

A SCANDALOUS GRACE: Lessons from the book of Jonah

(1) Grace that will not let us go – part one (Jonah 1)

As we begin this three-week series in the book of Jonah, I want to ask us all a question:

How would you describe the God you believe in?

There are so many different ways of thinking about God –

And if you're anything like me, your view of God on any given day can depend a lot on how that day is going – on how your life is going.

Is the God you believe in a distant authority figure – a long way off from life down here on planet Earth?

Or do you think of him as your special friend – someone you can confide in and ask for help and strength?

Someone who understands you?

Are there days when God can act like an agony uncle –

Someone you pour your problems out to, in the hope of finding some answers?

Or do you think of him more as a sort-of *life coach* –

Who can show us the best way to live – the quickest route to happiness?

Our church vision statement here at Magdalen Road can be summed up as follows:

Delighting in God – Displaying his glory.

But – *What sort of a God do we delight in, as a church?*

What sort of God do we believe in?

We're going to see over the course of the next few weeks that in the book of Jonah, we are presented with ***a powerful revelation of the character of God.***

In this book, God reveals his character to the prophet Jonah – and, through Jonah, to all of us – often in surprising ways.

And the supreme revelation of God's character that comes across in this book is that the God of the Bible – the God who supremely reveals himself through his Son Jesus Christ –

Is a God of startling grace.

That perhaps doesn't come as a big surprise to the Christians sitting here this morning –

After all, God's grace is something we sing about and talk about quite a lot.

But chapter 1 of Jonah presents God's grace in a slightly different way to the way we usually think about it...

The opening chapter of the book of Jonah tells us that ***God's grace will not let his people go***

–

Even though there will be times when his people want him to let them go!

Even when God's people want to break free from God!

I've already acknowledged that all of us can drift into many different ways of thinking about God –

The special friend – the agony uncle – the life coach...

What the book of Jonah does for us is *reacquaint us with the God of the Bible* –

A God who is both *comforting* for us to know –

But also a little bit *frightening*, at times...!

Look at these verses from Psalm 139:

“O LORD, you have searched me

And you know me.

[...]

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

If I settle on the far side of the sea,

Even there your hand will guide me,

Your right hand will hold me fast.”

(Psalm 139:1, 7-10)

In this psalm, there is at least the suggestion that the psalmist might actually *want* to ‘flee from God’s presence’ sometimes –

That he might want to get away from God – even to be *free* of God.

But – he can't!

God doesn't let him!

Like so many believers throughout history, perhaps the psalmist suspects he might be happier *without* God in his life.

Perhaps he feels that a life lived for God is just a bit too hard and restrictive –

Perhaps life *without* a relationship with God wouldn't be so bad after all...?

If you're a Christian here this morning, and you've ever felt like that – as, I suspect, most, if not all, of us have at times –

Then you are not a million miles away from the prophet Jonah in chapter 1 of this book...

Jonah is a relatively short book – only 4 chapters –

But it packs in an enormous amount of excitement and incident!

As we read it, we hear about:

- Terrible storms

- Enormous fish
- Messages of judgement
- And a prophet who argues with God again and again!

The account of God calling Jonah to the Assyrian city of Nineveh makes for a great story –
And the narrator records it in such vivid and fast-moving detail – *because he wants us to remember it!*

You see, the book of Jonah is supremely a book about **God** –
And the **lessons** God has to teach his reluctant prophet, Jonah.

And the lessons God had to teach Jonah – are lessons God always has to teach his people –
Including us today – both as individuals and as a church.

The book of Jonah is in our Bibles, because it reveals to us the character of the living God –
And make no mistake: the living God of Scripture is no safe and predictable God...

He is a God of scandalous grace –
And as such, he is *unpredictable – unsafe – startling* in the way he acts –

And *absolutely committed to revealing his character to his people –*
And **through** his people!

God has hard lessons for Jonah to learn in the course of this book –
And Jonah stands for all God's people here.

In the book's original context, Jonah represented Israel –
But there can be no New Testament superiority or get-out clause for Christians when we come to Jonah...!

We can *all* be guilty of relating to God and to the world in the ways that Jonah does in this book –
Every Christian here this morning needs to recognise that Jonah also stands for **us** –

And the lessons God had to teach Jonah – are lessons he wants to teach **us**, today!

