

A SCANDALOUS GRACE: Lessons from the book of Jonah
(2) Grace that will not let us go – part two (Jonah 2)

On March 21, 1748, a ship on its way home to England in the North Atlantic was caught up in a violent storm that threatened to sink it.

One sailor on board remembered waking up to find his room filling with water.

As he ran for the deck, the captain stopped him and urged him to return to his cabin and fetch his knife.

The crew member who took his place on the ladder was immediately swept overboard to his death.

Having fetched his knife, the sailor then worked the pumps from 3 in the morning until noon – slept for an hour – and then took the helm and steered the ship until midnight.

While at the wheel, he had time to reflect on his life up to that point –
On how close he had just come to death.

He had encountered Christians in his life, and was familiar with the basics of the Christian gospel –
So, that night, he began to pray.

Within a few days, while the storm calmed, he found a Bible and began to read it –
And within a few months, that sailor called John Newton came to put his faith in Jesus Christ and began to follow him.

Newton would always look back on that storm at sea in 1748 as the day the God of grace acted to rescue him and give him new life.

Newton went on to be a pastor and preacher –
A prominent supporter of the abolition of the slave trade –
And one of the greatest hymn-writers of his day.

And a few moments ago, we sang his most famous hymn –
‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me...’

‘Amazing Grace’ has been described by some as the world’s most enduring song –
And it’s certainly the world’s most *recorded* song:

It’s been covered by artists as various as Pete Seeger – Janis Joplin –
Rod Stewart – and even the mighty Robson and Jerome...!

Few churches in the Western world aren’t familiar with it in some shape or form –
And it is still sung widely today.

Perhaps as a result –
I know plenty of Christians who *don’t enjoy singing it...!*

They feel they’ve sung it too often.

Perhaps the word 'grace' has just become another piece of Christian jargon –
Over-used and barely understood.

Perhaps they've sung it in churches that paid lip-service to grace in the Christian life,
but where in reality, if a 'wretch' like John Newton turned up, he'd be turned away at
the door.

Whatever the reason, the grace that Newton celebrates in his song can often fail to provoke
praise from many people familiar with his song –

Instead, they echo the question that formed the title of Philip Yancey's best-selling
book of 1997 –

What's so amazing about grace?

This morning, we come to the second in our short series looking at the book of Jonah –
And I've entitled this series, *A Scandalous Grace*.

But I'm aware that for many of us here who are used to coming to church and talking with
Christians,

Grace just doesn't seem that scandalous any more...!

Grace is one of those Christian terms that sounds great –

But if we're honest, we are more than a little hazy as to what it actually *means*.

For a lot of us, *grace* has come to describe God's *cosy and indulgent side*.

It refers to those times when God decides to turn a blind eye to our sin and to give us another
chance –

And let's be honest: where's the scandal in that?

Isn't that what God *should* be doing?

Don't we all *deserve* to be given a second chance?

I suspect that for many of us, grace just isn't that amazing any more...!

It doesn't excite us, because we just presume that it is easy for God to forgive us and give us
a second chance –

After all, we're not bad people...

And so we come back to that question:

What's so amazing about grace?

I believe that Jonah's prayer in Jonah chapter 2 can help us begin to answer that question –
And to rediscover something of the biblical concept of *God's grace*.

A grace that is far from *indulgent* –

A grace that we can only ever benefit from at enormous *cost* to God –

A grace that is rooted in both *God's holiness* – and *God's love*.

Jonah chapter 2 is a prayer of thanksgiving for the amazing grace of God!
A prayer that John Newton would have echoed wholeheartedly –
A prayer that we can all listen in on and learn from this morning!

First of all, we can see in chapter 1 verse 17 that Jonah discovers that the grace of God is far from being just another piece of religious jargon.

No – as Jonah is thrown overboard into a raging ocean, he quickly discovers that the grace of God – is *his only hope!*

And Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving in chapter 2 is book-ended by *the miraculous grace of God.*

What's so amazing about grace?

- **God's grace is – always miraculous (1:17 & 2:10)**

And yet, when you read these verses for yourself, God's grace towards Jonah is recorded for us in such an under-stated, straight-forward way...!

