

“Down Before Out: Jonah and the Journey Outward (Part 4)

Who likes the parable of the lost sheep? It makes me feel good to know that the Good Shepherd would leave 99 other sheep to come and rescue me if I was lost.

Who likes the parable of the prodigal son? It makes you feel good to know that the forgiving Father would welcome you home no matter what, doesn't it?

We love these stories.

There's certainly nothing wrong with these parables. But there's a problem with our reading of these stories. There's something *off* about our conclusions. When we say “amen!” at the end of these stories of free grace, something in our “amen” rings a little bit hollow.

We want grace. But the kind of grace we often want is *cheap* grace. Instead of a grace that confronts what we're like deep down, we want a surfacey “it's ok.”

But it's not okay. Jonah shows us that the parable of the lost sheep and the lost son are not stories of cheap grace at all.

Jonah shows us that we must go down before we go out. That before we're ever motivated and equipped to journey outward with a message of God's love, we've got to experience that love in the dark depths of who we really are when no one is looking. Jonah shows us that real forgiveness and grace will be much more relentless; penetrating. True grace will go much further down to the core of our being than we are comfortable with.

Jonah shows us that before we ever boast in our identity as children of God, that identity needs to be cemented in the depths of our hearts. Jonah shows us that before we delight in our role as God's servants and ambassadors, we need to have our Father serve us his tough but tender love, and send to us his searching Spirit.

Before moving out from the first chapter of Jonah, we need to go with Jonah down into the depths. Down to where his heart is trying to hide. Down to the lowest pit.

Let's follow Jonah's journey down.

First, when the word of the LORD comes to him, he goes *down* to Joppa (3). In the Bible, when the word of the LORD comes to a prophet, it's usually uncomfortable. It's not like getting warm fuzzy feelings. Bible prophets described the word of the LORD coming to them as “a sword in their spirits, a burden on their shoulders, a hammer breaking their rocky hearts, a fire raging within them,” a bitterness in their mouth and stomach. The prophets find the word of the LORD difficult to bear because it means that there's going to be heart surgery involved. It's going to be good, and gracious. But it's not going to be easy and cheap.

But Jonah simply won't bear the burden of God's Word. He won't carry it to Nineveh. He won't even let it reverberate in his own soul. *Down* to Joppa he goes, to flee from the face of the LORD whose word he doesn't want to hear. Remember, every time it says he fled from the LORD, it's the presence, or, literally, the *face* of the LORD, from which he's fleeing. First trip down? First attempt to get away from God's face by going down? Down to Joppa.

“Down Before Out: Jonah and the Journey Outward (Part 4)

Jonah buys his ticket to Tarshish. He boards the ship. The captain calls “all aboard,” the anchor goes up, and they set sail West on the Mediterranean. And then this storm shows up. Just when the storm is really raging, Jonah (5) goes *down* into the depths of the ship. He can sense—just like the sailors sensed—that this was no ordinary storm. He can tell it’s the storm of the presence of the LORD. That the LORD’s face is not so easy to flee. He’s gone down to Joppa and West toward Tarshish, but he hasn’t gone down far enough to hide himself from God’s face. He looks at the waves, and he sees in their contours the contours of God’s determined face. So *down*, into the boat he goes. Away from God’s face.

Down in the depths of the boat, I imagine he can still hear the sailors shouting and the thunder cracking and the wind whipping. He can’t *see* the face of God in the storm, but he can still hear it and feel it. Down to Joppa, and down into the depths of the boat are not far enough. He’s still conscious of God’s face, even if he can no longer see it. So he goes down further. (5) He laid down and fell into a deep sleep. Some scholars think this is a deep, depressive sleep. Others say that he’s hoping never to wake up.

Most of us say that when they get old and are going to die, they want to die peacefully in their sleep. Maybe that’s what Jonah wants too. I’ll go to sleep, and I’ll simply never wake up.

Or maybe he’s spiritually and emotionally exhausted and the only relief he can imagine is to be unconscious. Have you ever been so emotionally exhausted that you’re too tired to even worry anymore? And you collapse into a deep sleep? Jonah goes down to Joppa, down into the boat, and down into a deep sleep. All to escape the face of the LORD.

Then the sailors wake him up. Soon, they find out that this storm is in fact the face of Jonah’s God coming after him. So much for his deep sleep. Like the prophet Samuel who couldn’t sleep because the LORD kept calling his name, Jonah will not be able to descend away from God’s face through a deep sleep. Now Jonah, laying there below deck, awakes to see God’s face in the face of these pagan sailors who bear his image. “What are you *doing* down here!?! Tell us what to do, prophet!”

Jonah insists that the sailors throw him into the raging sea. While all the sailors are crying “have mercy on us!” to any god who will listen, Jonah cries “kill me now!” Look, maybe Jonah knew that the sea would be calm as soon as he was thrown in. But maybe he didn’t know that at all. Maybe he was just making things up. Maybe he just wants it all to be over. Maybe he’s simply trying to hide the depths of his soul from God’s face by hiding in the depths of death at sea. Going down to Joppa didn’t work. Going below deck didn’t work. Going into a deep sleep didn’t work. Maybe drowning in a deep sea is the only way to get away from God’s face.

