

Surprising Mercy in a Raging Storm

Let's turn together to the book of Jonah. This morning we begin a study of the book of Jonah that we've titled *Surprised by Grace*. Jonah is a short book (just four chapters), and a familiar one. Who doesn't know the story about the guy and the whale? When I think of Jonah I'm transported back in time to a small Sunday school room with the smell of cookies and juice (when I was a kid you always got a cookie and juice in Sunday school) and there's this felt board guy about to get swallowed by a felt board whale. And honestly we can think that Jonah is a lightweight book that really doesn't have much to say beyond Sunday school. But there is more to the book of Jonah than meets the eye. Ray Stedman called Jonah "probably the best known yet least understood book in the Bible."

The first question that comes to mind with Jonah is, is it true? Are we really supposed to believe that a man could survive three days and three nights in the belly of a large fish? Some have tried to identify what kind of fish it might have been, and figure out how a guy could survive that long in a fish. Others, because of the fantastic nature of the story, have questioned the historical accuracy of Jonah, and have proposed that we are to understand it as a parable, not actual historical fact. But there are several problems with interpreting Jonah as a parable rather than a historical event. First, the book itself presents the events as factual events, with no hint of it being meant as a parable. Jonah was a real prophet who lived in the eighth century. In 2 Kings we read about Jonah bringing the word of the Lord to King Jeroboam telling him to fortify the northern border of Israel against the threat of the Assyrian nation. So Jonah himself is a historical figure and the book is presented as historical fact.

The other problem with interpreting it as a parable is that Jesus believed it to be actual history. When the Pharisees challenge Jesus to give them a sign that he was the Messiah, he tells them that no sign will be given except the sign of the prophet Jonah. *For [he says] just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth"* Matt 12:40. It would be odd for Jesus to choose as the one sign of the authenticity of his ministry (and the authenticity of his resurrection) an event that was just a fable and legend and never really happened. Jesus goes on to say that the men of Nineveh (the city Jonah was called to preach to) would rise up and condemn Jesus' generation for refusing to believe because they repented at Jonah's preaching and something greater than Jonah is among them now. Jesus believed that Jonah really happened.

If we dismiss Jonah as legend and myth because of the fantastic events recorded in it, we will miss the point that the amazing, almost crazy, events in Jonah's story reinforce. The surprising – even shocking – events in the book of Jonah call our attention to a surprising – even shocking – truth about God. In a way that is unlike any other book in the Bible, Jonah displays the radical mercy and missionary heart of God to an extreme that would be stunning to the original Jewish readers of this book. The purpose of Jonah isn't to give us a great flannel board lesson for Sunday school, the purpose is to foreshadow the heart and mission of Jesus in ways that are meant to surprise and even shock us.

Title of message: *Surprising Mercy in a Raging Storm (pray)*

Surprises are a central part of the book of Jonah and in the first chapter alone we are confronted with four things that would have surprised the original readers of Jonah. Right off the bat, the first surprise we find is...

I. A surprising message – 1:1-2

The book of Jonah opens routinely enough, with the words: *now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai*... That is the common formula when a prophet is given an oracle from the Lord. But then there is a completely unexpected twist: “arise and go to Nineveh, that *great* city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” In the OT prophets were often called to speak out against pagan nations, but God never actually sent them to the foreign nations to deliver their prophetic message in person. The oracles that Isaiah and Jeremiah and Obadiah spoke against nations like Assyria or Babylon or Egypt were spoken to Israel and were meant for Israel’s sake. But God calls Jonah to *go to Nineveh*, which God calls “that great city”. We’re going to see that word “great” a lot in Jonah – it’s the Hebrew word *gadol* and it’s a major word theme in the book of Jonah. Here it doesn’t mean great as in good, it means great in the sense of being the most powerful city in the most powerful nation in the world. Nineveh had the distinction of being the most wicked city in the most godless and wicked nation in the world, Assyria. And so it is not surprising that God would have his prophet speak out against that city, but it is *unbelievably* shocking that God would command Jonah to go there and deliver God’s message of wrath in person. No other prophet in the OT is called to do what Jonah is commanded to do. It is a surprising message. But it doesn’t stop there because we are then immediately confronted with...

