



WHEN GOD ROCKS YOUR BOAT

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
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It's great to have the kids in the service today, because we're going to talk about one of the most famous people in the Bible that I would bet almost every kid has heard about: Jonah. What can you tell me about Jonah?

How many of you knew there's a second story about Jonah in the Bible? It's a teeny tiny story, but it tells us something important about him.

2 Kings 14:23, 25

In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years... He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.

First of all, this tells us that Jonah was a prophet. What's a prophet? It's someone who spoke messages from God. How did they get those messages? God himself tells us:

Numbers 12:6

*When a prophet of the LORD is among you,
I reveal myself to him in visions,
I speak to him in dreams.*

The story we just read said that Jonah had gotten a word from God at least once before, a message that God was going to expand Israel's territory. That had actually come true, which was the test for whether or not a prophet was real.

These verses also tell us something else about Jonah that we wouldn't know otherwise, which is that Jonah was from a small town called Gath Hopher. We'll come back to that in a minute.

Now there are lots of prophets in the Bible, in fact there's a whole section of books in the Bible called "The Prophets". The book of Jonah is found in a collection of 12 little books – all of which were written by or about God's prophets.

But Jonah is different from the rest. We said that a prophet brings messages from God, and in those other books, that message takes up most of the space. Read through them sometime and you'll see what I mean. Amos, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi – all of them give us page after page of words from God to the people.

Do you know how much room Jonah's message takes up? One little sentence! We never even learn much about the people he delivered it to or why God decided it was time to send them a message. All of that is left out. The rest of the book is concerned with what happened between God and Jonah himself. For this prophet, the real story is about what God was teaching him instead of what God was teaching other people through him.

Have you ever seen a mom in a department store with a toddler who's having a temper tantrum? The kid will be kicking and screaming, and eventually they'll try the trick where they make their legs go limp so the mom has to pick them up. I'm sure none of you ever tried those tricks.

Jonah is like a grown up version of that toddler, fighting against where God wants to take him. He's not going to go easily. It's a struggle clear to the end of the book.

It's easy to be critical of Jonah. If you saw the VeggieTales movie about him, the main song in the movie said over and over again, "Jonah was a prophet, but he never really got it." The thing is, though, I'm not sure we're in much of a place to criticize. It's not easy for anybody to have a relationship with God, whether you're a prophet or not. We all struggle against him, and I think that's why Jonah's story is so invaluable. He's like us.

Our God is Jonah's God. The things that caught him by surprise about God catch us by surprise too. And throughout this entire book, the biggest surprise of all is God's grace. Jonah thought he understood it. But by the end of the book, he's seen how much he still doesn't know, how much bigger it really is.

We tend to think we understand God's grace too. We've heard about it a million times over. But I'm hoping that when we walk away from being with Jonah, we will be absolutely in awe of how big God's grace really is.

What is grace? It's the love and kindness God shows to us that we don't deserve. It's a love and kindness we can't earn and we can't lose. There's nothing so bad that we do that would make God stop loving us, and there's nothing so good we can do that would make him love us more. He just chooses to love us regardless, and that is grace.

Julia's mom went to college at a Christian college up in Canada. One day, a professor gave an assignment to write a paper on grace. A friend of hers named Cordell cheated and copied somebody else's writing. Now cheating is never a good thing, but you're really in a bad spot when you cheat in a Bible class.

Cordell got an A on his paper, and he felt terrible. He knew it was wrong and he couldn't live with that on his conscience. So he went to his professor and told him what had happened.

Now in college, when you do something like that, they can kick you out of the class. The professor said to him, "I should fail you. That's what you deserve. But this assignment was on grace, and I want you to remember it. So I'm going to let you keep your A, even though you didn't earn it."

That's grace – giving someone something they haven't earned and something they don't deserve.

Now if you could think of one thing in the Bible that really showed God's grace, what would it be?

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Jesus on the cross. He took the punishment on himself so we wouldn't have to. That's the big story of God's grace, and in one way or another, all the little stories in the Bible point us in that direction. The book of Jonah does that in some incredible ways. Hundreds of years before Jesus was on earth, God was preparing his people for what it would look like when he came, and Jonah gave them a preview of what Jesus would do later.

