

PROPHET IN THE DEEP!
Deep Evil – Rich Grace
What God Appoints Will Never Disappoint

A Journey through Jonah:
Embracing and Extending God's Scandalous Mercy

Text: Jonah 1:17; 2:10; Matthew 12:38-42

Jonah 1:17; 2:10 — 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. . . . And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

This morning we are continuing our journey through the powerful little book of Jonah. As we have already noted, the story highlights God's radical grace and spotlights His scandalous mercy.

Grace and mercy are theological concepts we embrace and even personal realities from God we thankfully celebrate. But generally, we do not think of grace as radical or mercy as scandalous. This is even true of people like us who have grown up in church and have been reminded all our lives that salvation is by grace and that God is merciful. Perhaps this is why we fail to be shocked by God's grace and scandalized by His mercy.

However, when one of the two main characters in the book came face to face with God's grace and mercy, he was shocked, scandalized, and deeply offended at God to the point he resigned his commission as God's prophet, he renounced his privileges as part of God's chosen people, and he removed himself from all the places where God had chosen to reveal Himself and upon which He placed His name – the Land of Israel, the city of Jerusalem, the majestic temple of Solomon, the Davidic Dynasty, the Mosaic Covenant, and the glorious wonderful worship system God had instructed for His people that was the marvel of the Queen of Sheba and the surrounding nations.

We followed this angry prophet down to Joppa and watched him go aboard a ship headed for Tarshish, the Timbuktu of that day, some 2000 miles in the opposite direction from where God instructed Jonah to go. Some days later, the sailors found themselves caught in the grip of a storm so fierce, the ship was about to

break apart. Recognizing the supernatural origin of the storm around them, they began to search out its human cause and the lots they cast fell unerringly and inevitably on God's prodigal prophet, Jonah.

Surprisingly, Jonah's personal admission combined with his theological confession resulted in the repentance of every person on the ship except one – Jonah. So offended was he at the thought of God showing mercy to the enemies of His people, the Assyrians, that when pushed to the point of choosing to perish or repent, Jonah chose to perish. We last saw Jonah being hurled over the side of a ship into an angry sea in the midst of a raging storm.

If we had been there on that day, we would have abandoned all hope of ever seeing Jonah alive again – no one could survive that ocean in that storm. And just when things could not seem worse for Jonah, a great sea creature appears on the scene and swallows up Jonah, and heads downward taking Jonah to the very bottom of the ocean.

Jonah is so far down, no one knows where he is – not his family, not his people, not the sailors, not even Jonah. All he knows is that when he landed in the water, his situation went from horribly bad to hopelessly horrific as he was swallowed up in the jaws of a massive, terrifying sea creature.

Who could escape from that situation? Who was there to rescue and deliver Jonah from the depths of the ocean and more importantly, from the deep evil that drove him there?

Illustration – cave rescue: *On June 23, 2018, twelve boys between the ages of 11-16 and their coach decided to explore a cave system near their village in Northern Thailand after soccer practice. It was monsoon season and while they were in the cave system, heavy torrential rainfall flooded the caves and trapped the boys and their coach deep inside the cave system approximately 2.5 miles from where they entered. The boys and their coach remained trapped deep in the darkness of the cave system for ten days before two British divers finally reached the place where they were trapped. It would be 8 more days before the boys and their coach were finally rescued from their ordeal. The rescue effort involved more*

than 10,000 people, 100 divers, and representatives of more than 100 different government agencies, and required an immense number of resources. By the time the boys were rescued 18 days after they were trapped, more than 1 billion liters of water had been pumped out, millions of dollars spent, and the life of one rescuer had been lost.

Show the Clip of the trailer for the documentary produced by the National Geographic Society.

None of us can begin to imagine what it must have been like to be trapped in the dark for 10 days without knowing whether anyone was ever going to find you much less rescue you. But at least the boys knew that someone was looking for them and attempting to rescue them.

Jonah, on the other hand, had to know that he was all alone in the deep, in the dark, running out of air, and running out of life! No one was coming. And even if they wanted to help, how do you rescue someone from the belly of a monstrous sea creature at the bottom of the ocean? From all outward appearances, Jonah was beyond human help and beyond human hope!

By the way, sometimes our own stubbornness and sinfulness land us in similar places where we feel alone in the mess we have made, forgotten by our friends, and even abandoned by God – with no way out of our trouble and no way back to the safety of dry land.

