Jonah 2: Bringing back the prodigal
Jonah 1:17-2:10

God has called Jonah to go and preach to the city of Nineveh, which just happened to be Israel's arch-enemy and the rising superpower of the day. But Jonah doesn't want to go. His nationalism, his hatred of the enemy means more to him than God and so he runs. But as we saw last week, God can run faster. Jonah tries to escape to the edge of the world, but God pursues him. And on board a ship in the middle of a storm, God boxes Jonah into a corner where he is forced to face what he's done. And he ends up being thrown overboard into the storm. He's got to pay with his life for his sin and to save the lives of the sailors, and that, as we saw last week, is a pale shadow of Jesus giving his life to save us from the consequences of our sin.

Now, I'm no musician, just ask the girls. Sometimes when they're standing next to me in the worship they'll deliberately sing a harmony part because they think it's just so funny when Dad can't hold the tune. But even I know that when there's a key change in a piece of music it ups the anticipation, you know something special is coming, and something like that happens here with chapter two as the writer switches key from narrative to verse. It goes from prose to a psalm and things start getting personal, and we get to hear from Jonah himself and what's going on in his heart. Now, if you're an arty type and you like painting or writing poetry you can probably think of some different places where inspiration has come to you. But as a place to compose a psalm, the belly of a fish has to take the biscuit.

But sometimes we need our world to be shaken up a bit, don't we, we need some forced time out, to bring us to our senses and help us see things as they really are. Su and I remember staying in a cottage on holiday in the north of England several years back, when we spent an evening looking over finances, and it was sobering as we realized the mess we had gotten ourselves into and that if we didn't take action we'd be in trouble. But it took that change of venue, combined with some enforced down-time, for us to see it.

So you can imagine God thinking 'ok, what do I have to do, what will make Jonah think straight. I know, let's squash him in the belly of a whale!' As we saw last week, sometimes the Lord will use strange means to work His grace in our lives – first, Jonah, a prophet is caught asleep by a pagan, now God throws several million buckets of water over him in a near-drowning experience to wake him up. And the result is that this man who wouldn't pray, who couldn't bring himself to pray for the pagan sailors, starts praying. As his life passes before his eyes, in the words of v2, he "called out to the Lord, out of my distress." And this psalm is Jonah, inside the fish, remembering what was going on in his heart as he was on the verge of drowning. Three points: Longing for Home, a Love that Looks Out, and Unfinished Work.

Longing for Home
And as he was sinking Jonah realized that in running from God he was running toward death. And Jonah's downward descent that we saw last week – down to Joppa, down into the boat, down into the hold of the boat, down to sleep, continued as he sank below the waves. First the water surrounds him – v5 it '… closed in over me to take my life.' The water is pressing in on him, suffocating,

and crushing him as he sinks down to the 'roots of the mountains' (v6). The man who tried to run to the ends of the earth is sinking to the bottom of the earth, he's heading for rock bottom. If you'll excuse the pun, Jonah's in deep trouble.

And ultimately Jonah's descent is a descent to the world of the dead, to Sheol, the place of the dead: v6, 'I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.' Jonah knows he's knocking on death's door, as he sinks he knows he's approaching the gates of hell which are going to close on him and clang shut on him like some Victorian prison gate with no hope of return.

But just as he's about to run out of oxygen, just as he's about to make the fatal gasp that will fill his lungs with water, v7, 'When my life was fainting away, *I remembered the Lord*.' Just as he's about to lose the ability to think at all he turns his thoughts to God. Up to now he's tried to blot God out of his mind, but with death fast approaching – as he says in v2, 'from the belly of Sheol', the monster of death and hell that wants to devour him, his thoughts turn to God. And he calls out to Him.

You see, Jonah's fear is not just of dying, he fears that he has been forever banished from God's presence: v4, 'Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight.' All along, Jonah had wanted to escape from God's presence, but as he's drowning he realizes the horror of what permanent separation from God in Sheol would be like. And he realizes that in turning his back on God he has been sent into exile, he has been driven away, he has been banished from God's presence without hope of return.

