

Sunday November 26th sermon: "Jonah's Thanksgiving – Start Giving Thanks Now!"

Preached at the Lord's Table at Grace Bible Church in Greenwood, MS,
by John Pittman Hey

Jonah 2; Matthew 12:38-41

On this Sunday the nearest to Thanksgiving, we meditate about how little most of us know of continuous fear and want and danger, while others in this world are in desperate circumstances all their lives.

Just consider the terror of the Holocaust, or the prospect of being beheaded for Christ's sake by savage terrorists, or spending a lifetime near starvation.

Could we, or would we, be able to give thanks in all these things?

Jonah gives us a striking example of thanksgiving and praise in time of great distress.

He ran from God's commandment to prophesy to Nineveh, and took flight on the sea. God stirred up a great tempest against the boat, and the sailors were finally forced to throw Jonah overboard due to God's wrath against him for his disobedience.

God prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah, saving him from certain death by drowning.

While in the belly of that fish, Jonah gave strong thanksgiving to God, even though he was not yet fully rescued. Jonah didn't wait until he was safely on dry ground, but recognized that God had rescued him from drowning, and ought to be praised and thanked!

Jonah chapter 2 records Jonah's prayer of deliverance, given even though he was still in great danger. He was being slowly digested by the fish even as he prayed.

Jonah recounted that he had cried unto the Lord for salvation, while he was sinking to the depths of the sea, and God had heard his prayer and rescued him by the fish.

Then Jonah makes it clear, that it was God Who had cast him into the deep! Surely God used the sailors, and surely Jonah was to blame for his own rebellion, and yet God was the ultimate cause of Jonah's troubles.

Heretics today will object to us pointing out that God was responsible for the wicked act of the sailors, but God used their act of throwing Jonah overboard to chasten Jonah and to correct him.

But to Jonah, it was God ultimately that had thrown him into the deep, using human means under His providence!

Jonah next tells the Lord, that he at first thought he was cast out of God's sight in the ocean. This is bitterly ironic, since Jonah had purposefully fled to escape the presence of the Lord in the first place!

Jonah now recognizes that in no place and at no time was he ever out of the sight of God! What had once seemed a foolish, rebellious desire of Jonah's, suddenly became his worst terror, and then when God saved him by the fish, Jonah praised God for the fact that God always could see and hear him!

Jonah describes in his prayer to God the utter horror of the prospect of drowning in the deep sea, and then rejoices in the hope that, one day soon, he would worship God safe in His temple in Jerusalem.

Jonah had cried out to God for deliverance, and God heard his cry, and God saved him!

Jonah contrasts God's mercy with the futility of idols, and the foolishness of the wicked who worship them, and thereby cast aside the mercy of God. They worship inanimate objects that cannot hear, cannot act, cannot save, and therefore cannot show mercy to anyone.

Jonah vows to give further praise and thanksgiving to God, and expresses his belief that God will complete his rescue someday. Then he will give sacrifices in Jerusalem in worship of the God Who delivered him.

Salvation is of the Lord! No matter what we see and experience, in reality, it is only God Who saves us, in all cases, in all manners, no matter the direct or physical causes He acts through.

When surgeons, or firemen, or generous friends, or intelligent counsellors act to deliver us from troubles, small or great, in every instance, it is from the mind and purpose of God, Who has all power and knowledge and love, and works all things after the counsel of His will!

Even half steps toward our rescue ought to be given thanks for! When we see the very first movement by God to save us, we must render to Him our praise and thanksgiving!

Jonah's challenge to us is not to wait until the rescue is finally complete, but to begin to praise God for hearing us and relieving us from the start.

So if we wake up today feeling better, we ought to praise God! If the Lord has provided a way to pay our bills this month, give praise to God, even though we cannot see our way clear through the next month.

Jonah could have complained, that now he was being consumed by the fish, but instead he saw the fish as providentially provided by God, to save him from the horror of drowning.

And sure enough, Jonah's hope in God was fulfilled! God spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah up on the dry ground.

Centuries later, Jesus told His critics that the only sign He would give them was that of the prophet Jonah – as Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and nights, even so Christ would be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights.

The men of Nineveh would speak out in judgment against Israel, because they repented at Jonah's preaching, but now here Israel had a greater than Jonah present in Christ.

There are parallels between Jonah's story and that of our Lord Jesus.

Being overcome by water and drowning in the depths of the sea is used in Psalm 69 and other places to describe Christ's death at Calvary.

Jonah was thrown into the sea by God because of his sin. The Savior was thrown into the depths of death and the grave by God, because He was obedient, but had the sins of His people laid upon Him by God.

The sailors tried desperately to save Jonah from the sea, because they knew it was wrong to throw him overboard to save themselves. It went against every law of the sea for six thousand years of human existence.

But the Jewish leaders and priests and the mob were eager to put the sinless Christ to death unjustly, and to betray Him into the hands of their hated oppressors, the Romans.

But both Jonah and Christ were sent to judgment by God, using the hands of feckless or wicked men.

Both Jonah and Christ were rescued from the corruption of death by God Himself, and by miraculous means! Jonah commented upon this truth in his great prayer of thanksgiving in the belly of the fish, and the Spirit of Christ recorded God's promise that He would not see corruption in Psalm 16.

But in spite of all this, the Jewish people would not believe the sign of Christ's death and resurrection, and almost none do today.

When we give our thanks for believing the Gospel, it is the miraculous work of God that caused us to believe!

As Isaac Watts put it:

With joyful hearts we raise our voice,
As those who have been blessed;
Each one thus cries, with thankful tongue,
Lord, why am I a guest?

Why was I made to hear Thy voice,
And enter while there's room,
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?

'Twas the same love that spread the feast,
That sweetly forced us in;
Else we had still refused to taste,
And perished in our sin.

Thus we see God's purposes and sovereign power, by which He rescues us, from the first to the last!

Like Jonah, nothing we do assists our God in saving us, in any way at all!

Therefore, we must cry out, to God ALONE be the glory!