First of all –
Just how similar is Jonah to the Christians in this church today?

Jonah and us

We're going to see in the course of this book that Jonah is:

- **An orthodox believer**

Jonah's doctrine of God is perfectly sound, right the way through this book –
Jonah is no heretic! He believes all the right things about God that a good Israelite should!

The problem is that his orthodox beliefs do not prevent him from completely missing the point about who God is at several key moments in the book...!

Secondly, Jonah was:

- **A willing servant of God in the past (see 2 Kings 14:25)**

The Old Testament records one other incident from Jonah's life outside this book –
When Jonah prophesied God's word during the reign of King Jeroboam.

In 2 Kings 14, God used Jonah to promise the restoration of the boundaries of Israel –
And Jonah did what was asked of him...!

Up to chapter 1 of this book, Jonah was a willing servant of God!

Thirdly, Jonah:

- **Enjoyed a relationship with God (1:1)**

God was in the habit of *speaking* to Jonah –
Read vv.1-2.

Jonah's problem was not that he didn't have a relationship with God, or that he didn't know
God personally –

As a prophet, Jonah clearly *did* have a relationship with God – he clearly *did* know
God personally!

I hope we can see –

Jonah is very similar to any Christian sitting here this morning!

The worst thing we can do with Jonah – in chapter 1 and in the rest of this book – is simply to
laugh at him –

Or to *criticise* him for running away from God or for arguing with God.

By all means, laugh –

But remember that, by laughing at Jonah, you're only laughing at *yourself!*

By all means, criticise Jonah –

But remember that, by criticising Jonah, you're criticising *yourself!*

If you're a Christian here this morning, Jonah should act as a *warning* to you –

He was an orthodox believer – a willing servant of God – he enjoyed a relationship
with God –

And yet – by v.3 of chapter 1, Jonah:

- **Wanted to break free from God (1:3)**

God speaks to Jonah in v.2 – God tells him to go to Nineveh and preach against it –
And Jonah heads for Tarshish – in the opposite direction!

Read v.3.

Why does Jonah run?

We aren't given a clear answer in chapter 1.

- *Was he afraid of going to Nineveh?*

After all, it was one of the great cities of the Assyrian empire –
And the Assyrians were a terrifying enemy for the Israelites!

Other prophets prophesied God's judgement on Israel's enemies –
But they did so from the relative safety of Israel's borders...!

God tells Jonah to travel all the way to Nineveh – and *then* to bring his message of judgement to the people, *in person!*

It's a lot easier to pronounce judgement from a safe distance – but God commanded otherwise...!

Fear could certainly have been a factor in Jonah's decision to run.

- *Perhaps Jonah reasoned that, if he refused to go to Nineveh, God would simply adjust his plan and send someone else*

There were plenty of prophets around Israel in Jonah's day –
It wasn't as if Jonah was God's only option.

God could easily call another, more willing prophet to go to Nineveh in Jonah's place.

That could be another reason why Jonah chose to run.

- *In chapter 4, Jonah gives us his own reasons for running – which we'll turn to in a couple of weeks...*

I don't want to spoil the surprise, so we won't look at that this morning...!

Whatever the reason, v.3 presents us with the astonishing picture of a prophet of the LORD turning and running away from God –

Of a prophet decisively *rejecting* God's call – and defiantly heading in the opposite direction...!

What are we to make of this?

Well –

I believe Jonah here stands as a warning sign to any believer here this morning.

We are all capable of running away from God in our lives –

Of wanting to break free from God, in the belief that it will make us happier.

What reasons might we give for wanting to imitate Jonah here?

Perhaps we want:

- **An easier life?**

And we believe that we will find it, if we can only be free of God and the life he calls us to.

Linked to that, we might want:

- **To take control of our lives?**

The assumption here is that, without God, we would have control of our lives – that somehow, by turning away from God, we can get that control *back*...

So we believe that, if we could only be free from God, we would be in control of our own lives...

Another reason we might give for wanting to be free from God is because of:

- **Painful experiences in the past?**

We don't know a great deal about Jonah's past –
Might he have experienced real disappointment in the past?

Certainly, this is a reason I've heard from people for why they walked away from the Christian life –
They experienced pain or disappointment in their lives – and they felt that God hadn't been there for them.

