

Keynotes from Pastor Tim's am Sermon on 23/05/2021

Series – Jonah, the runaway servant

Part 4 – “Meeting God in the depths of despair”

Text: Jonah 2

All scripture references are from the ESV.

Jonah 2 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 me⁴ 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!” ¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him

These are the first lines of the poem entitled ‘The Hound of Heaven’ by Francis Thompson, which describes the life of someone trying to run from God. In the poem, God is the hound of heaven relentlessly pursuing this person even though they keep running away. At the end, they discover that the God they were running away from was actually the very thing their heart longed for. This God is one who graciously and relentlessly pursues sinners not to condemn them but to rescue them from their sin and bring them to enjoy him forever.

We are right to fear God but this can lead us to see him as harsh and unforgiving, quick to punish people who step out of line, so that we spend our lives trying to keep

him happy. We may fail to pray honestly about our sin and our struggles with obedience, thinking we need to pray in the right way for God to accept our prayers and listen to us.

The book of Jonah gives us hope that God is like the God of the poem, pursuing us because he wants to bring us into a relationship with himself.

This message of hope is both for those who are not Christians and also for those who are running away from God.

Jonah 1:17 (see p4) tells us of Jonah being swallowed by a big fish, an event that many declare to be just a fantasy. Yet we know this is historically accurate because Jesus refers to it as fact (**Matthew 12:40** see p4). It is an easy task for the God who created the universe. The character of God is at stake if we deny the truth of this story, but it is the character of God that we need to see and trust if we are to find hope when we are on the run.

Jonah is sinning by running from God, a flight described as a series of downward steps. (**Jonah 1:3,5**, (p4) and **2:6** above). He is as low as he can go and still be alive – the next step is death, and Jonah speaks of being in the belly of Sheol (**v2** above). The fish has taken him down to the seabed (**vv5-6** above). He is in a dark and scary place, not just physically but spiritually too.

Jonah is well aware that God is responsible for all that is happening (**v3** above) and that:

- He is here because of his disobedience to God
- the sailors who threw him into the sea were only acting as God's agents
- He could die in a state of sin as he runs from God

Though he has apparently got what he wanted, finding himself as far away from the God of heaven as he could get, he cries out in despair (**v4**)

Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight'

Jonah is as low as he can be in the belly of Sheol, but he can still meet God because God is there. In **Psalms 139:7-10**

(see p4 for full text), King David wrote 'If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

However far from God we try to run, we can still meet God.

- He is the Hound of heaven who pursues us to the very depths of our sin and despair
- He is the God who meets us when we are at our worst and are in our most desperate condition

1. What kind of God do we meet in the depths of sin?

Jonah is alive because God had appointed the fish to swallow him, but he is not out of danger.

Unless God acts, Jonah will still die, so he has no choice but to seek God from his watery grave.

He called out to the Lord in his distress (v2 above). So far Jonah has:

- Disobeyed God by refusing to go to Nineveh and instead heading in the opposite direction
- Run away not just from the task God gave him, but also from God
- Refused to pray to God despite the danger he put the sailors in

God might justly have ignored Jonah's request for help, and allowed him to die, dealing with him in the final judgement. **Yet God doesn't treat Jonah as Jonah deserves to be treated.**

As he prays to God (v2, 7 above), he finds a God of grace who hears him, meeting Jonah in the depths of his sin.

From the very first time that humanity sins against God, we discover God to be gracious.

- Rather than cursing Adam and all of humanity, the curse for sin fell on the ground. In that act, God showed us that he was making provision for sinners to be saved. This would happen through a descendant of Adam who would deal a crushing blow to sin and Satan, but would himself be wounded in the process.
- When God revealed himself to Moses, after Israel's rebellion against God, he declared himself to be "'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (**Exodus 34:6**).

Adam, Moses and Jonah all came into the depths of sin. Yet, coming before God with all their guilt they met a God who was gracious. This is the same God we meet today.

When the Hound of heaven catches us, we stand before him in our sin, guilt and shame,

and as we cry out to him for mercy, we meet a God of grace.

2. Why do we need to meet God as a God of grace?

The first answer is that we are all sinners and all stand in need of God's grace. Jonah shows us an additional answer.

