

Sermon on Jonah prepared by Jonathan Shradar

YouVersion events... if able please stand for the reading of the word.

God's love will move and surprise his people.

Jonah 2:1–9 “Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, [2] saying,

“I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

[3] For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.

[4] Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.’

[5] The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head

[6] at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.

[7] When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

[8] Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.

[9] But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the LORD!” (ESV)

God’s love will move and surprise his people.

Imagine waking up every day without a clue how you got to where you are. Not sure who you are or what purpose defines your life... That is the storyline of a classic movie, Memento. The lead character is left to interpret a full-body collection of tattoos that reveal who he is, why he is where he is and what he has done to get there... It’s quite the trip. I won’t spoil it for you.

As I was studying this week the image stuck in my mind, how like the Christian life this is. At times amazement at the way life has unfolded, and other times perplexity with sin uncovered. Often asking, “How did I get here?”

In good ways (looking at your family with contented joy), bad (feeling ravaged by sin and attempts to defeat it), and the neutral (wonder what you are to keep doing with your life!)

Spending energy on interpreting the signs, the symptoms of our lives, and the words of God to recover our understanding of place and purpose.

In a way, Jonah helps us answer some of this question. God speaks of purpose, place, and his heart that confounds us. And we can take hope in what this prophet reveals of who God is, and who we are before him.

God’s love will move and surprise his people.

Jonah is without a doubt the best known of the Minor Prophets; Christians and unbelievers alike all know the story whether we know the context and outcome. It’s a whale of a story! God using a seemingly ridiculous story of waves, giant fish, astounding repentance of a violent society and the interplay of a shade plant and a voracious worm.

Jonah, a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel during a peaceful and prosperous time of the reign of Jeroboam II. 782-753 BC. This book is not all we know of Jonah.

Jeroboam the son of Joash did what was evil in the sight of God. **2 Kings 14:25**

“He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.” (ESV)

And from this account, we know that Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh to “call out against it” for their disregard of God. Instead, he goes a bit sideways and ends up in the belly of a fish.

Through the story though we catch a couple of huge clues about God’s motives and how he motivates.

God’s love will move and surprise his people.

God may use waves to motivate you.

Now Jonah is a prophet of reputation. We have heard of him from 2 Kings. So it is likely he was respected, trusted as an oracle of God. If he said ‘God says this will happen’ you can take it to the bank, it’s a sure thing. He is probably at the pinnacle of his ministry and comfortable with his influence and audience.

But God has a mission for him. “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city (important city), and call out against it, for their evil has come before me.” 1:2.

Think for a moment geopolitically. Jonah is likely in Samaria among Israel, his people. Nineveh is hundreds of miles away, and a warring people. Known for their violence toward those they conquer.

We don’t know exactly what is going through Jonah’s mind at this point, but instead of being obedient to God’s call, he runs the other way. He goes to Joppa on the Mederterainian coast and finds a ship heading to Spain... as far away from where he is supposed to be.

I get it, Nineveh is a barren, dry, and dark place. He is just calling down judgment. But Tarshish, that is where the adventure is. Unknown opportunity awaits there. And maybe, just maybe, it will be far enough to be out of God’s reach! If he could just get away from the presence of God.

And while on the ship, a storm comes and redirects him.

The pagans on the ship call on everyone to cry out to their own gods to save the ship, they offload cargo and have to wake Jonah up. Lots are drawn and it is clear the storm is Jonah's fault. They pray for absolution and throw him overboard.

You know what happens next, God appoints a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And the poor dude is in the tummy of that fish for three days! Change of plans!

Now, Jonah had a specific call, and God brought him to the place where he could be obedient.

God's mission is important enough for him to intervene in life, and he really does. If we have eyes to see it, we have all probably had a fishy moment that moved us where we were supposed to be.

God may use waves to motivate you!

Now we know that God is in control, he cares for his own. Even when it doesn't seem like it. He is sovereign and puts us where he wants for his mission to move forward.

Paul in Athens preaching the gospel. **Acts 17:24–27** “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, [25] nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. [26] And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, **having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place**, [27] that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,” (ESV)

This sometimes slaps us across the face like a dead fish... and so much of our cultural perspective attempts to cloud this reality. I need to be in the place that matches my preference, maybe even my economics! And I am not against being strategic in choosing a place to live or the work to set our hands to, but I think we miss so much because we don't think for a moment that God has put us where he wants us.

California is expensive... “There’s no such thing as a God-forsaken place if God’s people have not forsaken it. #californiacalling” Alan Frow

Jonah gives us a theology of place. God may give you specifics, but when we don’t notice them, likely he has placed us where he calls us. Flourishing in unexpected places - there are so many stories.

You and I have been called by God to serve in a divinely appointed way at a divinely appointed place.

And sometimes, if we don’t figure it out, the waves can come. The wind can blow us to a certain place. Our job situation might change, a pandemic might provide new flexibility, a friend might invite us to something different. “How did I get here?!”

That might be the adventure we need to stir us to do what God has called us to do. Have you ever been to a waterpark? The wave pool isn’t any fun without the waves! This is real adventure. We can say with Charles Spurgeon, “I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages.” (and his purpose).

It won’t always be easy, or match our definitions of success, but God will use us.