Jonah discovers new sides to God's grace practically every time he turns around. So let's get into the story and begin making some discoveries of our own.

Jonah 1

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

Anyone remember the name of that town where we said Jonah was from? Gath Hopher. Anybody know where that is? I'll show you. Can I have a volunteer? There's Gath Hopher. Now where did God tell Jonah to go? Nineveh. Anyone know where that is? I'll show you. Can I have another volunteer?

Nineveh is in the country of Iraq, near the modern city of Mosul. In fact, U.S. soldiers are helping restore some parts of Nineveh that date clear back to the time of Jonah. Back in those days, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. So it was outside of Jonah's home country. In fact, the people there were enemies of Israel and didn't even worship the same God. This is a scary, uncomfortable assignment.

And it's not a fun message – telling people they're wicked and God's upset. The last word Jonah got to share was way more appealing – telling a king that God is going to

make the country bigger. Jonah is finding that it's not always easy to be a prophet. Being chosen to share a message from God sounds special until you have to go and do it, and then you discover that sometimes it's plain hard.

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Anybody know where Joppa is? I'll show you. Can I have another volunteer? Joppa is in the modern city of Tel Aviv, and you can see from this picture that it's right on the water. It's the port city and a perfect place to catch a ship to Tarshish. Anybody know where Tarshish is? I'll show you. Can I have another volunteer?

Actually we're not totally sure where Tarshish is. We think it may have been in Spain. In any case it was a long way away.

What can you see on our map? If Jonah started in Gath Hopher and God wanted him to go to Nineveh, you can see pretty clearly that he did exactly the opposite. He didn't just decide to stay where he was and not to do what God wanted – he actually put himself as far away from doing what God wanted as he could. The verse says he was trying to flee from the Lord. He wanted to get out of God's line of sight.

At one time or another in our lives, we all try to get away from God. We might not get a word from the Lord the way a prophet does, but we do all have a pretty good idea of what he wants us to do. This week I was listening to a radio interview with Neale Donald Walsch, who wrote the book, "Conversations with God." I think the book misses the mark, but I was curious about what he would say. The radio host was asking him, "Does God talk to you in a special way that he doesn't talk to the rest of us?" And the author said, "No. Everybody is having conversations with God. We just don't call them that."

We all are in a dialogue with God. Sometimes it's through our conscience, or the little voice of his Spirit in our hearts that prompts us to do something. Sometimes we read a Bible verse and we just know it's talking to us about a situation we're going through. Sometimes we'll know by praying what the right answer is. And when we get those answers, sometimes we don't really like what God is saying. Maybe he's asking us to talk to somebody or befriend somebody or forgive somebody, and it seems harder than we want to deal with. I was talking with a friend this week who is struggling in his job, and he knows that God is working on his character through it, but he'd really rather just cut and run. Maybe you can relate.

At one time or another, all of us try to hide from God – try to escape his directions for us. Something has been wired into us ever since Adam and Eve tried to get away from God in the garden of Eden, and we resist giving in to God.

You would think Jonah would be more likely to do the right thing. After all, he's a prophet. But he was just as capable of ignoring God as the next person. I don't care how

long you've been a Christian or how much you may know the right thing to do, we're all inclined to make bad choices and escape from God if we can.

In doing that, something strange has happened to Jonah. Jonah started out not wanting to go talk to the wicked people of Nineveh. They were not godly. They were rebellious. They ignored God's instructions. There are all these things Jonah didn't like about them, and now they've become true about him. He's the one who's not godly. He's the one who is rebellious. He's the one ignoring God's instructions.

We're so quick to find fault in others that we often don't see the same characteristics in ourselves. Jonah had become the very type of person he was trying so hard to avoid. He just couldn't recognize it.

Jonah tried to run away from God, but found he couldn't get far enough, even on a ship headed to Tarshish.

Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

When we get as far off course as Jonah, sometimes, God sends in the storms to get our attention. He can use the choppy waters of life to shake us up. As in Jonah's case, sometimes it is our own actions that bring on the storm and the rain.

