



The Deep Transforming Prayer

24th January 2021

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Jonah 1:1-17 | Jonah 2:1-10 | 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 | Mark 1:16-20

Main Point:

God's grace uses the storms created by our own sin and rebellion to thrust us toward a deep prayer experience, which becomes so transformative we respond by fulfilling the mission to which God has called us.

Intro |

Well, I'm sure everyone here has heard the story of Jonah – it truly is one of the most intriguing stories in the Bible.

I noticed that the lectionary only includes chapters 3 and 4 of Jonah's story. So, I thought today, as we continue our series on prayer, we would focus on chapters 1 and 2.

Put succinctly, the story of Jonah is a story about sin and grace.

We'll learn that God's compassionate pursuit of Jonah in response to his stormy detour on the ship in chapter 1, is what prompted the powerful transformative prayer he uttered in chapter 2.

We see clearly that sin is running away from God; and grace is God chasing us down, in order to intercept our self-destructive behaviour.

We are going to see how easily we can be like Jonah – we fearfully run from God ... and our running compels God's fervent love to stir dangerous storms, ferocious troubles and uncomfortable situations, which are not only a danger to us, they are a danger to those around us.

At the beginning, Jonah receives an assignment from God, **"Go to the great city of Nineveh, and announce, "the Lord is going to destroy you, for your wickedness rises before me; its stench to the highest heaven."** (Jonah 1:2)

But, Jonah knew what Nineveh was like. Nineveh was Sin City - violent and rampant with wickedness and evil – it was the capital of the Assyrian empire. So, for us, it would be like God asking us to go and warn the citizens of Iraq that Jehovah's judgement is about to come upon them.

Such an overwhelming assignment causes Jonah to climb onboard a ship going in the opposite direction, and promptly fall asleep ... probably relieved he has successfully escaped God's assignment.

Then we read, **"But as the ship was sailing along, suddenly the Lord flung a terrific wind over the sea, causing a great storm that threatened to send them to the bottom."** (v4)

Let's pause for a moment to think about this storm and Jonah's response to the storm.

Point 1 | The storms of life are opportunities for us to experience God's transforming grace.

The storm was God's graceful intervention in Jonah's life. God intercepted Jonah's rebellion to teach him that he was headed in the wrong direction.

An 'intervention', as some of you know, is a word used by organisations like Alcoholics Anonymous. It is when a bunch of friends surround an alcoholic, and say to them 'you're out of control, you're bringing harm to yourself and others, if you fail to admit it, you'll die.'

The storm in Jonah's life was God's intervention – to shock Jonah into admitting he had no understanding of the sin that existed in his own life, and his need for God's grace and forgiveness – the very grace he refused to extend to the Ninevites (see 4:2).

So, God orchestrated events to teach Jonah the very message He had called him to preach.

Let's bring this into our own lives. How do we respond when storms develop in our lives?

Stormy weather in our lives represent times when we are unsettled, we become frustrated and agitated with circumstances or people, we feel angry and annoyed that our comfort and routines have been disturbed. No doubt, there is a fierce storm raging in our world right now, and we are all, literally 'taking cover' in the hope that one day it will blow over. But there are many other types of storms – some of you may be aware you are living in stormy weather right now.

Often, when stormy weather develops, we quickly complain,

'What's going on! This isn't right or fair! How can I make this storm stop?

Or we may fall into the trap of blaming someone for our discomfort, 'it is all their fault', 'if they just did this or that ... everything would get back to normal'.

That is what is going on the ship.

Because the crew knew the unseen realm governed the seen realm, they immediately discerned that the storm was not just bad weather. They asked Jonah, "What have you done to bring this awful storm upon us? Cry out to your god, and see if he will have mercy on us and save us" (v6, 8)

When Jonah admitted he was running away from the God of the earth and sea, they were petrified. They ask him, "What should we do?" (v11)

Jonah finally admitted he was responsible for the storm. So, "throw me out into the sea" (v12).

Confronted by his own rebellion, Jonah surrendered himself to both the storm and to God.

So, ask yourself, when the stormy disorientating weather starts raging, how do I respond?

Have you ever considered that stormy weather can be an opportunity for us to experience a deeper sense of God's grace in our lives?

Let me explain by telling you a fairy-tale - it illustrates quite plainly the role storms can play in our lives:

There was once a wicked witch who lived in the deep forest. When travelers came through looking for lodging, she offered them a meal and a bed. The witch ensured the bed was incredibly comfortable. But the cost of a good night's sleep didn't come cheap.

You see, this was no ordinary mattress. The witch's bed was full of dark magic, and if you were still asleep in it when the sun came up, you would turn to stone. Then, the witch would place you in her garden of statues, trapped for eternity.

This witch kidnapped a young lady and forced the girl to serve her, and though she had no power to resist the wicked woman, she did have a real heart and it had become more and more filled with pity for her victims.

One day a young man came looking for bed and board and was taken in. The servant girl could not bear to see the valiant soldier turned to stone. So, as she made up the bed, she began to throw sticks, stones, and thistles under the sheets. It made the bed horribly uncomfortable.

That night, the man was miserable. Every time he turned over, he felt a new painful object jar him. Though he cast each one out, there was always a new one to dig into his skin. He didn't sleep a wink. Finally, long before dawn, he got up, feeling tired and angry.