Or might we reject the life God calls us to as Christians because of so-called:

- **Compassion fatigue?**

We feel as if God wants us to love those around us – just as he called Jonah to travel to Nineveh –
But we just can't bring ourselves to care enough about the people God is calling us to...

'I just don't *care* about Nineveh,' Jonah might have thought –
'What about *me* for a change? What about *my* life?'

We are all capable of reacting to God's call in the way that Jonah does here –
We are all capable of finding reasons for *not* obeying God – of finding reasons for wanting to break free from God, in the belief that life will be *better* if we do...!

We are all very similar to Jonah!

BUT –

If and when you find yourself thinking in those terms, you have reckoned without something...

When we entertain thoughts of breaking free from God -
We have reckoned without the unstoppable grace of God!

Grace that will not let us go – even when we want it to...!

On one level, we could summarise the message of the book of Jonah very simply:

DON'T BE LIKE JONAH!

But the message of this book is far more than just that bare commandment.

As a narrative, this book gives us powerful reasons *why* we shouldn't be like Jonah –
Because in it, we get to see *the effect on Jonah* of his decision to run away from God
– to disobey God in a bid for personal freedom.

Throughout this book, there are always two perspectives:
The *human perspective* of Jonah –
And *God's perspective* – which is often very different...!

BUT –
Even from just a human perspective, Jonah is a bad advertisement for a life of
disobedience to God...!

Jonah runs away from God at the beginning of this chapter –
But we do not see him enjoying his freedom – or rejoicing that he is finally free of
God.

Instead –

Jonah shows us

- **The misery of disobedience**

Look at vv.4-5 with me.

God sends a terrible storm to attack the ship that Jonah is travelling on –
The ship 'threatened to break up' –
the sailors on-board '*each cried out to his own god*' to save them –
and they were forced to throw all the cargo overboard in an attempt to rescue the ship.

And what is Jonah doing, while all this is going on?
'Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep' (v.5)

Somehow, Jonah is able to sleep through all this activity –
How is that possible?

One commentator really helped me understand Jonah's deep sleep here –
He argued that Jonah's deep sleep could be seen as a symptom of *depression*.

Jonah has just fled from the living God –
He has *rejected* God – and now he is on the run from him.

His prophetic career is now over –
And he is exiling himself from his home and his country.

He has directly disobeyed God –
And instead of a sense of liberation – a sense of relief...

Jonah slumps into a deep, depressed sleep.

This makes a lot of sense to me.

A good friend of mine who suffers from periodic bouts of depression, reacts in this way –
When he is depressed, he can sleep for days on end – and no alarm clock, no phone call can wake him.

In v.5 here, I believe Jonah is a picture of *depression* –
Of the misery that comes from running away from God.

There is no life here – no joy – no relief –
Just *guilt* –
Just *exhaustion*.

In one sense, Jonah is living the dream of many believers here.
‘What would it be like to just say ‘NO!’ to God, and head off and do our own thing?’

Would that give us the freedom and happiness we feel we are lacking here and now?

Would the world around us be able to step into God’s place – and give us everything our hearts desire?

We have Jonah’s response to those questions here –

NO!

The world cannot give us what our hearts desire!

To run away from God – is to run away from life, and light, and goodness.

To run away from God – is to live with *guilt* – and *remorse* –
and the constant question of *where do we fit in this world?*

In that little snap-shot of Jonah –
in a deep, depressed sleep in the hold of a boat about to sink –
We have a powerful picture of the *misery of disobedience*.

Alongside that misery, Jonah also shows us:

- **The dangers of disobedience**

The sailors who wake Jonah up from his sleep are in no doubt –
This storm is too much for them...!

Without some form of divine intervention, they are all *lost!*

Jonah’s disobedience has led God to send this violent storm –
And Jonah himself is in the eye of it!

We’re going to see that the God who reveals himself in the book of Jonah is a God of great grace –

But he is no *doormat*.

By walking away from him, Jonah has placed himself in terrible danger...!

And it's the same for us today.

It is one thing to speculate about what life might be like if we just rejected God and did our own thing –

It is quite another to indulge that thought – and seek to become the gods of our own lives.

