
GOD'S GRACE IS GREAT

Jonah 3:1-10

June 20, 2021

Salvation belongs to the Lord, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

When it comes to knowing Bible Stories, the story of Jonah is certainly a memorable one. Jonah is swallowed by a great sea creature of some kind and survives in the belly of the creature for 3 days. Who could forget that story, especially the wonder that it created when you heard it as a young child in Sunday School. However, that neat story is only a small part of the Book of the prophet Jonah. There are 3 other chapters in the book which tell a story where the key subject in the book is not a man named Jonah, but the Great Grace of God.

You likely remember that Jonah was swallowed by the fish, but I am willing to bet that you don't remember why. In the lesson today it says, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Get up. Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.'" The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time because the first time didn't go so well. God originally told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to it, but Noah did exactly the opposite. Instead of making the 25 day, 550 mile walk to Nineveh, Jonah made the short trip to Joppa and boarded a boat to go 2500 miles in the opposite direction the Lord told him to go!

Why did Jonah do that? Was he lazy and didn't want to walk that far? Was he not interested in being a prophet for the Lord? No, Jonah ran because he knew that if he preached the Word of the Lord to the Ninevites, they would repent of their sins and God would have mercy on them! Jonah didn't want to God because he knew the Word worked. If Jonah spread the seed of the Word in Nineveh, God would make it grow!

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian people. It was a huge metropolitan area, like our New York. It was an ancient city already in the time of Jonah. It was founded by Nimrod, the great-grandson of Noah. Unfortunately the people who became the Assyrians, lost touch with the true God. They worshiped many, many false gods. They were a very cruel and wicked people. One of the kings of Assyria reveled in how high he could stack the severed heads of those they conquered. Jonah knew of this wickedness, but was terrified by the idea that God would have mercy on them. The very fact that God called Jonah to preach, giving them an opportunity to repent turned Jonah's stomach.

That is when Jonah found himself in the stomach of a great sea creature. He ran from God's call, was angry about God's grace and needed repenting himself. God used a unique way to call Jonah to repentance. Now before the adult in you says, "That was a neat story when I was a kid, but

someone could not be swallowed by a fish and live.” A few days ago, off the coast of Cape Cod, a lobster diver was eaten by a humpback whale. He was fully in the mouth of the whale but not swallowed. He describes feeling the muscles of the whale trying to do their work and swallow him down, but the whale wasn’t too happy about the size of the man and the scuba gear so after 30 to 40 seconds the whale surfaced and shook the man loose from its mouth, alive. God can do anything and he can keep a man alive in the belly of a great fish if he wants too and in Jonah’s case, he did.

In that fish, Jonah learned that he was as guilty of despising God as the Ninevites. He learned that his sins, though different from those of the Ninevites meant he deserved God’s wrath and punishment too. He deserved to sink to the bottom of the ocean and die of drowning and die forever in the fires of hell, just like the Ninevites did. And as we read the accounts of sinners who have lived before us, we see the same thing. All those sins that were on your mind and heart today as we confessed our sins make us guilty too before God. He asks us to live perfect lives according to his Word, and we say no and run for Tarshish to follow our own sins and wicked desires.

But what did Jonah learn? Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the fish in chapter two tells us, “In my distress I called to the Lord and he answered me. You brought my life up from the pit, O Lord, my God. Salvation belongs to the Lord.” My dear brothers and sisters, salvation belongs to the Lord. The Lord, in his grace would not let Jonah get away, but grabbed him in the most dramatic way and helped Jonah see that the Lord’s grace is for all, even for those who run away. The Lord’s grace is for us too. It will not let us get away. We return to sin over and over and over again, but the Lord does not abandon us but calls us back to him and again and again in his Word and points us to forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time and this time he went and preached in Nineveh and guess what, the Word worked. The Ninevites repented of their sin and wickedness. The king even issued a decree that everyone ought to fast and call on the Lord, even the animals. He confessed that the people were wicked and violent and that this needs to stop. Just as the gospel lesson showed us today in Jesus’ parable, Jonah scattered the seed of the Word in Nineveh and God made it grow in the hearts of the whole city. It is one of the most amazing conversion stories in all of the Bible, that an entire heathen city would repent and turn to the Lord.

This account also highlights that God’s grace knows no bounds. He called back the fleeing prophet to repentance and faith and he called with wicked and evil Ninevites to faith in him through the preaching of Jonah, and he calls sinners like us to himself as well. God’s grace is great. He relented from destroying the city of Nineveh when he saw the faith in their hearts.

Did the Ninevites really believe in God as Savior? Were they really repentant? Sometimes people call into question the validity of what happened there in Nineveh. It helps us when we look at what Jesus said about it in the New Testament. Jesus was speaking with the Pharisees and teachers of the law who were opposing Jesus and said, "But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation wishes for a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. For just as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. But one even greater than Jonah is here."¹

It is likely that the Ninevites learned from Jonah how God showed tremendous grace to Jonah and called him to repent in the belly of the fish. They learned how God, who threatened to destroy them because of their wickedness, would forgive that wickedness through a Savior who was to come who would spend three days in the belly of the earth before becoming alive again to show that sin is forgiven. Jesus says that people from ancient Nineveh will join us in heaven someday.

My dear brothers and sisters, there are two things I pray that we all learn today from Jonah. The first is just how great God's grace is. God has mercy on the fleeing prophet who runs away from his call to share the Word. God has mercy on the absolutely wicked and heathen people of Nineveh. God has mercy on us. You have not sinned so greatly that your sin can't be covered by Jesus' blood. Whatever sin is bothering you, however you are struggling with temptation, whatever it is you have said or done, Jesus died, and rose again from the belly of the earth so that you are forgiven. God's grace is great.

The second thing is that God's grace is for all people. The Lord calls on all of us to share his Word like Jonah, not to this or that great city, but to those people we can where God has put us. Yes, it seems that as every year goes by, the world marches further and further away from God and his Word. Whether our world today matches the wickedness and godlessness of Nineveh or surpasses it, doesn't matter. Jesus calls on us to spread the seed of his Word and we can be know just as Jonah did, that the Word works. It can make a change in the heart of even the most wicked and godless people and it can make a change in the hearts of people in our world today.

In the Second Lesson today Paul wrote, "The gospel is bearing fruit and growing in the entire world, just as it also has been doing among you from the day you heard it and came to know the grace of God in truth."² This is true today just as it was in Paul's day. The gospel continues to

¹ Matthew 12:38-41

² Colossians 1:6

grow and bear fruit. We don't always see the results with our eyes. We don't see what is happening in other places around the world, but the gospel is growing and bearing fruit.

Go like Jonah when the word of the Lord came to him a second time and share the gospel with as many people as you can, the neighbor across the fence, the person you are dating, the coworker in the next cubicle, the family member who has drifted from God, whoever it might be. Go like Jonah and don't be afraid that the Word works, rejoice that the Word works, even in the hearts of those you think it has no chance. It worked in Jonah. It worked in Nineveh. It worked in you. God's grace is great in the gospel. Share it and know that it works. Amen.