However, when all other help has failed and all human hope is gone, all is not lost when God is involved. God was interested in delivering Jonah from the danger he was in, but He was far more interested in delivering Jonah from the disobedience that landed him in the deep.

The main character in the book is not Jonah – it is God. Throughout the book, God is sovereignly at work delivering people. He has delivered idolatrous Israel by once again showing mercy through Jonah, the son of Amittai (1:1; 2 Kings 14:23-27). He delivered idolatrous pagan sailors from the deadly storm and from their deadly idolatry (1:5-16). Later in the book, He will deliver the Ninevites from their great wickedness (3:1-10). But in this scene, God is about to deliver the hardest-hearted person in the book – His

stubborn, prodigal prophet Jonah. God knows exactly where, when, and how to deliver Jonah from the deep so that in the end He can deliver Jonah from Jonah! And perhaps as God delivers Jonah, He will also deliver some of us out of our own journey into the deep.

And the appointed means for all of this deliverance was a massive, sea-creature – a “great fish” created by God for this very moment and deployed by God for this particular task!

I. God’s Merciful Intervention – “But God”

- The Hebrew text is very clear and very direct – “but God.”*
- The narrator has crafted the story skillfully so that as Jonah disappears under the waves, so does our hope for him.*
- And it is here when all human resources are powerless to help, and all human hope has been abandoned that the narrator brings up the spotlight and focuses our attention squarely on God and on His gracious intervention for good in our lives.*
- We don’t yet know what God will do to Jonah or for Jonah, but we do know that He is up to something, and based on what we know about His character and the covenant He has made with His people, we suspect that whatever is about to happen will result in Jonah’s good.*
- And that is exactly what happens – God directly intervenes in the affairs and in the life of His prodigal prophet.*
- And what is more, we discover that this is not a random, last-minute rescue attempt. God has been involved all along. He has hurled the storm in Jonah’s path. He directed the lots cast by the sailors to reveal Jonah so that through Jonah’s confession about God the pagan sailors could come to embrace God. He frustrated their efforts to row to dry land in a desperate attempt to save Jonah’s life when Jonah would not repent saving his own life. He calmed the sea for the sailors and opened their eyes so they would repent and moved in their hearts so that they would dedicate themselves to following Him.*
- The way the text is framed clearly displays that the narrator wants us to know that what comes next in the story is coming from the hand of God who*

has been at work in Jonah's life all along but who now intervenes directly in the scene.

· And when God intervenes in this text, we observe three important realities about God we must never forget or ignore:

A. He will not abandon His servants to their Stubborn Sinfulness

· As we have already noted, Jonah is determined to resist God's decision to show mercy on those that Jonah does not believe merit such mercy.

· Jonah is not running to pursue some sinful pleasure or engage in some immoral or idolatrous pursuit.

· Jonah's running is fueled by righteous indignation. His disobedience is justified by self-righteous outrage at what God has decided to do.

· But whether our sinful disobedience is fueled by immoral desires and wicked lust, or it is fueled by self-righteous theologically motivated outrage – sin is still sin, and disobedience, though however justified in our own eyes, is never acceptable in God's.

· Truthfully, Jonah has had every opportunity to listen to the voice of God, respond to the circumstantial warnings from God, and repent of his willful disobedience – to no avail.

· At this point in the story, Jonah is done with God! He resigned his ministry, renounced his citizenship, and removed himself from the presence of God – and when God showed up on deck, Jonah decided that death by drowning was preferable.

· And sometimes we get to this place in our own hearts – we are done with God! BUT . . . God is never done with us no matter what we have done, where we have gone, or what mess we have made of things – God is never done with us, and He will not abandon us or leave us to our sins.

B. He won't abdicate His control over the affairs of His Servant

· Our choices limit up but never frustrate God's larger plan!

· Jonah was free to choose to disobey God's call but when he did, he became responsible for the consequences of that choice.

· And as he progresses down the path of disobedience, you can see that his choices became more and more restricted while God's were not at all restricted.