Now if you know your Old Testament, that might ring some bells. The book of Genesis tells the story of our first parents – who wanted to decide for themselves what was right or wrong, like Jonah they wanted to be free of God's rule and reign in their lives. But it ends with them being banished from the garden, driven out and exiled from the presence of the Lord, with no hope of return.

And that's a powerful picture of humanity's alienation from God and His goodness. Like Adam and Eve, like Jonah, we want to be our own lords, we want to have things our way, we don't want God to tell us what we should or shouldn't do, or at least not when it crosses with what we want, and we think we will find happiness by being free of His control. So we pursue career, or money, or prestige, or sex, or relationships as the ultimate – free of His control. But what we discover is that this so called freedom ends in slavery, and the thing we pursue, thinking it will give us life, ends up controlling and destroying us. We think we will find freedom apart from God, but like Jonah it ends in exile, with us separated from God, banished from the very place where life flourishes – His presence.

And we long for homecoming. We long for a place where everything is not marred by sin and disease and death, where relationships don't fail, where we are loved unconditionally, where life is balanced: we long for a place of true freedom. Of course no one would express it like this, but we long for the garden of God. We long for home.

And Jonah realizes that in turning his back on God, in seeking freedom apart from God, he's in exile, 'driven away from your sight.'

Do you remember Jesus' parable of the prodigal son? That younger son leaves his father's home, wanting independence and freedom and he heads off into a far country. Well, Jonah too has gone to a far country. But just as the Prodigal's journey led to his poverty, so Jonah's desire to get to Tarshish has led him to Sheol, the place of death. And now, his only chance of being brought home, his only chance of return from exile is if God rescues him and brings him back.

And in his distress, Jonah prays and God hears: v2, '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*.' And in the words of 1:17, 'The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.' At least the fish does what it's told!

So, ask yourself, does Jonah deserve to be heard when he prays? Does he deserve to be rescued from the consequences of his sin? Does he deserve to be brought back from exile? And the answer to all of those must be 'No'. And neither do we. But the God who pursues Jonah, the God who pursues us, is a God of grace. A God who does not treat us as our sins deserve.

And it is that dawning understanding of grace that begins to work on Jonah's heart. In the belly of the fish, he knows that God has done this for him: v6, 'I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit.' Jonah had set himself on this downward trajectory, but God had reversed it. And in a sentence that could be a summary of the whole Bible, Jonah ends his psalm by saying, v9, 'Salvation belongs to the Lord!' I could never have saved myself. But you did it. I couldn't have saved myself by trying harder to swim upwards, as if we can save ourselves by our own religious efforts, and running from you didn't bring the freedom I wanted, as if our irreligion can help us. No, Jonah says, salvation belongs to the Lord. It's His grace. You brought me up, you saved me.

But did you also notice how Jonah keeps mentioning the temple? V4: 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' V7: 'When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.' Why does he do that? He's sinking, why does he think about the temple? If salvation belongs to God, if it's by His grace – why bring the temple, the place of sacrifice, into it?

Well, think about your own response to evil and wickedness in the world. Innately we know it shouldn't just be forgiven with a wave of the hand, as if it never happened and the perpetrator is left to carry on as before. We know inside of us that justice should be done. At least to others. We want grace for ourselves, but we also know that if God is a just God, and He is, then sin such as Jonah's, sin such as our own, must be paid for. And Jonah knows that. And he looks to the temple because it's in the temple, where sacrifices were made and animals were slaughtered and blood was spilt, where God's grace to forgive and His justice

against sin, met together; it was where the price for sin was paid, but not by the sinner.

And that is where this matters for us. You see, if we realize that our relationship with God is broken and needs restoring, but God is a God of justice, how can we return from exile and be brought back home? Sure Jonah has the fish and can look to the temple and its sacrifices for sin. But what about us?