That is to reject the personal, holy God of all grace –

And if we insist on rejecting God in our lives – then God will have no hesitation in *judging us for it* – by ultimately *rejecting us*.

People who reject the living God, as Jonah does here – place themselves at a terrible risk of experiencing God's eternal judgement –

An eternity under God's wrath – cut off from God forever in the place the Bible calls 'hell'.

Even from Jonah's human perspective, this chapter shows us that his decision to run away from God has brought him only *misery* – and *terrible danger*.

We need to be clear here –

Running away from God is a bad idea!

And if it were left up to Jonah, then this would be the end of the story –

A miserable Jonah – sinking to his death alongside a group of pagan sailors – in a storm brought about by his own foolishness and sin.

BUT –

Thankfully, for Jonah – and for us! – events are not left up to Jonah here!

God has other plans for him –

And it is here that God's unstoppable grace comes into play!

The grace that will not let us go –

Even during those times when we might want it to...!

In the middle of this storm, God shows Jonah something about himself.

God shows Jonah

- **God is committed to revealing himself to his people**

Jonah – the orthodox believer – nonetheless seemed to think that he could slip away from God, without God minding.

But God sent a storm – and then a fish – to show just how much he minded...!

God was not finished with Jonah yet –

And if you're a Christian here this morning – *God is not finished with you yet, either!*

If the God you believe in no longer surprises you –
Then I want to suggest to you that your God is not the God of the Bible.

If the God you believe in finished teaching you things about himself a long time ago –
Then your God is not the God of the Bible.

The God of the Bible – the living God – is *surprising* – even *bewildering* at times in the way he relates to his people!

He is more powerful than we can possibly imagine –
And yet utterly committed to lavishing grace on undeserving people like us!

He is sovereign over the whole of creation –
Over every nation, every empire, every superpower in this world –
Over weather-systems and over the greatest fish in the ocean –

And yet he is committed to revealing himself to a foolish sinner like Jonah –
To foolish sinners like *us!*

Jonah thought he knew all about God –
After all, he was a prophet of God.

But this terrible storm in Jonah 1 showed him that there was *more* to learn –
More to experience –
More to worship and trust in...!

This storm showed the enormous lengths God will go to, to bring his people to their senses –
And bring them back to himself!

On one level, God could just have left Jonah to his fate here.

We've already seen that Jonah could easily have been replaced by God –
God had other, more willing prophets to serve him in Israel at that time.

But the storm proved to Jonah that God was not simply committed to his people as a whole –
*God was committed to keeping **Jonah** – as an **individual!***

God had purposes for Jonah! He had work for him to do!

And so, he was committed to saving Jonah from his own foolishness and sin – by using this storm to bring him to his senses!

There is a wonderful truth in God's dealings with Jonah here.

God didn't need to stick with Jonah –
But he *chose* to!

And it is the same with us today!

If you're a Christian here this morning, God doesn't *need* to stick with you –
God doesn't *need* you to do his will in this world –

And that in itself is a liberating truth...!

But God *wants* to work through you in this world to achieve his purposes –
For your life and for the lives of others around you.

God doesn't need you –
But he *wants* you!

A glorious truth for us to grasp!

But let's be clear here –
God revealed more of his character to Jonah – and ultimately revealed his astonishing
grace to Jonah – through an absolutely *terrifying storm!*

Experienced sailors thought they were going to die!

And similarly, the grace of God in our lives is not always comforting or gentle.

God can bring us to our senses at times by *completely exposing our need of him.*

- By revealing the frightening sinfulness of our hearts –
- By disillusioning us and robbing us of the things and people we have trusted in up to now –
- By experiences of real loss and suffering.

The living God of the Bible is not a *safe* God –
But in that amazing phrase of C.S. Lewis', describing Aslan the lion in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* –
He isn't safe – but he's *good.*

Next week, in chapter 2, we're going to explore more the *kindness and comfort* there is in the
grace of God,
As we look at Jonah's prayer from inside the fish.

But this week, Jonah experiences God's grace towards him in a terrible storm –
And we need to see that this is sometimes how God will reveal his grace to us.

Through a storm –
through a frightening experience of just how vulnerable we really are...!