He already knew that God is a gracious God (**Jonah 4:2** see p4), knowing as he did the history of Adam and Moses and the many narratives of God's grace to his wayward people. However, it seems that he only had an intellectual knowledge of God's grace and had not experienced it himself.

He needed what he knew in his head to become a reality in his heart.

For this to happen, God had to expose the sin that was in his heart, bringing him into the depths of sin and to the very point of death in order to show Jonah not just God's grace, but Jonah's own need of that grace. Jonah believed that the Ninevites were sinners but **he never saw himself as a sinner in need of God's grace.**

Until he saw that, he could not be used by God to share the message of God's grace.

Many of us can suffer from the same kind of spiritual pride, particularly if we have been Christians for a long time. We can imagine that the world out there deserves God's judgement, and is in need of God's grace, but we are past

that point. We consider that we did once need that grace, but now we are a long way on in our walk with God, we

are better than the people out there, and therefore no longer really in need.

That is spiritual pride, and God always deals with that kind of pride, bringing us low and into the depths, perhaps

- Putting us in a situation that exposes the sin deep in our heart, sometime publicly so we are ashamed or

- Shattering all our earthly ambitions, because we think we can do ministry by ourselves **or**
- Bringing to nothing all our human efforts

In the depths we cry out to God and discover a God of grace. We come into a new experience of God's grace that leaves us more aware of our sin, but at the same time more aware of God's grace to us and our need for it. We become more patient with other sinners. **What we know with our heads becomes a reality in our hearts.**

3. How are we to respond to this God of grace?

We come to him in prayer as Jonah did, taking what he knew about God and, in his prayer, asking God to act on it.

This is all about honest prayer, prayed to the God who knows us to the depths of our being.

- a) **v3 Jonah is honest about his sin.** He doesn't tell God that he didn't deserve what happened. Instead, beginning with confession, he acknowledges that God is just to do all that he has done. We need to begin there too, being honest with God about our sin. He knows everything about us down to the deepest recesses of our heart so we don't need to put on a front with him. We can tell him the very worst about ourselves.

God doesn't want us to hide our sin – he wants us to confess it.

- b) **vv5-6 Jonah is honest about his need.** He is in an eternal prison and has no way of escape. Unless God saves him, he is dead both physically and spiritually. We need to admit our own helplessness to change any situation we may be facing. **We need God to act.** This is particularly true spiritually. We cannot change our own hearts or put ourselves right with God. God must do this. Until we realise this, we will never cry out to God from the depths of our sin and come to experience his grace.

Be honest with God about your need.

- c) **Jonah is honest about the cost of grace.** Looked at naturally, Jonah's circumstances lead him to despair, but when he looks through the eyes of faith, he is filled with hope (**v4**). He expects to see the temple again – the place where

he would meet God through sacrifice. He knows that if God is going to forgive him and spare his life then another death needs to take place. What Jonah couldn't fully have known is that God would send his own Son to die in Jonah's place. The Hound of Heaven would himself suffer the punishment for our sin.

**God offers grace but that grace comes at great cost to himself –
the cost of offering up himself to death on the cross.**

Today, if **you are not a believer**, God is chasing you – that's why you are reading this. Maybe he has brought a storm into your life that has brought you to the depths.

- Jonah shows us that you need to be honest with him about your sin, your need and the cost of grace.

Then plead with him to save you.

Today, if **you are a believer in Christ**, and are currently on the run, God is pursuing you. He will not leave you in your sin, but will expose it and bring you into the depths. That is good news. There you will meet a God of grace who, at great cost to himself, put right the wrong you are currently doing.

- Jonah shows us that you need to be honest with him about your sin, your need and the cost of grace.

Then plead with him to have mercy on you.

Jonah 1:17 And the LORD appointed^[d] a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Matthew 12:40 ^{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

Jonah 1:3,5 ³ But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went **down** to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went **down** into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone **down** into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.

Jonah 2:6 I went **down** to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;

Psalm 139: 7-10 Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me.

Jonah 4:2 ^{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.

The Hound of Heaven by Francis Thompson was written in 1890 can be found both in the original language and in modern versions in many poetry anthologies. It is well worth a read.