

Jonah 1:17-2:10  
Recognizing and Acknowledging God's Blessings  
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A little boy said,

"Salt is what ruins the mashed potatoes, when it is left out."

And it is also true that thanksgiving is what ruins life, when it is left out.

People cannot be happy when they are always complaining, when they are always convinced that they deserve better than what they have: a better salary, a better position, a better spouse. According to Scripture, this is characteristic of the heart in rebellion against God. It cannot be grateful. It cannot recognize God's blessings. In Romans 1:20-21, the apostle Paul made this classic statement about the pagan culture of his day:

- 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,
- 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Notice especially those words, "although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful."

Now why does the heart in rebellion against God refuse to give God thanks? The first reason is that the heart in rebellion against God refuses to find its fulfillment in God. The heart in rebellion against God does not want to be dependent upon God and thus tries to find fulfillment somewhere other than God. When a person tries to find fulfillment somewhere other than God, he will seek to find fulfillment and happiness somewhere in God's creation. That is the only other place to look because God and His creation are the totality of what exists. Seeking our most basic fulfillment and joy and satisfaction in creation rather than in the Creator is the essence of idolatry.

The second reason is that idolatry cannot satisfy the human heart. As St. Augustine said in the opening paragraph of his Confessions in a statement addressed to God: "... thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee."

Pascal, the 17th century French scientist and philosopher, put it this way: "... there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present. But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself." Pascal's beautiful statement is sometimes paraphrased with the crisply abbreviated statement "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator."

Why does the heart in rebellion against God refuse to give God thanks? First, the heart in rebellion against God refuses to find its fulfillment in God. Second, idolatry cannot satisfy the human heart. And third, a person in rebellion against God always believes that life owes him more and better than he is receiving.

Back when God created Adam and Eve, God put them in the Garden of Eden, which was a perfect paradise. There was no sickness, no sorrow, no death, no pain. God gave them the fruit of the trees that surrounded them for food. Their every need was met. Yet God put a restriction upon them. God said that there was one tree whose fruit they were not to eat. God called it the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That tree stood for God's authority to proclaim what is good and what is evil. Eating that forbidden fruit was a sign and seal of moral rebellion, moral usurpation, moral defiance. Eating that fruit was a sacrament of evil. The devil tempted Adam and Eve to lust for the fruit of that one tree which God had proclaimed off bounds. Adam and Eve rebelled against God and ate the forbidden fruit. When people rebel against God, they cannot be satisfied, not even in paradise.

The other side of the coin is that when people submit to God and find their satisfaction in God, they can be content and thankful to God even in difficult circumstances. This was the attitude of our Savior Jesus, who experienced many sufferings, even the suffering of the cross. Yet He never complained. We are to follow Christ's example and give God thanks in every situation.

Our text today is about a psalm of thanks that was sung in the belly of a great fish. I want to look at this as an example of giving God thanks even in difficult situations.

Before I begin commenting on our text, I might mention that the use of the designation great fish instead of whale in this passage is probably not just an incidental word choice. There are certain species of shark in the Mediterranean Sea of sufficient size to swallow a man whole. The existence of such sharks today gives credibility to this story about Jonah's experience in the depths of the sea. But the main reason we know that the story of Jonah and the great fish is not just a so-called fish story but a reliable account of an actual historical event is because that is how the Bible presents it, and the Bible is always true. The Word of God is our ultimate measure of truth. The Word of God is by definition truth. If the Word of God were to contain any errors, then we would be worse off than Jonah ever was. We would be lost in a chaotic sea of relativism and subjectivism, and we would have to say with the skeptic Pilate, "What is truth?" But the Word of God is true, and that means that Jonah really did stay three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish. So this second chapter of the book of Jonah contains a true historical account of a great miracle of deliverance from a certain death in the Mediterranean Sea.

Now try to put yourself in the place of Jonah. You have just been thrown into the Mediterranean Sea during a storm of such unusual intensity that seasoned sailors who had weathered many a storm before were frightened for their lives. You have sunk beneath the waves. You have descended into a valley on the

ocean floor. You are entangled in seaweed. And then a great fish comes toward you. It is a shark. It is a shark of monstrous proportions. It zeros in on you and reaches you. It swallows you. And you find yourself alive in the belly of this ocean beast. There you are in absolute darkness. You are soaked in digestive juices. Your nose is filled with the stench of dead, half-digested fish. Your ears are filled with the body noises of the great shark: the beating of the giant heart, the gurgling of the digestive tract. What would your attitude be? What thoughts would be racing through your mind? It is in this context that we must read the psalm of Jonah that we find here in Jonah chapter two. Jonah in this situation prayed a prayer of gratitude, a prayer that rejoined in salvation.

Here is the Old Testament parallel to Acts 16 where Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into the Philippian jail. But what were Paul and Silas doing at midnight? Were they feeling sorry for themselves? Were they becoming bitter at God? Were they singing the blues and saying like so many people do today, "I deserve better than this?" NO! They were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. As Paul wrote in his later letter to the church at Philippi, "Rejoice in the Lord when things are going your way . . ." NO! "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice!" "I have learned in whatever state I am to be content." "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

As Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Paul was rejoicing in the jail because he had learned to look at life through the eyes of faith. He was in an apparently undesirable situation, but Paul knew that God was in sovereign control of the situation, that God was all wise (God knew what He was doing), God was all powerful (God could have prevented their going to prison if He had chosen to), and Paul knew that God loved him. Paul knew by faith that God had a purpose for his being beaten and in prison, and Paul accepted in faith that God did not owe him an immediate explanation. In faith, Paul prayed and sang hymns to God. And in faith, Jonah prayed a prayer of thanksgiving while in the belly of the great fish.