Read 1:17.

Jonah didn't drown when he was thrown overboard.

The sailors who threw him in presumed that he would –
And Jonah presumed that he would – *but he didn't!*

And why didn't he?

Because 'the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah' –
'Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights' –

And then – 2:10 – 'the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.'

This was no remarkable fluke of the natural world!
Jonah didn't just get lucky here!

Jonah's rescue took *an act of God – a miracle of God!*

The LORD got Jonah into the fish before he drowned –
And the LORD made sure Jonah got out of the fish and onto dry land after three days and three nights.

God's rescue of Jonah was *miraculous!*

And we need to see this morning –
That God's grace towards sinful people like Jonah – and like us – is *always* miraculous!

Modern readers often have a problem with this bit of Jonah.

We can just about cope with the storm in chapter 1 –

But what's a modern sceptic to do about this 'great fish' swallowing Jonah up, to rescue him from drowning?

It's the best-known section of the book –

And yet many readers are quick to dismiss it as *fiction*...!

But – when they do that, they are forgetting one thing:

The God of the Bible – is a God of the miraculous!

No, it doesn't usually happen that a man is rescued from drowning by a fish.

That's why we call it a miracle...!

And Jonah celebrates it as a miracle – and thanks God for it!

Read 2:2.

It took a miracle of God to save Jonah's life from drowning –

But then, we need to see this morning –

It always takes a miracle of God to save anyone – and restore them to a right relationship with himself!

Some modern-day readers of Jonah dismiss his rescue via a great fish as unbelievable.

I want to suggest to them that what is truly unbelievable – is that a community of Christians exists here in east Oxford!

That there is a church that calls itself Magdalen Road Church!

What is truly unbelievable is that there are communities of Christians like this one, gathered together as we are this morning, *all around the world*.

What is truly unbelievable is that ordinary men, women and children are coming to faith in Jesus Christ all over the world today –

And every day!

The fact that a worldwide Christian church exists today – is a *miracle!*

It is evidence of *the miraculous grace of God at work in our world today!*

And it should astound and amaze us, far more than this great fish here...!

There are so many reasons why people would never naturally follow Jesus Christ today.

There are so many other philosophies and worldviews out there to choose from!

And individual Christians and Christian communities are sadly often very poor advertisements for following Jesus...!

To really encounter Jesus, we need to go back and explore the New Testament gospels for ourselves – books written nearly 2,000 years ago.

That just does not happen naturally...!

There are so many obstacles to people today believing in Jesus Christ –

And the Bible gives us an even more powerful obstacle to be overcome!

In 2 Corinthians 4:4, the apostle Paul describes the spiritual realities going on all around us, behind the scenes:

*“The god of this age [that is, the devil] has **blinded** the minds of unbelievers, so that they **cannot** see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”*

Paul insists that naturally, people are *blind* to the gospel of Jesus Christ –
That they *cannot* see the light of the gospel on their own!

But that is where the miracle-working God of Christianity steps in!

Paul goes on in 2 Corinthians 4:6 to explain:

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

For anyone to come to faith in Jesus, God has to work a miracle in their lives!

The same God who created the world by saying, ‘Let there be light’ –
Has to bring about a new creation in our hearts to enable us to find new life in him!

The same Creator God who is sovereign over great fish – is also sovereign in granting us new life –

Forgiveness –
And a relationship with Jesus Christ!

If you’re a Christian here this morning –
God has performed a miracle in you!

So – *praise him for that! Thank him for it!*

Take Jonah’s words here in chapter 2,
And worship God for rescuing you from death and giving you new life!

The only reason God can demonstrate his grace to sinful people like us – is because he sent,
not a great fish,
but his only Son Jesus into the world to save us.

C.S. Lewis called this ‘the grand miracle’ –
God entering our world in the person of his Son – God becoming a human being in
order to reveal himself to us and to rescue us.

God’s grace towards us is *always miraculous!*

If you have friends and loved ones who don’t know Jesus yet –
This understanding of how God rescues people must lead us to ***pray for them!***

We need to cry out to God to show his mercy and work a miracle in their lives –

Because on our own, we can do nothing!