God knows how to rock our boats. You can see how all the sailors instinctively turn to prayer. Not Jonah, though. He was oblivious to the whole thing.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish."

Jonah doesn't feel like praying. He already knows what's going on. He knows why this storm came along. But he's still not ready to change his mind. He could put an end to it right then and there by telling God he's sorry and he's ready to go. But he bites his tongue and says nothing.

When we're running away from God, taking our chances with the storm sounds a whole lot better than going back to God and saying we're sorry.

Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

Jonah doesn't seem to see the disconnect here. He still says he worships God, even though he is not obeying him. But God doesn't want us to just say he's our God. That's what the prophet Samuel had to point out to King Saul:

1 Samuel 15:22-23

But Samuel replied, "What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Obedience is far better than sacrifice. Listening to him is much better than offering the fat of rams. Rebellion is as bad as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as bad as worshiping idols."

Knowing in our heads who God is will never substitute for actually doing what he has asked us to do.

Back to Jonah and the sailors:

This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

It's interesting that Jonah doesn't say, "Turn this ship around and take me back to Joppa." He has no hope of patching things up with God. He seems to have interpreted the storm as being a sign that God is angry, as some sort of punishment, and at this point he feels his life is doomed. He apparently feels he is too far gone to be of any use to God anymore.

The storm isn't what Jonah thinks it is, though. It isn't punishment. It's the opposite. It's our first glimpse of God's grace. **God's grace is bigger than my storm.** In the wind and the weather, God is saying, "I see you. I haven't given up on you. I am pursuing you." It's not what we expect grace to look like. It's jarring and upsetting and frightening. But the underlying intent is the opposite of what Jonah thought.

This isn't God squashing him – this is God chasing him. It is the storm that will rock Jonah out of the boat. It is the storm that will rock the world of the sailors. It is the storm that Jonah will always remember as the point at which God made his presence felt on that trip. And that can't be anything but grace.

There may be something in your life right now that is rocking your world. It may feel like nothing but a big storm that's causing chaos. When you are in the middle of a crisis

it can be hard to see anything but the waves. And I'm the last person to tell you why God allows some hardships into your life or anyone else's. But I do know God was bigger than Jonah's storm, and he's bigger than yours as well. He's big enough to turn it into something that shows you his grace. His love can be disguised in the wind and the waves.

Jonah sure couldn't see it while he was going through it. He couldn't even bring himself to ask for forgiveness, so instead he asks the sailors to throw him overboard. Jonah knows that's a death sentence. He won't be able to swim to shore. And he's not expecting a miracle. In his mind this is the end of the line. It's over. In reality, this is just where the story starts to get interesting.

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried to the LORD, "O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased." Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

This is one of my favorite parts of Jonah's story. Because God uses Jonah in spite of himself. In his despair, he becomes part of a miracle. Jonah brings the sailors into his mess. They are forced to take a step of faith before they even believe in Jonah's God.

They pray to God for forgiveness, and God immediately gave them a sign that he heard their prayers. The sea quieted right away when Jonah hit the water. As mighty as God's grace appeared in the storm, it shows up in quiet force when the sea is calm.

The sailors see the power of the living God. They understand that there must be a difference between Jonah's God and the gods they had been praying to in their fear. And they switched their allegiance immediately. God became real to them – all through a broken, disobedient man who wanted to die.

Here is our second surprising picture of grace. **God's grace is stronger than my rebellion.** Just because Jonah was being disobedient didn't stop God from reaching those sailors. Jonah thought he was getting out of being God's messenger, but God put him to work in the strangest circumstances and showed that he's powerful enough to change people's hearts. God is always in the business of reaching people, even if it means working around his chosen messengers. God can work through you in spite of yourself.

God works through us, but he's not dependent on us, and often the work he's doing through us is not what we think it is. I remember when I preached for one of the first times. Afterwards, a man came up to me and thanked me for what I had said because it had really struck home with where his marriage was at. I was feeling pretty good. I was hearing what I knew all along: that my words were having a huge impact and changing lives.