Well, that is why Jesus links himself so strongly to Jonah. He describes himself as the One Greater Than Jonah, and talks of His death and resurrection as the sign of Jonah. And whilst Jonah realizes that 'Salvation belongs to the Lord' at Jesus' birth the angel said to Joseph, 'you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (Matt 1:21). His name means: God is salvation. And Jesus is greater than Jonah because Jonah needs rescuing: but Jesus is the rescuer. And whilst Jonah is brought back up to life before he dies, at the cross Jesus sinks to the lowest point, he enters our pit, He descends into death and does die.

And He endured the exile we deserve. He left his heavenly home and was born away from His earthly parents' home; in His life he had nowhere to lay His head, and finally He was crucified outside the city gates, the ultimate sign of rejection and exile and banishment; separated, alienated from His Heavenly Father, as He calls out on the cross, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

But why does He do all that? Why does He substitute himself for us, and pay the price for us? Why does He suffer exile in our place? And the answer is, because He loves us, and has come to bring us home.

And just as after 3 days and 3 nights Jonah comes back into the land of the living, so Jesus descends into death and the grave and 3 days later is raised again. And the place of death, the tomb, becomes the place of life – and by His resurrection Jesus breaks the power of sin and death and exile and starts the new creation, the new home, to which He invites everyone of us to come.

And understanding what Jesus has done for you can have two effects. Firstly, when you realize the measure of His love and His grace for you, you won't want to run away thinking you can find what you're searching for elsewhere. But secondly, when you've known grace for yourself, it changes how you view others. Especially those who are different from you. And something like that is beginning to stir in Jonah's heart.

A Love That Looks Out

One commentator has described Jonah as the ultimate religious insider. I mean, he's a prophet, a preacher, he's good with religious language, he's great up front in the pulpit. But he's not so good out there in the world where outsiders, like the Ninevites, need to hear about God and His grace. Jonah's religion works in church – but when it comes to God showing grace to others who don't deserve it, he stumbles. And don't you see something of that in yourself? As we find ourselves judging and criticizing and pointing the finger at others. Especially those unlike us.

And Jonah ran from God's call to preach to the Ninevites, because he was blinded by his own nationalism, his love of country, his religious pride and his reputation. These were the idols in his heart that meant more to him than God, that he couldn't see past to share grace with others.

But as he endures 3 days and nights in the belly of the fish, Jonah's beginning to realise that he's been ignorant of the very grace he had been called to go and preach. And as he recognizes his own need of grace it changes how he sees others.

Listen to what he says in v8: 'Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.' Now who's Jonah talking about there – who are the ones who pay regard to vain idols? Well, it could be a dig aimed at his fellow Israelites who were given over to idol worship. By forsaking God they had forsaken God's love for them. Or it could be aimed at the sailors. We saw in chapter one how they called out to their own gods, who couldn't rescue them. And yet, chapter one ended with them turning to the Lord and worshipping Him.

But there are two other options: Jonah himself and the Ninevites. You see, something incredible is beginning to dawn on Jonah. He realizes that pursuing the idols of his own heart has cut him off from God's love, that he is no better than the idol worshipping Ninevites. But just as he needs grace, they do too. You see, the steadfast love that Jonah is talking about here is God's never failing, never ending, covenant love to His people - it's one of the great themes running through the Bible. And Jonah's realizing that that love is not for him, or for Israel alone – it's even for foreign idol worshippers, for those who Jonah has despised. If they turned from their idols, they too could share in this love. Jonah has learnt that salvation belongs to God – not to him, or Israel, or anyone else. And the God of grace will share it with whom He will.