It takes the miraculous grace of God to bring someone to faith in Jesus –
So we need to *pray!*

And if you're sitting here this morning, and you don't yet have a relationship with Jesus –
Please – *ask God to work that miracle in your life!*

Ask God to shine his light in your heart, as you explore who Jesus is – what he has done for us – and what it means to follow him.

God's grace is always miraculous –
And as we glimpse that truth, we should be *amazed* by it!

Another aspect of God's grace that we too easily forget comes across in Jonah's prayer here:

- **God's grace is rooted in both his holiness and his love**

From experiencing both the storm in chapter 1 and his rescue from the storm in 1:17, Jonah discovers that:

*God is more holy than Jonah thought –
And God is more loving than Jonah thought!*

We saw last week that Jonah was a prophet of God –
He was an orthodox believer – someone who had served God faithfully in the past.

BUT – by running away from God, Jonah demonstrated that he had lost sight of the *sheer holiness* of God!

Jonah thought he could run away from God –
Jonah thought that his small act of disobedience would make little difference to 'the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land' (as he describes him in 1:9).

Jonah probably reasoned that he was replaceable –
That God had better things to do with his time than concern himself with one disobedient prophet.

But in chapter 1, God showed Jonah just how *wrong* he was!

Jonah's disobedience mattered to God!
God couldn't just ignore it – God refused to let Jonah just run away from him!

*God was not indifferent to Jonah –
Jonah's actions mattered to God!*

And we need to see, with Jonah, that we cannot appreciate the grace of God – without first recognising the *holiness* of God.

God's grace is never just God turning a blind eye to our sin –
God cannot just ignore our sin – our selfishness – our disobedience –

*He is far too **holy** for that!*

And in the belly of the fish, Jonah came to recognise that...!

Read v.3.

And why had God ‘hurled Jonah into the deep’?

Because Jonah had personally rejected a holy God and treated him with contempt, by refusing to go to Nineveh.

Jonah’s attempt to run away from God – had reckoned without the holiness of God!

God had to show Jonah just how foolish he had been to run away from him, before Jonah could recognise just how much he *needed* God’s help and grace!

Read v.4.

God’s grace is always rooted in *his holiness*.

As John Newton so memorably put it:

“Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, / And grace my fears relieved.”

Part of our response to the grace of God *must* be to recognise and fear the holy God we have ignored and rejected in our lives –

And ask him to *forgive us!*

We need to ‘get’ the holiness of God – if we are ever to ‘get’ the grace of God!

God’s grace towards sinners is never simply God indulging them in their sin and selfishness –
It is never God turning a blind eye to sin.

God’s grace towards sin is demonstrated supremely at **the cross of Jesus Christ** –

And there we see that the *only way* a holy God could satisfy his holiness and justice –

Is by ensuring that the penalty for our sin –

and the terrible damage it has done to others and to ourselves –
is fully paid for, by the death of his only Son.

God couldn’t just ignore Jonah’s sin –

He sent a storm and cast Jonah into the sea to open Jonah’s eyes to just how *serious* his rebellion against God was...!

And God can’t just ignore our sin, either –

He is *too holy* for that.

Our actions *matter* to God –

Justice *matters* to God.

And it took the death of the Son of God to pay the price and take the punishment we each deserve for our sin.

We witness the grace of God at the cross of Jesus –
And the cross of Jesus reveals God to be a God of unimaginable *holiness*.

A true understanding of God's grace teaches us to have a healthy fear of the living God.

But thankfully, when the grace of God provokes our fear –
God quickly acts to *relieve* that fear...!

Jonah learnt through the storm that God was more holy than he'd previously thought –
But he also learnt that God was *more loving* than he thought, too!

Both Jonah and the sailors in chapter 1 concluded that God had sent the storm to *kill* Jonah
for his disobedience –
And as Jonah sank under the waves, he fully expected to die.

Verses 5 and 6 are as vivid a description of the experience of drowning you'll find anywhere
–
Read vv.5-6 (up to '*barred me in for ever.*')

BUT –
v.6 doesn't end with Jonah drowning!

'But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.'

