

Deeper and Darker

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Date: 19 July 2020

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[0 : 00] Well, let us turn back then to God's word. Let me read verse 17 of chapter 1 again. But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. Lord, how deep and how dark has your life descended?

Let me use an illustration. As we come through these summer months, and we'll eventually go into the autumn and then into the winter, it will seem like all of a sudden to some of you, when we come to October, that the nights are dark.

All of a sudden it's dark. It's not as bright as it used to be. However, for others of you, you've even noticed this past week that the nights are getting longer.

Even just by a minute or two, and the days are getting shorter. Slowly the darkness begins to overshadow the light.

[1 : 21] At the scene of Calvary, Jesus enters into the deepest and the darkest of experiences. When he cried out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And tonight we turn to the scene that Jesus used to illustrate his experience of the depths on the cross and in the grave.

He spoke about Jonah, who goes into the belly of the sheep, and then into the belly of the sea, and finally into the belly of the fish.

From the belly of the fish, and the belly of the sea, Jonah prays. And in the fish he's praying, recalling when he was in the water.

In his mind, thinking his imminent death. So let's look at three things this evening. Jonah was sinking. Jonah was seen.

[2 : 26] And Jonah was saved. Sinking, seen, and saved. So we begin then. Jonah was sinking. As I explained in a recap of chapter one, Jonah's decision to rise up in disobedience to his God has led him down, down, down.

He immediately went down to Joppa, down into the ship. And now finally he goes down into the depths of the ocean and the depths of this great fish.

We read here in verse two of chapter two, as Jonah describes his location, From the depths of the grave I called for help.

The word there is sheol, from the place of the dead. And then again he says in verse four, I have been banished from your sight.

Jonah's emphasizing his desperate condition. That he's feeling totally isolated. That he is permanently isolated from God.

[3 : 45] And yet we need to ask a question right at the beginning. Is this not what Jonah wanted? Did he not want to be free from his merciful God?

Did he not hear his call to go east? And he rose up and ran to the west? Did he not suppress every aspect of his faith and conscience?

And ignore the will of God? And do the will of Jonah? Is that not what so many, perhaps, of you are doing and have done in your life?

This is what you want. To be free from God's call on your life. You perhaps don't want to hear any more about this God.

Or this invitation to come and be part of God's family. You don't want to hear any more about what God has done for you. In sending his one and only son, Jesus Christ, to the cross.

[4 : 54] And maybe, then, God lets you run and lets you sink down, down, down. The further away we run from God, the deeper and darker it gets.

Maybe you know this place that Jonah is describing in his prayer. Maybe you've been there. Maybe you are there. Maybe you are there. It's a dangerous place.

But I want you to listen to what Jonah did next. From the depths of the grave, the end of verse 2, I called for help and you listened to my cry.

As it's often said, you never realise that Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have. If Jonah was to begin to finally ascend, both in the water and in his faith, he had to be brought to the very end of himself.

The way up for Jonah was, first of all, down. God steps into Jonah's providence. You see, sin had pushed Jonah downwards.

[6 : 17] But God's mercy pursued Jonah even further. This great verse is a great example of God's mercy.

But we have to open our minds here. Why do then perhaps you have them at the moment? Jonah's decision has spiralled him on a downwards trajectory.

This was his attempt to step away from the Lord and his call on his life. And what has the Lord been doing?

What has the Lord been doing through all of this since Jonah just rose up and went in the opposite direction? Will he just let Jonah go? No, no. God has prepared this great fish.

You see, before Jonah had said one word in prayer, before Jonah had stepped foot upon that ship, before Jonah had even risen up in disobedience to God, God had prepared this great fish.

[7 : 24] It had grown. It had developed. And for how long? Had it swum up and down in the ocean to find itself in the exact position at the exact time to swallow God's disobedient disciple and save him.

God, who is the creator of all, is in control of all creation. Never forget that God is in control of all things.

Not just in the general way, but in the specifics. It is as if with one hand, God hurled Jonah off that ship and with the other hand, he prepared this great fish to save him.

What a remarkable God Jonah has. What a remarkable God you have. You may have run from the Lord.

It may be getting deeper and darker. But while the word of God can still be heard, there is still light. The light has not yet gone out.

[8 : 39] Even from the depths, you, like Jonah, can cry for help. Jonah is sinking.

But secondly then, Jonah is seen. Notice the belly of the sea and the belly of the fish become the prayer chamber for Jonah.

Jonah doesn't move physically, but he moves a great length spiritually when he prays. And we can pray anywhere.

God hears the utterances, our cries, from wherever we pray to him. Remarkable prayers have been carved out in some unremarkable of places.

Notice what Jonah doesn't pray for, though, as you look through chapter 2. He doesn't pray hoping that this fish is heading in his right direction towards some piece of land and not further out into the sea.

[9 : 55] He doesn't ask about how he's going to be preserved at all. You see, nothing else matters to Jonah apart from what is most important.

As he rose up in chapter 1 in disobedience, his journey, his destination, and his transport was paramount to his plans. And God, for him, was somewhere on the periphery.

But now in the depths, now that he has seen clearer, all these other things are on the periphery, and God has become paramount.

How major is God in your sight tonight? The smaller role that he plays, and I suggest, the deeper you are in sin.