Finally, the sailors throw him overboard. And now the storm will swallow him, right? Now he’ll finally be free of God’s face. “The LORD can’t get me here. God can’t look at me if I’m dead!” While the sailors are up above on the calm surface, Jonah is sinking down into the depths of the sea. He’s won his freedom from God’s presence at the cost of his own life.

Or so he thinks. Because just when he thinks he’s sunk below God’s radar, a submarine of the divine navy detects and captures him. The LORD appoints a giant fish who swallows him alive. And now he goes down into the belly of the fish. Now where is Jonah? He is in the heart of the sea in the belly of a fish, conscious, and alive.

“Down Before Out: Jonah and the Journey Outward (Part 4)

Is he happy about it? It doesn't seem like he would be. Maybe he's furious about it for 3 days. He has tried every trick to flee God's face. He can't do it. As Luther says: “Not only the ship, but the whole world becomes too small for Jonah. ... He finds no nook or corner in all of creation, not even in hell, where he might crawl in.”

And then on that third day, he decides to write a poem. I mean, all true art is born from suffering, right? Jonah has some pretty good material to work with.

And in this poem, he says “Ok, God. You win.”

In fact, in 2:3, he says that it was the LORD who threw him into the heart of the sea. Not the sailors; the LORD. It was the LORD's waves and breakers who went over his head and engulfed him. Deep in the heart of the sea, there's Jonah. All the way down (6) to the roots of the mountains, there's Jonah. He is now as far *down* as anyone can go. He's at rock bottom. In a way, he's further from home, further from the Temple mount, down there at the bottom of the sea than he would have been in Tarshish. But God has made this fish's insides into a temple and has surrounded, almost suffocated, Jonah with his presence. After 3 days, he's finally quit running. He knows, like the psalmist says, (139)

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, in the place of the dead, in hell, you are there.

If I settle on the far side of the sea,

If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,”

even the darkness will not be dark to you;

the night will shine like the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

I can run, LORD, but I can't hide.

As Jacques Ellul says: “Jonah is pursued by a devouring love which wants him totally, [which wants] the ardor of his own converted heart. He is pursued by an unwearying patience which will use every means to bring it about finally that this man yields to God.”

You see what's going on here? It's going to have to be Jonah who finally decides to look at God's face. God won't *make* Jonah love and trust him. Jonah has to do that. But God is going to bend heaven and earth, sea and dry land, storms and sailors, floods and fish, in order to pursue Jonah's heart. The entire book of Jonah is God's relentless pursuit of Jonah's heart. It's God saying “you are going to get a good look at my grace before you go rejecting it.” The LORD could have easily given up on Jonah the minute he went down to Joppa instead of up to Nineveh. The LORD could have raised up another prophet if all he was interested in is the Nineveh problem. But the book of Jonah is not called “Nineveh.” The book of Jonah is called *Jonah*. Because the book of Jonah is really about Jonah's heart. Jonah's hatred of the gracious character of God's heart. Jonah's desperate attempt to avoid dealing with the confrontation between God's grace and the depths of his own sin. And God's determination to make his face shine upon the darkness of the depths of Jonah's heart.

“Down Before Out: Jonah and the Journey Outward (Part 4)

Jonah had been so proud of his position in the palace of Israel’s king. He’d been so proud to be identified with the one true God. He’d been proud of his ethnic identity. He’d been proud of his *service* to the LORD. But when the LORD called him to go to Nineveh, he realized that this God of his was ridiculously gracious. Way too gracious for Jonah’s taste. So gracious that he might warn wicked empires instead of simply destroying them. Way too patient. Way too persistent. And so Jonah went down, down, down, down, down. Burying himself in an attempt to cover himself from the face of such a stubborn grace. Trying even to hide in the depths of death. And the LORD keeps coming. Keeps shining his face into the depths of Jonah’s proud dark heart.

Alexander Whyte said: “When I watch the working of my own heart ... this is what I am compelled to write: I am Jonah.”

If you are a chosen child of God, then you are Jonah, too. You and I can’t stand to have the depths of our pride exposed to the sight of God, to have our sinful hearts shown to be what they are in the splendor of God’s holiness. So we flee from the face of the LORD. We want to be identified with the true God. We want to be known to the world as God’s servants. To be respected. But God doesn’t need us. He can find someone else who will go to Nineveh. Someone else to serve on the church council, usher, lead Bible study, go to the mission field.

He doesn’t need us. He *wants* us. And the only way he can get us is if he will continue to show us the very thing that we don’t really want: the presence of his grace and glory; his face of mercy and truth. Shining on the deep darkness of our shame and failure and pride.

God has dispatched his true prophet to speak grace and truth to us. Jesus. “In many times and ways he spoke by the prophets. But finally, he spoke by his Son” (Heb 1:1). He spoke by his coming, his life, his death, his burial in the depths of the earth, and by his resurrection. He has chased us down. He’s bent heaven and earth to get alone with our souls and to confront our darkness with his light. There’s nowhere to flee from his presence.

Will we keep running? Keep heading down and away from his face? Or will we receive his compassion and mercy, his abundance of steadfast love?

Jonah had to go down before he went out. We do, too.