BUT –
Whether in a storm or in a time of calm, we need to learn with Jonah that God's
purposes for us – are passionately and perfectly for *our good.*

That we might *know him* –
And find everything that is good and praiseworthy *in him.*

That we might *delight in him* –
And learn to live with him and trust him more and more in our lives.

As we prepare to leave Jonah for this week –
We've seen the foolishness and misery there is in running away from God –

And we've considered God's commitment to reveal his character to his people –
Not always in immediately comforting ways – but in ways that are ultimately for our *good*.

But we need to see finally that this chapter shows us that God's purposes never stop at just revealing himself to his people.

God is not content simply to reveal his character to Jonah in this storm –
He chooses to reveal his character *through* Jonah – to the pagan sailors Jonah is travelling with, as well!

- **God is committed to revealing himself *through* his people**

As God is teaching Jonah about his character –
He is also revealing his character *through* Jonah – to others around him!

And that is the life of discipleship God calls each and every Christian here this morning to!

God doesn't mean for us to learn everything there is to know about him, before we dare attempt to live *with him and for him* in our lives –
He doesn't insist that we iron out all our flaws and weaknesses and petty sins, before he can use us in this world.

No –
It is *as we learn from him* –
In the midst of our weakness and sinfulness and pettiness –

That God reveals himself through us!

The apostle Paul expresses it well in 2 Corinthians 4:7 –
'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.'

There is perhaps no more feeble-looking jar of clay in Scripture than the prophet Jonah...!

He rebels against God –
He flatly refuses to do God's will –

And yet, amazingly, through his sinful decision to run from God, a boat-load of pagan sailors come to encounter the power and the mercy of the God of Israel –
As Jonah himself puts it in v.9:
'The LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.'

It didn't matter that as Jonah spoke those words, he himself was guilty of great disobedience against God –

God still used his words powerfully – along with Jonah's self-sacrifice in v.12 and the miraculous ending to the storm in v.15 – to reveal his character to these sailors in a way that changed their lives forever!

Read v.16.

There is a huge encouragement – and challenge – to all of us here...!

If you're a Christian here this morning –

Don't wait until you're perfect, before asking God to use you to make him known in this world.

You will never be perfect, this side of heaven –

And God is able to use you *now*, to make himself known!

Jonah is no model of godliness here –

And God still needed to bring him to repentance inside the great fish in chapter 2 –

But we need to see here –

If God can use Jonah to bring a group of pagan sailors to trust in him –

*then God can use **us** – as individuals and as a church – to bring people in east Oxford and beyond to trust in him!*

In one sense, the storm here was all about bringing Jonah to his senses and bringing him back to God –

But in another sense, the storm wasn't about Jonah at all...!

God sent this storm to bring a boat-load of sailors to trust in the living God!

*God is committed to revealing himself **to** his people – and **through** his people –*

The two are never mutually exclusive!

So, if you're not a Christian here this morning –

Please don't fall into the trap of presuming that the Christians around you have it all worked out in life.

We don't!

This church is made up of sinful people who are disciples of Jesus Christ – not because of anything good in us, but because of the scandalous grace of God!

Like Jonah, every Christian here is capable of making a real mess of our lives –

Our obedience to Jesus is often faltering and stumbling.

We have so much still to learn about the God we worship – and about what it means for us to belong to him.

BUT –

My prayer for you this morning, if you're not a Christian – is that as the Christians among us continue to learn the lessons of grace –

You might encounter the God of grace yourself, through our imperfect witness.

That you might be drawn to put your faith in Christ – and in him alone –

Just as every Christian here needs to learn and relearn, every single day of our lives!

The only hope any of us has here this morning – whether you're a Christian or not – is the *grace of God* –

but – thank God! – it is this *scandalous grace* that the book of Jonah demonstrates to us so clearly...!

The lessons God had to teach Jonah – are lessons God has to teach all of us, again and again in our lives.

- A life lived in disobedience to God will only bring us misery – and place us in terrible danger, as we treat the grace of God with contempt.

But if we respond to God's grace and place our trust in him –

Then even in the face of our terrible choices at times –

Even in the face of our weakness and foolishness –

God will not let us go!

And he will reveal his true character of grace to us – and through us, to the world around us!

As the apostle Paul puts it –

'We have this treasure' – the good news of the power and grace of the living God, and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent into our world –

'We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God, and not from us.' (2 Corinthians 4:7)