Then he told me the point that had really struck him. It wasn't even a point I had been making. This big revelation he got had nothing to do with what I said. You could hear the air leaving my head as it deflated. Suddenly I realized that God had chosen to speak to that man, and even though I was involved, it really had nothing to do with me. God was working independently of my words.

We can be as reluctant as Jonah, we can be as out of line as Jonah, but that's not a high enough wall to prevent God's grace from bursting through. It shows up where we least expect it and reaches further than we thought it could. Sailors lives were changed forever because God's grace was big enough to bring something good out of Jonah's rebellion. That's the way his grace is – making wholeness out of despair, beauty out of ugliness, strength out of weakness.

Throughout the story, Jonah has been in a downward spiral. The Bible passage says he “went down” to Joppa. Then he “went down” inside the boat and “went down” into a deep sleep. Now he has gone down as low as he can possibly go – to the bottom of the sea.

It's more than just a physical description. Jonah has sunk a long way spiritually. Just when you thought he could burrow no further away from God, he ends up a little lower until he can't possibly go any further.

And what does he find at his lowest possible point?

But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

A fish named grace is sitting there under the waves, waiting to scoop him up. As deep as Jonah has sunk, God's grace is deeper. God's grace is deeper than my lowest point. As Corrie Ten Boom once put it, “There is no pit so deep where God is not deeper still.”

People sometimes wonder if such a fantastic tale as Jonah's could really be true. Could someone really survive inside a fish or a whale? Could that really happen?

There are sea animals large enough to swallow a human. A Great White Shark has the gullet for it. So do Sperm Whales. There are a handful of reports of someone who has been swallowed by a whale and lived to tell about it. In fact, in the 1800's one man named James Bartley claimed to have been on a whaling ship called the Star of the East that was attacked by a whale near the Falklands, and that he was swallowed alive for 48 hours.

He said he had been thrown overboard and lost consciousness, waking up inside the whale. It was dark and slimy and incredibly hot. The walls of the stomach around him would shrink away from his touch. His face and neck and hands were bleached white from the stomach acids. He said he probably could have lived in there until he starved, because there was plenty of air. But he was scared senseless at the prospect of never

getting out. The whaling ship eventually killed the whale and found him inside. It took him two weeks to recover from the ordeal.

Skeptics have doubted whether or not Bartley's story is true. But as I listen to his description of what it was like inside the whale, it helps me more clearly imagine what Jonah might have experienced. Because all those sensations would have overcome him. The darkness. The heat. The pressing in. He is completely surrounded and held tight. It's far too close for comfort. And yet, it's what saves him. The grip of God won't let go. Grace is transformed from a spiritual concept into something he can touch and feel for himself.

Jonah needed a firsthand encounter of God's grace to truly understand it. This wasn't about God saving Israel in general. This was no message for thousands of people to hear. This was personal. This was God's love for Jonah himself. This was grace in his hour of need, God's refusal to let go of him when he had sunk to his lowest possible point.

Psalm 139 had to have taken on new meaning for Jonah after that.

Psalm 139:7-12

*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.*

*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.*

Jonah's journey of anger toward God that turned into despair ended up being the very thing that brought him to a fuller understanding of God. It is only after his encounter with the great fish that Jonah is ready to say anything to anyone about God's grace. That is the event that changes his course and sets him back on the right path.

We can know a lot about God's grace. We can understand in our heads that God loves the world. But what we need is a big fish. It's got to be personal knowledge. We need Jesus in our own hearts. We need to know not just "God loves the world," but "God loves me." We need to see that when we hit our lowest lows, God is deeper still, ready to swallow up our sins with his forgiveness. Even when we run as far as we can in the opposite direction of him, we find him holding on tightly and showing up everywhere we turn.

God's grace is bigger than we ever thought, but it's also way more personal. Just like Jonah, he has work he wants to do through you. But even more importantly, he has work he wants to do in you. Are you ready to let his grace get close enough to touch? It won't always be comfortable. But it will change the direction of your life forever.

Bigger than storms.

Stronger than my rebellion

Deeper than my lows