

Jonah 2

'The Surprisingly Generous God'

Introducing a word

The Golden Calf incident (Exodus 32-33)

I want to start this morning's talk by telling you that I often teach people about preaching.

And when you are introducing people to preaching you often tell them rules that they should not break.

One such rule is that you should never begin a sermon with an apology.

Another rule is that you should avoid using original languages.

Well, today I'm going to begin by apologising for breaking my own rules.

You see, I'm going to introduce you to a Hebrew word.

It is my favourite Hebrew word.

And I'm going to show it to you on the screen.

The word is *hesed*.

Now I need to explain a little about how you pronounce it.

The 'h' at the beginning is a guttural 'h'.

It is pronounced at the back of your throat.

So, let's see if we can learn to say this word together.

[Spend some time pronouncing it as a group.]

So, I've introduced you to a new word.

Now, rather than just telling you what it means by giving you a definition, I want to define it by telling you a story.

The story begins in the book of Exodus.

At the beginning of the book of Exodus, God's people are in slavery in Egypt.

They cry out to God for help.

God hears their cry and sees their grief.

With great and great and wonderful acts he rescues them from Egypt.

And eventually they meet with him at Mount Sinai.

In an amazing revelation, he gives them his law and comes near to them.

In Exodus 24 God then invites Moses to ascend the mountain.

He tells him that he will give him tablets of stone that he himself has written.

And so Moses ascends the mountain.

He stays there for forty days and forty nights.

But while he is there, the people of God grow impatient.

They ask Aaron to make them gods to lead them.

And Aaron listens.

He crafts a calf out of their gold ornaments.

And they engage in feasting and revelry.

And God sees it.

He tells Moses what is going on and threatens to act in righteous judgment.

He will wipe them out.

But Moses intervenes.

He begs God to change his mind.

He urges him to remember Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And Exodus 32:14 tells us that the Lord does as Moses requests.

He does the incredible and changes his mind.

He relents and does not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

In Exodus 33 he then tells Moses that he will send an angel to lead his people to the promised land.

He will not go with them himself because they are stiff-necked and he might destroy them on the way.

The people hear what God has to say.

They are devastated.

Moses intercedes again.

And God relents again.

In Exodus 33:14 he tells Moses that his presence will go with his people.

The word

Now, what God does in these two chapters is that he shows *hesed*.

He acts in surprising, unobligated, overwhelming love.

He doesn't have to relent.

He doesn't have to change his mind.

He has every right to act with judgment and fierce anger.

But he refuses.

Instead, mercy triumphs over judgment.

In the Old Testament this disposition of God is called his *hesed*.

And when God reveals himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7 he uses this exact word to describe himself.

God passes before Moses and proclaims that he is...

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in hesed and faithfulness, keeping hesed for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...

This is the God of Israel.

He is a God of *hesed*.

hesed lies at the core of his being. _____

And it is this word that sits under the surface of the book of Jonah.

And it is used at a very important point in this chapter.

So, with all this in mind, let's get back to Jonah.

Let's remember what's happened so far.

Remembering Jonah's story

The word of the Lord came (1.1)

Jonah's story began on that fateful day when the word of the Lord came to him.

In other words, God spoke to him.

God called him for a task.

And Jonah heard God speak.

He knew what God wanted.

But he couldn't handle God's word or God's will.

But he fled (1.3)

And so Jonah fled.

He ran away from the presence of the Lord.

He disobeyed God.

Invoking God's anger (1.4)

And by so doing he invoked God's anger.

He put others at risk.

As a result of his disobedience before the God of all the earth, innocent sailors were at risk of losing their lives.

But still not responding (1.5-12)

But, as we saw, this did not stop Jonah.

He still failed to respond.

He doesn't pray.

He doesn't turn back.

He refuses to give up his right to choose his own way, which he deems is better than God's way.

Therefore... (1.13-16)

Therefore he leaves the sailors with only one choice.

They must get rid of him.

And so they reluctantly do this.

They throw him into the sea.

And God acts again.

He provides a great fish to swallow Jonah.

And that brings us to chapter 2.

Chapter 2 takes us into Jonah's mind.

It expresses what he thought and felt while inside the fish.

Let's have a look.

Observing the contents of the Psalm

Who's responsible?

First of all, he records the feeling of sinking and drowning.

Look at verses 3, 5 and 6.

³You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

⁵The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.

⁶To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God. (NIV)

Now I want you to notice the impact of what Jonah says here.