- *Jonah was free to go to Joppa and board the ship. But once on board, he was restricted to the ship. Once the lots were cast, his options were even more restricted – he could repent and remain on the ship or refuse and be hurled into the sea. Once he was in the sea, his options become even more limited when the sea creature swallowed him up – and by the time we find Jonah at the bottom of the ocean, he is out of options and has no choices at all.*
- *And that is often what God allows to happen in our lives – we think we are casting off God’s right to rule our lives and direct our paths – but every sinful choice not only takes us away from God, it actually restricts our lives and confines our paths until we have finally chosen ourselves right into the desperate situation we are in with no apparent way out.*
- *When we try to take control over our own lives, as our loving Father, He never abdicates His greater control over us!*

C. He will not adjust His plans to show mercy when, where, and on whomever He wills.

- *Jonah has acted in ways he believes will thwart God’s plans to show mercy on Nineveh.*
- *After all, if he doesn’t go and preach to Nineveh, they won’t repent. And if they don’t repent, then surely God will have to judge them.*
- *Jonah used his theology to manipulate God into doing what was right in Jonah’s eyes.*
- *And Jonah had to learn that no matter who you are, what ministry you have or what theology you know – you can’t manipulate God. You can’t manipulate His mercy or His judgment.*
- *Jonah is at the top of the list of all the people in the book who deserve judgment – and he tries to force God’s hand by refusing to repent. He gets mercy instead of judgment not because he deserves it but because God delights to give it!*

II. God’s Sovereign Direction – “appointed a great fish”

- *When God intervenes in our lives, He often does so by an appointed means of His sovereign choosing and specific design.*

- *The term that is used in this text – “appointed” – is a term one would use to apportion or dedicate (apportion) a resource for some particular use or direct (allocate) to some specific task.*
- *Earlier, Jonah confessed a theological reality about God – He is the God of Heaven who made the sea and the dry land (1:9).*
- *And the God who is the sovereign creator of all that is in the sea directed one of His creatures – a great fish to perform a very specific task – to bring His prodigal prophet back! Back to his senses, back to Yahweh, and eventually back to dry land!*
- *There is little point in trying to identify the kind of fish that God directed Jonah’s way – clearly, it was very great and sufficiently large to accommodate and transport Jonah.*
- *What we must not miss is the part God assigned for this great sea creature to play in Jonah’s physical and spiritual deliverance.*
- *And we must not miss how God uses natural circumstances – even disconcerting ones – to bring about similar deliverances in our own lives.*
- *The fish may have been a natural creature of the sea, but in our story, it plays supernatural role at the command of its Creator!*

A. It is the Means of divine deliverance

- *By means of this natural disaster, God will bring about a supernatural divine deliverance.*
- *Jonah desperately needs to be delivered from:*
 1. *Impending Death*
 2. *Impenitent Disobedience*

B. It is the Place of divine Instruction

- *The belly of the fish will become a spiritual classroom where God teaches Jonah several important lessons about self-righteousness, repentance, mercy, restoration, and deliverance.*

C. It is the Means of divine transportation

- *It is the means by which God transports Jonah back to the land of the living*

· *It is the means by which God transports His mercy to those who are dying in sin.*

However, God's merciful intervention and sovereign direction bring up an interesting and important question:

Why does God spend so much time and effort rescuing a disobedient, unrepentant prophet who has willfully chosen to perish instead of repenting? Why not just let Jonah experience the end result of his willful rebellion and raise up another prophet to go in His place?

There is only one answer – God's Loyal Love (Loving Kindness). And it is the same answer as to why God does not abandon us to the consequences of our own Jonah-like choices.

III. God's Loving Compassion – “to swallow up Jonah”

· *What exactly did God task or direct His great sea creature to do? To swallow up His prodigal prophet!*

· *The image of swallowing up is a violent one. In the bible, it can convey the idea of being swallowed up by danger (Ps. 16:19; an enemy army (Jer. 51:34). It is often used to describe being swallowed up by the “sheol” or the grave in judgment (Ex. 15:12; Num. 16:30-32) or sinners swallowed up in death (Job 24:19; Prov 1:12). In every case the image of “swallowing up” is used negatively to describe judgment.*

· *So why is it that here, the image of “swallowing up” is actually used in a positive way as a means of deliverance?*

· *Because in this instance, the “swallowing up” of Jonah is the result of God's commitment not to bring judgment on Jonah but rather to deliver him!*

A. God is committed to Jonah's salvation from death.

· *Jonah has sinned in ways worthy of death.*

· *Jonah preferred death over life.*

· *BUT by the end of what looks like certain death – God deposits Jonah back on dry land . . . alive.*

B. God is committed to Jonah's sanctification from disobedience.

- *Jonah has determined to rebel against God's will and has persisted in his disobedience to God's Word.*
- *By the end of this experience, he has responded to God's Word and is obeying God's will.*

C. God is committed to Jonah's spiritual service and ministry.

- *Jonah may be done with God and with serving Him in his prophetic ministry, but God isn't done with Jonah!*
- *By the end of this experience, Jonah is back in prophetic ministry and headed to Nineveh to preach the message God sent him to deliver.*

BUT how in the world did all of this happen in the belly of the fish? Obviously, what was going on inside the fish was nothing compared to what was going on inside Jonah!