And when we experience the grace of God in our own life, it can't help but turn our hearts outward. We can forgive others, because we know what it is to be forgiven. We can receive the prodigal home because we know we too were prodigals. We can give of ourselves, because we know we have received from God's giving. We can show grace to those who don't deserve it because we've been shown grace and we don't deserve it. We can love the unlovely because we have been loved. And rather than looking down our noses at others, at those who are different from us, politically, racially, culturally, whoever the outsiders are, when you encounter grace you realize you're no better than them. We all stand in need of grace. And that means you can take the good news of God's grace to them confidently but in love and humility.

So Jonah is beginning to shift his world-view – but if you know the story, and what happens later, you'll know he has got miles to go.

Unfinished Work

Now this chapter two ends, v10, 'And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.' And that's interesting for two reasons. Firstly,

Jonah has just finished this wonderful prayer, full of language lifted straight from the psalms, and yet God doesn't say a word to Jonah. He doesn't say, 'well done, Jonah, now you get it, now you understand, let's get you back to Joppa.' No – God speaks to the fish and tells him, ok, you can puke him up. And secondly, the fish does vomit Jonah up. He doesn't cough him up, or gently deliver him to the shore, or even spit him out. He vomits him out. And that has pretty negative overtones in the Bible.

You see, on the one hand Jonah's prayer is great, but if you look more closely you realize that nowhere does Jonah actually repent for running away. Everyone else in the book repents: the sailors turn to the Lord from idols, the people of Nineveh, and even their king repent, but Jonah doesn't, not clearly anyway. And if you look at his prayer, whilst it is very real, it's all a bit self-centred. Jonah manages to use the word 'I' 10 times, the word 'me' 7 times, and the word 'my' another 7 times; all in 8 short verses. It's me, me, me, I, I, I, my, my, my.

And then in v9 as he's coming to the end and comparing himself to the those who trust in idols, he says, 'but I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.' And that sounds great, and very holy, except chapter one ended the same way – with the pagan sailors making vows and offering sacrifices to the Lord. And they didn't need to be taken to the sea bed to get them there. So the pagans have beaten Jonah to it. And Jonah, with all his prejudices, might think he's doing great, but he's just playing catch up with the pagans.

And whilst Jonah has realized that salvation belongs to the Lord, and he's rejoicing in God's grace to him, and he begins to see the implications of that for how he sees others, later it is that same grace that makes him so angry. The very same things that draw forth his praise here, draw out his anger when God shows his enemies grace.

And knowing how Jonah behaves later, you're left thinking, is this all just a bit hollow, a bit pious? Isn't this just a typical bit of two-faced religious hypocrisy? And does the whale vomit Jonah out because he's sick of him. Does he vomit him up in disgust? Is that why God speaks to the fish and not to Jonah, as if to say, 'I know it's sickening, you can chunder if you want to.'

And all of that is probably true. But here's the thing. God did choose this man Jonah, and He pursues this undeserving man with His grace. And just think about it, was there no one else in all of Israel that God could have called? Was there no one else who would have caused God less trouble – someone who would have gone immediately rather than run? And the answer is almost certainly 'yes.' But God chooses Jonah because He wants to do a work in Jonah's heart. Jonah isn't sorted. Far from it. His idols are deep and he's a work in progress. And so are we. And the genius of this book is that it forces us to confront our own prejudices. Because one moment we think we are so much better than Jonah and the next we realize we are just like him.

And that's the power of grace. You see, God doesn't call perfect people. He calls broken people. He doesn't choose automatons, but real people. People like Jonah, people like you and me, people in need of transforming grace. And through grace and His Holy Spirit, He's transforming us into the image of Jesus. You see, He doesn't leave us like Jonah. His grace changes us to be like the One Greater than Jonah.

A few weeks back someone sent me a quote. It's from John Newton, the former slave trader who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*, a man who knew what it was to be transformed by grace. This is what Newton wrote: "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."

Jonah is far from a finished work. Here was a man who deserved death, but what he got was grace. And in Jesus so do we, because just as for Jonah, the gospel is the gospel of the second chance.