The key to understanding Jonah's prayer is to understand Jonah's attitude toward his being in the belly of the great fish. Jonah is not complaining about his being in the belly of that fish but is thanking God for his being in the belly of the fish. Jonah viewed his being in the belly of the great fish as the beginning of his salvation from the realm of death. Jonah had been thrown into the raging sea, and this was as if he had been buried at sea. The sea was the realm of death, the grave. Jonah called it the belly of Sheol, which is Hebrew for the grave, the realm of the dead. But now Jonah has been delivered from the belly of Sheol and is safely in the belly of the great fish. That is how Jonah viewed it. The fish was his savior sent from God to deliver him from a sure death. The fish was the firstfruits of his full and secure salvation. Jonah recognized the great fish for what it was: the beginning of God's salvation; and therefore Jonah rejoiced. Because Jonah knew that God would complete the work of salvation that He had begun. As Paul says in Philippians 1:6:

"being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you (that is, God) will complete it."

All Christians are in a situation similar to Jonah's. We once were in the realm of death. We once were spiritually dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). But now God has made us spiritually alive in Christ Jesus. And we have received the beginning of our salvation. We are justified through the work and righteousness of Christ, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and we are freed from the dominating lordship of sin and Satan. But notice, we have only received the firstfruits of our salvation. We are freed from the lordship of sin, but we still live with a remaining sin urge; we are not yet totally freed from the presence of sin. We have not yet been given a resurrection body. And we still live in the midst of much of the misery and sickness and pain that is God's curse upon man's sin. But we know that God has begun our salvation because we are freed from sin's lordship, and we know and believe that God will complete the work of salvation which He has started. And we in faith look to that day when our salvation will be complete, when we will have a resurrection body completely freed from sickness, pain and death. We in faith look to that day when we will live on a new earth totally freed from the curse of sin.

In like manner, Jonah had received the firstfruits of his salvation from the realm of death at the bottom of the sea when he had been swallowed by the great fish, and in his prayer he looked to the time when his salvation would be complete and he would be again worshiping God at the temple in Jerusalem. Jonah concentrated not on the fact that his deliverance was not yet

complete. Jonah concentrated in faith on the fact that his deliverance had begun. And so he had the perspective of hope and faith. He was rejoicing in the Lord.

How was it that the prophet Jonah had such a great faith? He had taken advantage of God's means of grace, the outward and ordinary means whereby God communicates to us His grace. We read in Romans that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. And we know that the prophet Jonah was steeped in the Word of God. He had studied the Word until his very blood was Bible. Jonah knew how to think and to talk in terms of the Biblical message. How do I know this? Because practically every phrase in Jonah's prayer can be found somewhere in the psalms. The psalms will sometimes speak of affliction metaphorically in terms of waves and water, and Jonah took these phrases and aptly adopted them into his own prayer psalm before God.

Also, notice that Jonah in his prayer of faith expressed his belief in the sovereignty of God. It was God who cast him into the sea. He had been afflicted by God's billows and by God's waves. His experience had been a chastisement in which God had covenantally cast Jonah out of His sight. Jonah in faith saw that God was behind the situation. He recognized that in all of this situation, God the loving Father had been chastening Jonah the erring son. This too is a source of Jonah's great faith, this belief that God was in total control of the situation. The child of God that is afflicted should remember that God loves him, that God knows what He is doing, and that God is in control and is all powerful.



Notice also Jonah's changed attitude. Jonah had been fleeing the temple at Jerusalem because that was the place of God's covenantal dwelling in the midst of God's covenant people. Jonah had associated the temple with his responsibility to obey the command to preach to the Ninevites, a command that Jonah found repulsive. So Jonah had fled from the temple of God. The price for disobeying God was his cutting himself off from God's presence, and that is equivalent to death. Yes, the wages of sin is death. But now God is delivering Jonah from death, and Jonah now anticipates again celebrating life before God, the Lord of life, at the temple in Jerusalem. God delivered Jonah from death not only physically but spiritually.

Jonah ended his prayer with the words, "Salvation is of the Lord." This little sentence is sometimes called the best Biblical summary of the doctrines of grace, the teaching that salvation is totally a gift from God. "Salvation is of the Lord." Not "salvation is mostly of the Lord." Not, "God has done His part, now you do yours." It says that salvation is of the Lord -- totally, 100%.

The doctrines of grace are well illustrated by Christ's deliverance of Lazarus from the grave. Yes, Lazarus himself came to Christ. Christ didn't walk for him. But Christ gave Lazarus the life without which he could not have done it. Lazarus' deliverance from the grave was totally a gift from God. And Jonah's deliverance from the sea-grave was totally a gift from God. The Christian when he is saved believes and repents, but he couldn't and wouldn't have done these things if God had not first delivered him from spiritual death and bondage through

the new birth. Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Salvation is of the Lord.

When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they could not be satisfied even in paradise. When God worked His grace in Jonah's heart, he gave God thanks even in the belly of the great fish. Come to Jesus today, and He will make you right when God and enable you to find your satisfaction in God. Then you will have a thankful spirit, even in the midst of life's difficulties.