II. A surprising response 1:3

Jonah does what no other prophet or man of God in the entire Bible does – he gets up and runs away from the presence of the Lord! The original readers would have been dumbfounded to read this, because this is not how OT prophets acted. Oh, there are accounts of men of God dragging their feet and making excuses when called to do something they didn’t feel able to do. Moses reminded God that he couldn’t speak eloquently. Elijah complained to God that all the prophets had been killed and he alone was left serving the Lord. But once God commands – they got up and obeyed. Jonah doesn’t. He flees. A prophet, a man who knows that God is the God of the heavens and the earth, tries to flee the presence of the Lord. He refuses to deliver the Lord’s message, he rebels against God’s command, and he goes to the seaport of Joppa looking for a ship that would take him as far away from Nineveh as he could get by sea in that day.

This would be like your going to see your favorite hero-actor (Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, whoever) in a new action movie where aliens or zombies take over New York and the city is in danger of being destroyed, including your hero’s family and friends, and then the movie documents how your hero hops on a plane for San Francisco and spends the whole movie just trying to get as far away from the danger as possible. You’d probably be surprised and a little disappointed. It’s not how hero’s act. And this is not how prophets act.

At this point we don’t know why Jonah is running – that won’t be revealed until chapter 4. All we know at this point is that Jonah is running from God. Before we consider the implications of this, I want us to see one other surprise that chapter one holds in store for us, for the next thing we are confronted with is...

III. A surprising reversal – 1:4-14

Jonah is running from the Lord, on a boat to Tarshish, but the Lord isn’t going to let Jonah get away so easily and He hurls a great – *gadol* – wind upon the sea which creates a “mighty tempest” on the sea. It is a great picture of the greatness of the God that Jonah is running away from: He is capable of hurling a raging storm at Jonah as easily as we might hurl a small rock. We see in the gospels that He is just as able to easily calm that same sea with a single word.

This is a violent storm that soon has sea-hardened sailors frightened for their lives and crying out to their gods. When the captain finds Jonah sleeping in the lower deck of the ship he urges him to call out to his god – who knows which god is the god who can save them from perishing. Let's cover all our bases.

But nothing helps and the storm intensifies until they realize they need to know who it is who has angered a god powerful enough to create this storm and so they cast lots and it falls on Jonah. Jonah isn't surprised and admits everything. He is a Hebrew who fears the Lord (Yahweh) the God of heaven who made the sea and the heaven. And he admits to them that he is running away from the Lord.

At this point we see a surprising reversal. Although Jonah identifies himself as a man who fears God his life isn't lining up. And although the pagans are supposedly men who have no regard for the living God, they show great respect and fear for God. When they hear that Jonah is running from God they cry out "*what is this that you have done?*" with the kind of passion that a prophet would cry out against the disobedient. As the storm gets worse and worse they try everything they can, even trying to reach the shore, to avoid having to throw Jonah overboard to his death. Finally they realize that God is not going to let them off any other way and they pray the Lord doesn't hold Jonah's death against them. The sailors have been transformed into God-fearing men and Jonah has an odd kind of indifference to God and to whether he lives or dies. It is a surprising role reversal.

Running from God

This is an echo of what we will see in the gospels: godless, sinful men and women who become true followers of Jesus and supposedly religious experts whose hearts are shown to be far from God. This reversal of roles is shocking until we realize that we are all running from God in one way or another.

Some people are real obvious about how they run from God – they run from God the way the prodigal son ran away from his father. Their lives display a disdain for God and His commands – they live exactly how they want to live with no regard for God. But there is another way that we can run from God while looking like we're walking with Him. It's the older brother kind of running – living moral, good, externally obedient-looking lives, but all from a heart of pride and self-reliance rather than from desperate need for God. And we see in the gospels that it is often the prodigals who are more likely to come to their senses and see their desperate need for God than the religiously moral older brothers. That's why Jesus said, "*I didn't come to call the righteous (those who think they're righteous enough to reach God on their own), but sinners.*" (Mark 2:17) It isn't possible to be so sinful that you're out of God's reach but it is possible to be so good that you're out of God's reach.