So, what was God doing? He was sanctifying His prophet (1 Thess. 5:23), and he was causing him to will and eventually to do His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13)

IV. God's Gracious Reorientation – "and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights."

- *Jonah's experience in the darkness of the belly of the fish became a portable classroom where he learned unforgettable spiritual lessons that reoriented his thinking in at least three major areas:*

A. Reoriented in His understanding of God's sovereignty

- *This experience radically reoriented Jonah's understanding of who was really in charge of his life, his ministry, his message, and the mission God had appointed him to accomplish.*
- *Jonah was in a fish appointed by God to a mission to remind Jonah that he too had been created by God and had been appointed to a mission.*
- *Just like the fish didn't get to choose the mission; nor be excused from the mission because Jonah was un-tasty; nor be excused from the*

mission due to its unusual nature – neither could Jonah be excused from the mission appointed to Him by the same Creator God!

B. Reoriented in His understanding of God’s severity

- Jonah needed a clear and unforgettable reminder that it is no small matter to disregard God’s Word or disobey God’s will – no matter how justified in your own mind you might think you are in doing so.*
- Disobedience is serious business and ultimately, it brings the severe wrath of God upon the head of the impenitent sinner.*
- God’s mercy was delivered by a severe means – a sea monster.*

C. Reoriented in His understanding of God’s mercy

- Jonah needed as much unmerited mercy as the Ninevites*
- Mercy is never merited, and it is never merely just or fair.*

V. God’s Redemptive Instruction – “And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.”

- So why is it that here, the image of “swallowing up” is actually used in a positive way as a means of deliverance?*
- Because 750 years later death would swallow up another prophet from Jonah’s home region – Jesus of Nazareth. And because God appointed death to swallow up Jesus, He could appoint this great fish to swallow up Jonah and save his life!*
- And this is possible because when Jesus was swallowed up by death – like Jonah, he remained there for 3 days and nights – but then God spoke, and the tomb was not able to hold Jesus – He conquered death and came forth in life!*
- And the evidence of Jonah’s temporary deliverance from death is that God spoke to the fish a second time and it vomited up Jonah on dry land!*

A. God saves us from judgment

- *Because one greater than Jonah came and was swallowed up by death for three days and three nights – He suffered the penalty that Jonah and we should have rightly experienced.*
- *God saves us from Judgement by one greater than Jonah!*
- *But . . . He saves us from judgment in an unusual way by an unusual means – we are saved from judgment by judgment!*

B. God saves us through judgment

- *When Jesus was swallowed up by death and took upon himself the penalty that was ours and bore on his head the curse we are under – he rescued us from judgment!*
- *And this is why Paul quotes Isaiah 25:8 and triumphantly declares, “Death is swallowed up in victory! O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Our Lord Jesus Christ!” (1 Cor. 15:54-56)*

Conclusion: Lessons for Life

So, what are we supposed to do with a message like this? How do we take truth like this and fit it into our lives?

We do what God wanted Jonah to do and what Paul exhorts us to do when he stated, “Therefore. My beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain.” (1 Cor 15:58)

And when we find ourselves in the place of God’s appointed deliverance, instruction, sanctification, and spiritual reorientation – let us remind ourselves of the lessons Jonah learned in the very same classroom:

1. God will never abandon us to our sin . . . never!

He promised that he would never leave us (be absent or disengaged) or forsake us (abandon us) to our sinful ways or their consequences. (Dt. 31:8; Heb. 13:5-6)

Deuteronomy 31:8 It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

2. The end of all sin is death – someone has to pay a penalty.

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

3. God might be silent, but He is never absent.

Isaiah 43:1–3 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

4. Appearances are not always what they seem with God.

1 Samuel 16:7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

5. Salvation from judgment comes through judgment!

2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So . . .

- *No matter where you are, what you have done, or what you think you have lost – there is a way back . . . all the way back!*
- *No matter what you don't see God doing, trust that He is working amazing things for His glory and your good!*
- *Therefore, be steadfast in your faith! Be immovable in your loyalty to Christ. Be abounding in your ministry for Christ!*

Because we are not involved in vain effort or worthless work!