked hard and been honest, and I don't abuse substances, and I've volunteered a lot at church and this good life is because I've been like this." It isn't true. For everyone here that's worked hard and saved money, and read their Bibles, and gone to worship, and obeyed the law -there are many God-followers in other place and time that worked harder, sought God more and received suffering and persecution instead of 401K accounts and new cars every year. For every parent who gave up buying fast food every day for breakfast to save money for the kids college, -there are parents who gave up far more, and their children never got schooling just because of where they were born. My point is this: everything we have is grace. Work,

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save, plan, but remember it's still all in the hands of God to do as he will. Expecting that we deserve grace, or that grace can be deserved at all was Israel's mistake, and is ours as well.

◆ **C.** Get to the end/bottom of yourself as quickly as possible. We call getting to the bottom of yourself surrendering. Is there anywhere you need to surrender? Surrender your pride and go to AA if you can't stop abusing alcohol. Your family doesn't love you because they think you're staying sober. They love you because they want to. Surrender your pride and tell a trusted friend you can't stop looking at porn. Surrender your pride and tell someone you're sorry. Surrender your pride and ask your wife to look up the directions on Google Maps. Surrender your pride and ask Jesus to forgive you for your sins. You have nothing to lose except your sin!

◆ **Conclusion:** Here is the conclusion of the matter: ponder grace. Marvel at grace for when you have, your joy and hope are more full. You will live life delighted and in awe of the compassion God has for you. Plus, when we ponder God's grace, we normally become more gracious ourselves, which is the sad and missing element in Jonah's story. Like Israel, if we find we have no time for our enemies, it's likely we haven't pondered the grace God showed us when we were his enemies. God's grace breaks out anywhere, even on a battle field.