Ask yourself...

Who does Jonah regard as responsible for his situation?

Who cast him into the sea?

Was it the sailors?

Or was it God?

Verse 3 makes it clear - God did!

The sailors were merely agents of God's anger, just as the fish is merely an agent of God's rescue.

Feelings (2.4)

Now let's check out Jonah's feelings.

Chapter 1 told us that he wanted to flee from God's presence.

But verse 4 tells us another side of the story.

Look at Jonah 2:4

*⁴I said, 'I have been banished from your sight;
yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'* (NIV)

In other words, Jonah is making clear that although he wanted to flee from God's presence, he can't bear the thought of what this might really be like.

There are two sides to Jonah's feelings about God.

On the one hand, he wants God to leave him alone and he wants to flee as far as he can from God's presence.

On the other side, this is a prospect he simply can't bear and he longs to be back in God's presence.

Remembered (2.7)

Now I want to look at verse 7.

⁷*“When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD,
and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.*

This is a crucial verse in Jonah’s experience.

In the Hebrew language to remember something doesn’t just mean to bring it back into your memory.

It means to recall something and act on it.

This is what is meant here.

Jonah tried to flee from God’s presence.

But he knows God is everything to him.

So, in the belly of the fish he brings God back into focus.

He remembers God.

And he acts.

He calls upon God.

And his prayer comes to the very presence of God.

And God? (2.1, 6)

And what about God?

What does he do to this recalcitrant prophet?

Does he keep on judging?

Does he keep on being angry?

Well, Jonah 2:2 tells us this.

He answers Jonah’s prayer for deliverance.

Listen to Jonah...

²*“In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me.*

From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. (NIV)

Now take a look at verse 9.

It tells us why God answers.

He answers because he is the God who is into deliverance and rescue.

He is the God of deliverance.

Salvation belongs to him.

Some points to ponder

So, there is the story.

Now, in my view this story presents a number of very important things to think about.

Thinking about the miraculous

First of all, there is the problem of the miraculous.

Let me put it this way.

This book presents us with a number of events that have the appearance of the miraculous.

The fish is one.

A rapidly growing tree in chapter 4 is another.

But these are not the only such things in the Bible.

The Bible as a whole is full of records of miraculous events.

Now let me say that in my view there are two ways to approach the miraculous.

- Approach 1: We are modern people

Approach 1 is to say...

We are modern people.

Miracles never occur.

Therefore Jonah can't have been swallowed by a large fish and returned to land.

Therefore the story is fictional or embellished or simply wrong.

- Approach 2: What appears to be said

Approach 2 starts at another place.

It attempts to start with no presuppositions.

It says, let's look at the text and see what it says of itself.

Does the text appear to suggest that a miracle occurred?

Now the obvious answer is that this story in any culture would be classed as depicting a miraculous event.

- A way ahead

Now this is not the time or the place to give an extended discussion about the question of miracles.

However, I do want to make some short observations about the two approaches I've outlined.

You see, I think there is an inherent problem with the first approach.

You see, I think it has an unstated assumption.

The assumption is that the miraculous and/or the supernatural can never happen.

But this is hardly a sympathetic reading of the passage, is it?

After all, whoever wrote this book was very clear that the God he believed in was the God of heaven and earth.

He is the one who created the sea and the dry land.

Now if you believe this, then what problem are you going to have with him creating a large fish to populate this sea?

And why would you think it strange that the creator of the heavens and the earth and everything that lives in them should use a great fish to rescue Jonah?

Can you see what I'm saying?

If you are free to listen to the book without modern and so called enlightened reason, you may just be free to hear what the writer clearly wants to communicate – that there is a God who is able.

There is a God who can do what no human could do.

Please notice what I'm saying.

I'm saying that the stories of the Bible draw out decisions from us.

In this case, they ask us which way we want to go.

Do we want to accept the modern dictum ... miracles never occur and therefore the book must be a fiction.

Or...

Will we believe that if God is really God, then it is not surprising that he would intervene in miraculous ways at particular times and places.

You must decide which way you want to jump on this one.

But before you do, let me ask you to consider the consequences for your view of God in deciding for each.

Do you want an impotent God or a sovereign God?

The choice is yours.

For my money, I want a God who is worthy of the name.

Remembering our new word

- Finding it here

And speaking of a God who is worthy of the name, let's go back to our new word.

Let's return to hesed.

Do you remember what it means?

It means God's spontaneous, unexpected, undeserved, surprising, love.