Jonah says in verse 3, You, God, you hurled me into the depths of the sea. Jonah knew that it was God who sent the storm.

[11 : 02] And for the sailors to be saved, he had to be sacrificed. He wasn't blaming God or making excuses. He was holding his hands up, recognizing that all that was happening to him was because of him.

He goes on in verse 6, The earth beneath me barred me in forever. Not only did he see that he was a sinner, but he realized that he could do nothing about his present condition.

He didn't conclude that enough law-keeping or being an upstanding citizen would release him from this watery prison. Only one person could save him now.

We are by default barred from God because of our sin. We cannot open the gates.

We can't clear our own debt. We need intervention from outwith. We need to be shown some kind of amazing grace.

[12 : 12] We would need to be the recipients of some kind of eternal love if we are to have any hope at all. Jonah was sinking.

Jonah was now seen. And thirdly, Jonah was saved. Even though the hymn writer John Newton wrote Amazing Grace in the 18th century, Jonah could relate to every word.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind, but now I see.

In verse 4 and verse 7 of Jonah's prayer, he directs his gaze towards the temple. This is significant. Jonah knew that he had done wrong.

He knew that he could do nothing to rectify the situation. And he knew that only God could save him now. The temple.

[13 : 21] Why did he pray about the temple? Well, the temple in the Old Testament was the place where God promised to meet with his people. In the temple, the Ten Commandments were kept in something called the Ark of the Covenant.

There was a slab of gold over the Ark of the Covenant, which was called the Mercy Seat. And just once a year, the priest would enter into the temple and only then enter into this place where the Ark of the Covenant called the Holy of Holies.

And as he would enter, he would sprinkle blood from a sacrificed animal onto the mercy seat. You see, nobody could keep the law of God, even back then.

So they would stand condemned. But here in the temple, a substitute is provided and is accepted by God. The blood of this animal pays the price for the sinful Israelites.

The death of another secures their forgiveness. So Jonah prays about the temple. He prays about the blood being poured out. He prays because he seeks to be forgiven.

[14 : 44] But of course, this in the Old Testament is for us with our New Testament glasses on, all a pointer to a once and for all sacrifice to our substitute, whose blood would be poured out at Calvary, Jesus Christ.

He would go down into the deep darkness so you could be brought into his marvelous light. In verse 6, Jonah recognizes that he is lost, he is condemned, and he's unable to unlock the doors of his prison, and yet God saves him.

You may think, you may think that you're unsavable, but until you find yourself further away than in the belly of a great fish in the depths of the ocean, then this mercy of our God extends to you.

Though the whole world may have given up on you, God has not. What do we see in the Gospel? What do we see as we read our Bibles?

We see that those, Jesus tells in a story, that those from the highways and the byways, from the alleyways and the streets, are called to his banqueting table.

[16 : 11] We see some simple fishermen called to be his disciples. We see a thieving tax collector, despised by his whole community, and yet ushered down by Jesus.

Lepers healed, the blind receiving their physical and their spiritual sight back. And we see on the cross, a thief on his deathbed, been told these beautiful words from the Lord.

Today, you will be with me in paradise. Friend, you're not unsavable, but are you willing to be saved?

Jonah's prayer, which began with him speaking, now ends in verse 9 with him singing, salvation comes from the Lord.

It has taken Jonah, his whole prayer, to reach this climactic point of realisation. Some have called this the central verse of the whole Bible.

[17 : 20] Certainly, it expresses the main point of the entire Bible. It literally means that salvation belongs to the Lord alone, to nobody else.

It's not a matter of, God's done most of it, and I've done some of it. It's that God has done all of it. God saves us. We cannot save ourselves.

And this is what's so amazing about God's grace. So we see that Jonah has been on somewhat of that spiritual rollercoaster.

He went down, down, down. But now God has lifted him up, up, up. He went down to the ship, down in the sea, and down into the belly of the great fish.

And Jesus wants us to see that his own experience is illustrated by Jonah's. Jesus also went down, down, down.

[18 : 28] And now he has come up, up, up. He went down from glory to Golgotha and into the grave.

But just as Jonah was given his life back, Jesus raised his own life up from the dead. And he has now ascended to the right hand of the throne of God.

There is at least one key contrast between Jonah and Jesus. Jonah went down because of his own disobedience.

Jonah went down because he was being punished for his own sin. Jesus went down because he took the punishment for our sin.

Friends, it may be dark in your heart tonight, but can you see this light? The light that has come into the world and the darkness shall never overcome it.

[19 : 34] Jesus said, I am the light of the world. you may have drifted down, down, down, down, but will you let Jesus, who has been lower than you can ever go, tonight lift you up, up, up?

Well, we pray that you will. Let's join together in a word of prayer. Heavenly Father, we do thank you and praise you for your word.

We thank you for the life of Jonah and even though he was a disobedient disciple, we thank you that we can relate so much to him.

We thank you for his prayer to you, even from the belly of that great fish and we thank you that Jesus, our Jesus, has descended even lower than Jonah so that each and every one of us can be lifted up to you.

Oh, we pray in the work of the Holy Spirit that you'll be moving amongst us. We ask it all in your name. Amen.