Jonah expected to drown –
But God *saved* him from drowning!

Just when Jonah thinks he is beginning to understand the holiness of God and how serious his
sin against God really was –
He comes face to face with God's equally staggering *love for him!*

God didn't want Jonah to drown –
He saved Jonah, because his purposes for Jonah were *good!*

God's purposes for Jonah are very different to the life Jonah would have chosen for himself –
For a start, they still included sending him to Nineveh...!

But Jonah was slowly coming to discover that God's purposes for him were the expression of
a deep love for Jonah that he had previously lost sight of..

God demonstrated his love for Jonah in providing a fish to rescue him –
And God demonstrates his love for us today – through his decision to send his Son
Jesus into the world, 2,000 years ago.

The apostle Paul puts it like this, in Romans 5:8:
*"And God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ
died for us."*

The grace of God that Jonah celebrates in chapter 2 is rooted in both:

*The holiness of God –
And the love of God.*

And the greatest demonstration of both these characteristics of God is *the cross of Jesus*.

We've already seen that the cross proves that God can never turn a blind eye to our sin – that it must be paid for –

But it also demonstrates the enormous love God has for sinners, that he was willing to both satisfy his justice – *and* lavish us with mercy...!

I hope we can see in Jonah's case, that Jonah didn't *deserve* to be rescued by God.

He had gotten himself into that storm –

and he had endangered a boat-load of innocent sailors in the process.

Before his prayer from inside the fish, there isn't even much evidence to suggest that Jonah had repented of his actions.

But in his grace – God chose to save him!

If you're a Christian here this morning, you should feel the injustice of Jonah's rescue –

To help you grasp the injustice of *your own!*

Jonah's time in the belly of the fish was later taken by Jesus as a demonstration of God's lavish grace to foolish, sinful people.

And in Matthew 12:40, Jesus linked the grace God showed towards Jonah – with the even greater grace God was about to show through *him...!*

“As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Jesus entered our world to die –

To spend three days and nights in the grave – before destroying the power of sin and death by rising again!

*God's grace is miraculous – it is rooted in both his holiness and his love –
Supremely, it is rooted in Jesus!*

And, if we accept God's grace towards us in Jesus, then it is *life-transforming!*

- **God's grace is – life-transforming**

By the end of Jonah 2, Jonah is a changed man.

He responds to God's grace towards him, by entrusting his life afresh to God and to God's purposes for him.

Read v.9.

We're going to see next week that Jonah's understanding of God still needed a lot of work...!

But for now, as we leave this chapter, I want us to see the difference God's grace makes to the way we should live our lives as *individuals* –
And the way we should live our life *as a church community*.

The grace of God – in all its vastness and miraculous power – demands a *response from us*.

The American pastor Tim Keller once recalled a conversation he had with a woman in his church in New York.

She had been a church-goer for many years, but confessed to him that she'd never really heard God's grace clearly explained to her in the past –

That God alone has the power to save us –
And that he does that on the basis of his *holiness* and his *love*.

She went on to say that she wasn't surprised that so many people like her shied away from a robust, biblical understanding of God's grace, focussed on the cross of Jesus.

"The grace of God is a dangerous thing," she said.

When Tim Keller asked her why she thought it was dangerous, she answered:

"Well, if I'm saved by his grace, then there's *nothing* God can't ask of me."

I think she's right...

The grace of God – rightly understood – has the power to completely transform our lives –
And the life of this church.

If we're saved by grace, then there is *nothing* God can't ask of us!

- No act of service
- No demonstration of costly love
- No command to humble ourselves and repent of our sin –
- No frustration of our hopes and plans

Let's be clear this morning –

The grace of God in saving sinners is both amazing – and *frightening...!*

There is nothing God can ask of us, that he hasn't already given for us...!

And as we seek to respond to his grace – in repentance and faith –

We can know that he always goes ahead of us, to show us more of his grace – more of his goodness and glory.

When Jonah was thrown overboard, he didn't know the fish was there to rescue him –

But it was...!

God's grace goes ahead of us – as individuals and as a church –

Will we accept it?

Will we listen to God's call on each and every one of us –

To know him – to love him –

And to make him known?