As he stumbled to the front door, the servant girl met him, and was shocked when he snarled at her, "How could you let anyone sleep in such a terrible bed full of sticks and stones?"

As she watched him leave, she said, "Ah, the misery you know now is nothing like the infinitely greater misery a comfortable sleep would have brought upon you! Those were my sticks and stones of love."

It is God's love that uses the storms of discomfort, caused by our sin, to drive us to a place whereby we recognise our desperate need for God's grace.

It is not the storms themselves, that produce depth and wisdom.

It is *our response* to the storms that produce depth and wisdom.

A quote from a book by Sharon Garlough Brown, who is a Spiritual Director, entitled '*Sensible Shoes Club*' is relevant here.¹ I often reflect on them whenever I get agitated or annoyed at something. She writes,

¹ The Sensible Shoes Club is a fictional novel written by Sharon Garlough Brown, tracing the journey of four women as they experience a Sacred Journey with a spiritual director. I encourage all women in the congregation to read the book. I have an electronic version available for you to read.

"the things that annoy, irritate, and disappoint us have just as much power to reveal the truth about ourselves as anything else. Learn to linger with what provokes you. You may just find the Spirit of God moving there." (The Sensible Shoes Club, 80)

Storms are used by God to do one thing: drive us to place whereby we surrender our lives to God and his will – only then are we equipped to utter the prayer like that which Jonah uttered from the depths of the ocean.

Point 2 | Jonah's Prayer from the deep shows the fruit of God's revelation of grace in Jonah's heart.

Let us turn and look at how dramatically Jonah changed. Remember, the entire book is about Jonah's need to learn about God's grace. How profound that one who was receiving direct communication from God, even to the degree of being called a prophet of God, still did not understand the message of grace he had been called to preach.

If we look closely at how the book of Jonah is structured, the whole climax of the book is embedded in Jonah's prayer.

For three days and nights Jonah prayed in the belly of the fish. The first part of his prayer he recognised his brokenness and great distance from God (see 2:3-4).

We see that time and time again, Jonah utters the words, 'and yet', for example, "I was imprisoned in the earth ... But you, O Lord ... snatched me" (6)

Then, finally Jonah figures out God's grace – it climaxes in verses 8 and 9:

"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs, for salvation is of the Lord."

Immediately the fish spits Jonah out onto the land – showing, quite dramatically, all this has been to bring Jonah to this point, whereby he'll recognise the depths of God's grace.

Application | If it is true that Jonah, who received direct revelation from God can be so ignorant of God's grace, we should have the humility to recognise we can too.

Our most severe problems and annoyances are caused by our failure to understand the true depths of God's grace.

For understanding God's grace is the essence of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul wrote to the believers at Colosse, **"the gospel has born fruit in you from the first day you understood the grace of God"** (Colossians 1:5).

It is only when we understand God's grace towards us, that we show grace and mercy to others.

So, we learn that the storms of life provide an opportunity for God to teach us about the places within ourselves which need to experience God's grace.

I'd like to finish with another portion from Sharon's book,

"We begin our journey to freedom when we go back to the places where we were spiritually, emotionally, and mentally wounded. But this time we go with God's presence, help, and strength.

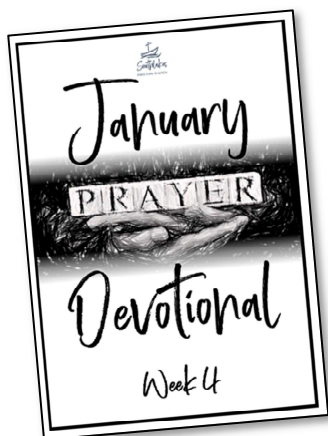
No matter how frightening and messy it feels, God invites us to trust him. The Lord does some of his most beautiful work in the midst of the messiness and brokenness of our lives.”

Let's pray,

My loving Father, I am living in a world where storms seem to rage continually. Teach me how to respond when storms thrust me deeper towards depending on you. Reveal to me the wonder of your grace. Show me how you are always pursuing me so that you can teach me more of your grace in my life. Amen.

Some reflection and discussion questions

1. How do you normally respond when stormy weather rages in your life?
2. What traps do you often fall into (when stormy weather hits)?
Who do you blame?
Do you complain to God, wanting life to return to its previous comfort?
What kinds of things do you do in an effort to make the storm go away?
3. Have you ever considered how God uses the difficult situations and problems that we encounter?
4. What storms (troubles or difficulties) are in your life at the moment?
5. Have you asked what God may be trying to teach you through these?
6. How does this storm reveal God's grace in your life?
7. Read again the fairy-tale (which is like a parable). In what way does our drive for comfort and normality make us vulnerable to be lulled into sleepy apathy?
8. In what way does the devil 'turn people into stone' who are lulled to asleep due to comfort and laziness?
9. What do the thorns, thistles and stones represent in the parable?
10. Have there been times in your life, where troubles, annoyances and problems have represented a season during which you have learnt more of God's grace?



Look out for the January devotional

The January devotional has been developed using a number of prayer resources including:

1. Andrew Murray's 'Teach Me to Pray'
2. Rosalind Rinker's Prayer: 'Conversing with God'
3. Richard Foster's 'Celebration of Discipline'
4. Darren Cronshaw 'Dangerous Prayer'