It is what God does when you least expect him to.

It is what God does when you have been like Jonah and suddenly remember him.

And all of a sudden he does the unexpected and gives you his spontaneous kindness.

Now the word hesed is actually used in verse 8.

Let's read it.

⁸*“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.*

The words 'grace' here represents the Hebrew word *hesed* just like it did in Exodus 34.

Think about what Jonah is saying.

He is reflecting on his own experience.

He is saying that there is a temptation for people in relation to God.

The temptation is that when things get hard we desert the worship of the true God and run after other gods (or no gods at all).

What Jonah is saying is that when we do this we desert our only hope.

Our only hope is a God who treats us better than we deserve.

Our only hope is a God who is *hesed*.

A God who is surprisingly, spontaneously, gracious and kind.

This is what lies under God's rescue of Jonah.

In my mind, this is why he turns back to God even though he doesn't like his command.

This is why he longs for his presence.

He knows God is *hesed*.

And he knows that to forsake this is to forsake the richness of knowing God.

For at the core of his being, God is gracious, kind, merciful, and loving.

- Implications

With this in mind, I want you to notice the similarities between this chapter and the chapter we looked at last week.

The experience of Jonah is similar to the experience of the mariners in chapter 1.

Both face a crisis - peril from the sea.

Both cry to the Lord and acknowledge his control over the world.

Both are saved.

Both offer praise and sacrifice.

You see, the point is that God's *hesed* is not discerning.

God saves **all** who call upon him - Jew and Gentile alike.

This is what verse 9 is about.

Salvation belongs to the Lord.

Because he is *hesed*, he is a rescuer.

Because he is *hesed*, salvation belongs to him.

Undergirding his desire to save and rescue is a fundamental disposition of his character towards surprising, spontaneous, unearned, grace and kindness.

- Finding it in the New Testament

With this in mind, I now want to make some observations from the New Testament.

Now, when we come to the New Testament, the Hebrew word *hesed* is translated into the word for 'grace'.

And the New Testament agrees with the Old Testament.

Grace, or *hesed*, is the very guts of God's nature.

His nature is to have mercy, to act in generous, spontaneous, surprising generosity.

And the New Testament tells us of one event where his nature to act in this way is displayed most clearly.

The New Testament tells us that God sent Jesus, his Son, into the world to die - the just for the unjust.

God acted beyond obligation.

He did *hesed*.

He has acted according to his nature.

Look at Romans 5:6-8

⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man

someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

God's word is clear here, isn't it?

God's view is that we were like Jonah – disobedient to him.

But God did what he did with the Mariners and with Jonah – he acted in spontaneous, unexpected, unobligated love, by sending his Son.

Later on, the same author makes another point that is made in the book of Jonah.

Listen to Romans 10:9-13

⁹That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ¹¹As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." ¹²For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

You see, God's generosity is for all.

There are no exceptions.

h̄esed belongs to him.

And therefore deliverance or salvation is for all.

No matter who you are.

This is the great thing that God has done in Jesus Christ.

This is the very core of the Christian message.

- Implications for Mission

Friends, I want to close tonight's talk by speaking to those of you here who are Christians.

I wonder if you can see the implications of what we have said tonight?

You see, if God is h̄esed.

If God is love.

Then God's heart will invariably be directed at salvation.

And if we have experienced that salvation.

If we have been overtaken by God's hesed.

Then we too will have hearts directed at the salvation of the world.

We too will long for people to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ.

Friends, God's heart is what energises evangelism.

It is what energises Christian mission.

And it should be what energises you.

Take a look at 2 Corinthians 5:14-21.

Turn it up with me.

[Read the passage, pointing particularly to verse 14—'Christ's love compels us']

¹⁴For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

¹⁶So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Friends, are you aware that those who don't know Jesus Christ have forsaken the hesed that might be theirs?

Have you been gripped by God's overwhelming and surprising love in Jesus?

And do you know that the world out there is forsaking this love that might be theirs?

And does that move you?

Has it gripped your heart?

Does the world's lostness and God's overwhelming love compel you?

Does it drive you to prayer for those who don't know this love and grace?

Will you let it you from here into a lifetime of making this love known?

Will you let it eject you from small ambitions and fill your heart with the ambition of making Christ known wherever he is not known?

Friends, God is a God of *hesed*.

He has ensured that salvation is available for all.

We cannot keep this a secret.

We cannot but give our lives that others might know.

God's *hesed* compels us.