Elizabeth Elliot told of how her husband and four other men sang the hymn “We Rest on Thee” the night before they tried to share the gospel with an Amazonian tribe.

“We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender!
We go not forth alone against the foe;
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,
We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go”

For Jim Elliot, obedience was met with a spear. But the purposes of God went forth. A life surrendered to the resurrected Christ is worth it... but I don’t want to get ahead of ourselves.

The waves worked for Jonah. **Jonah 2:5–6** “The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head [6]

at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.” (ESV)

It motivated obedience. God came to Jonah a second time after he was spat out on land. **Jonah 3:2–3** “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” [3] So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.”(ESV)

So we can take heart when waves come and learn to roll with it. God is at work. He might use waves to motivate us into his mission.

God surprises us with grace.

Once Jonah is obedient, things get interesting. With boldness, he goes to Nineveh and calls out “Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

The man who speaks for the Creator of heaven and earth has come... and the city repents!

Jonah 3:5 “And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. (ESV)

And God relents. **Jonah 3:10** “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.” (ESV)

Now for those in Israel hearing this account, they probably didn’t expect Nineveh to repent. But God wasn’t surprised and he gave them grace - rescuing them from destruction.

This is crazy for a couple of reasons. First, Nineveh was evil. Unrivaled for their violence and debauchery. If there was a people beyond saving, it should be them. And second, they are outsiders. They are not God’s chosen people. Foreigners.

Jonah definitely has some ethnocentrism - but his reputation is also on the line, what he prophesied didn’t happen because of the grace of God.

It makes Jonah angry. God is exactly who he knew him to be, and he can’t take it.

Jonah 4:2–3 “And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. [3] Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (ESV)

'I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!' 4:2

Jonah knew God loved humanity so much that he would pull back his wrath for the repentant. He stays surprised by grace and can't take it.

Grace is meant to extend outward but we can get so wrapped up in our own experience of it we despise others receiving it.

"Jonah's sulking came from a failure of imagination as well as a failure of heart. He knew little of the heights of God's love, the depths of his mercy, and the breadth of his salvation. His life has a certain childish quality to it, selfish and pouty. Like a child, Jonah was reluctant to obey. He had his own ideas, his own dreams, his own desires. And he didn't want anyone telling him what to do... God had brought Jonah to Ninevah to show him amazing grace... at the end of the book Jonah is no longer preaching to the people of Ninevah, they were preaching to him."

God shades him and then kills the plant illustrating for Jonah what he is missing. **Jonah 4:10–11** “And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. [11] And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (ESV)

That's how it ends. “How did I get here?” is answered by the hand of God, to call people to repentance. And when they experience his grace, Jonah misses that he too is a recipient of grace and should be rejoicing.

"If I ever reach heaven I expect to find three wonders there: first, to meet some I had not thought to see there; second to miss some I had thought to meet there; and third, and the greatest wonder of all, to find myself there." John Newton

Not so for Jonah, he would just be grumpy.

"Instead of being held up as an ideal to admire, we find Jonah to be a companion in our ineptness. Here is someone on our level. Even when Jonah does it right (like preaching, finally, in Nineveh) he does it wrong (by getting angry at God). But the whole time, God is working within and around Jonah's very ineptness and accomplishing his purposes in him." EP

God's love is beyond us - but it is real for us - we know because the greater Jonah has come - to grant us grace and call us to go.

We need a greater Jonah!

This is Jesus, coming from the place of influence and power, the throne of heaven, to the dirt and filth of earth to live among those he would save. As he proclaims the kingdom, waves would come and he would calm them with a command.

His obedience wasn't forced but motivated from his own heart, out of love for us. And when it comes to the penultimate moment, he sets aside himself for others. "Not my will but yours be done."

Jesus doesn't just call out a warning he delivers forgiveness for us.

People can't stand it, surprised by it...

Matthew 12:38-41 "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." [39] But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. [40] For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. [41] The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. (ESV)

Ascending to a cross to meet the wrath of God for sin once and for all. He faces the waves of death and a mocking crowd for you.

Three days in a tomb... but resurrected, alive, giving his Spirit and new life to all who will believe. Proving the love of God. Proving his grace. Giving us identity and citizenship worth giving our whole lives for.

He was not only called to give himself for us, he calls those that belong to him to go where the waves take us and proclaim his good news of grace.

Matthew 28:18–20 “And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (ESV)

Will we arise and go? Have we truly experienced and owned his grace, his love for ourselves? Will we be motivated by that love to extend it to others? Will we confront the way of Jonah in our own hearts and thrive where the Lord has placed us?

"You may have already discovered this strange contradiction that lies at the heart of all Christian experience: while loving Christ, you find yourself turning from him; while trusting Christ, you often battle fear and anxiety; while serving Christ, you sometimes struggle with disappointment about certain events in your life. You are not alone!" GTB

And the greater Jonah stands ready to empower you to live for his mission, his purpose, his kingdom, and his glory. We become what we're called to by repenting, saying yes to Jesus, and by praying. And we start out by praying in the belly of a fish.

Jonah 2:7, 9 “When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple... [9] But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!” (ESV)

God's love will move and surprise his people.

We may still ask "How did I get here?" But the answer becomes 'however I did, it's on purpose, that I would answer the call to make the love and grace of God known.'

May it be so with us. In Jesus' name.