Faith in Christ means we turn away from either kind of running – flagrant disobedience or moralistic self-reliance and run to Jesus desperate to be saved. And we never outgrow our desperate need for Jesus' salvation. 38 years ago I desperately needed God's mercy when He forgave me of my sins and saved me, and this morning I desperately need God's mercy to forgive me of my sins and keep me in His saving grace.

The truth is we can be walking with God and still be running away at some point or in some situation in our lives. Every choice, every action, every thought is either running towards God (even if it's a slow jog) or running away from God.

- When God convicts us of a sin and we stubbornly hold on to that sin, trying to ignore that still, small voice of our God-given conscience because we don't want to let go of it, we are running away from God.

- When we choose to hold unforgiveness towards someone we are running away from God's command to forgive even as God in Christ Jesus forgave us.
- When God calls us to step out in faith – witnessing to an unbeliever or helping someone in need and we refuse, we are running away from God's missional heart as revealed in Jonah.

Not all storms in our lives are because we're running away from God but certainly some are. And that brings us to the final surprise in chapter 1.

IV. A surprising mercy 1:15-17

As soon as the seamen pick Jonah up and hurl him into the sea the storm stops raging. The result in verse 16 is that they feared the Lord exceedingly – literally with great (*gadol*) fear. As they offered a sacrifice and vows to the Lord, there seems to be a transformation in them. They will never forget Yahweh, the God who created heaven and earth and who would not let His servant get away with disobeying Him, but whose rage was extinguished the moment He got what He was after. He is a God of mercy who had no desire to kill innocent men and in fact kept them alive until they figured out what God was after and acted on what they learned.

But what about Jonah? We might assume that the storm's rage reflected God's rage against Jonah. He had disobeyed God and God chased him down in order to punish him for what he did. We might think so – God's rage won't be satisfied until the men throw him overboard into a raging sea that will certainly drown him. Except verse 17 ends the chapter by telling us that God appointed (or prepared) a great – there's that word *gadol* again – a great fish to swallow up Jonah. There's no sense in trying to figure out what kind of fish it was or if a man could survive in a fish for three days. God prepared this fish – it was a miracle in the same way that Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednego survived the fiery furnace. By God's miraculous intervention.

And in this we see a surprising mercy. The storm wasn't sent to punish Jonah, but to intervene in his headlong, self-destructive pursuit of a life separate from God. He was on the way to destruction and God intervened. It wasn't God's anger that chased Jonah out to sea, it was His love.

When God allows storms into your life, if you are a believer you can know that it isn't there to destroy you but to save you. Maybe you've been praying for God to still the storm, but could it be that there is something that God is rescuing you from that you haven't yet seen? Maybe you've grown apathetic towards God? Maybe a self-reliance that chokes out your faith in God? Maybe a desire to be in control that tightens your grip on the steering wheel instead of giving it over to the Lord? Maybe a sin that has grown more dear to you than God's presence. Rather than praying that God would remove the storm, maybe it would be better to ask God to help you see whatever it is He is seeking to show you.

And if you are not a believer, and there are storms in your life, there's a good chance God is trying to get your attention. There is only one true God, and only one way to Him – Jesus Christ His Son. On the cross Jesus faced the raging storm of God's wrath against our sin so that anyone who believes and trusts in him should not perish (sink beneath the waves of eternal death) but have eternal life. The Bible promises that anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Will you call upon His name this morning? Will you drop any pride or doubt that keeps you from Jesus and humble yourself and ask Jesus to rescue you?

Surprised by Grace
Allen Snapp
Grace Community Church
August 4, 2013

The message of Jonah is God's radically surprising love for those who are far, far from Him, whether it be a godless nation or a prophet on the run. Will you come to Him right now?

The Deep, Deep Love