

Main Idea: According to his own testimony in Jonah 2:8-9, the prophet Jonah learned the importance of expressing thanksgiving from inside a fish. He teaches us that there are essentially two kinds of people in the world.

- I. There are people who worship idols (8).
  - A. Some people believe in false gods (e.g. the people of Nineveh).
  - B. Some people believe false notions about the true God (e.g. Jonah).
    1. “God exists for me.”
    2. “God blesses me because I deserve it.”
    3. “God wants me to be happy.”
  - C. All idol worshipers forfeit grace.
    1. The pagan does.
    2. The self-focused believer does, too.
- II. There are people who worship the right God in the right way (9).
  - A. They sing a song of thanksgiving.
  - B. They bring sacrifices to God.
    1. In so doing they admit they are not worthy.
    2. In so doing they admit God is worthy.
  - C. They keep their promises to God.
  - D. They affirm that salvation comes from God.

Make It Personal: If I am truly thankful...

1. I will see the world the way God sees it.
2. I will see my possessions the way God sees them.
3. I will see God as worthy of my song, my sacrifices, my all.

Thursday is Thanksgiving. Actually, every day should be Thanksgiving for followers of Jesus, since the Lord has given us so much. But the truth is, we tend to take for granted the Lord and His gifts. We’re often like Jonah. As we’ll see in today’s text, he learned about the importance of thanksgiving from inside a fish, and there’s much we can learn from him.

*Scripture Reading: Jonah 2*

If there is one thing that traveling outside our country helps you to see vividly is that *we have so much!* The rather obvious blessings we enjoy are the material ones. Our homes are castles compared to the dwelling places of many. Most of us have not only an automobile, but more than one, again unheard of by most of the world.

More significantly, there are the spiritual blessings. We have the privilege of having God’s Word (only one in one hundred Christians in China have a Bible). Because we have the Scriptures we have knowledge of God’s life-giving truth (which affects morality in our society) and most importantly, the knowledge of the Savior, God’s Son Jesus Christ. In a world full of people, most of whom are dead in sin, we know the Lord.

It’s so easy to take for granted the blessings we enjoy. If that weren’t bad enough, this is worse. We can easily begin to think that we *deserve* the privileges God has graciously sent our way. Though unsaid, it’s as if we *expect* them to continue.

If you struggle with that tendency you are not alone. The prophet Jonah did as well.

*Background: Jonah, an eighth century B.C. prophet in Israel*

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For a previous message from this passage, see WBC 11/26/06.

When a dog bites a man, that is not news; but when a man bites a dog, that is news! Similarly, when a man catches a fish, that is not news; but when a fish catches a man, *that is news!*

Jonah was a prophet. As such he was God's representative. That was his job. He was supposed to give an accurate representation of the will and word of God for His people. People should have been able to look at Jonah, to talk with him, and know what pleased God.

But Jonah had a problem. In fact, he merely reflected the rest of Israel who had the same problem. They'd become *ingrown*. They'd come to see the Almighty as *their God exclusively*. The problem surfaced when God gave Jonah an assignment.

Jonah 1:1-2 "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.'"

God's instructions were quite clear. "Go!"

But Jonah had other thoughts in mind...

Jonah 1:3 "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."

Why did Jonah head for Tarshish? Why did he want to avoid Nineveh? Simply put, he didn't want God to spare Nineveh. That's what he later confessed in Jonah 4:1-2, when, after God spared Nineveh, this occurred, "But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, 'O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.'"

That raises another question. Why didn't Jonah want God to spare Nineveh? It's because a very *ingrown* attitude had developed in Jonah's heart, again, an *ingrown* attitude which merely reflected the common thinking on the street in Israel.

God chose Israel to be a conduit through which He would bless the world (Gen. 12:1-3). But Israel developed a *bucket* mentality. Rather than share the blessings, God's chosen people preferred to hoard them.

So Jonah ran from God. He found a boat heading as far away from Nineveh as possible, paid the fare, and took off. It's intriguing how he "found" this ship. "Why, this must be God's will for me. Look how He provided this ship!" And then later in the ship, when the storm is howling, where do we find Jonah? While the sailors are on deck, fighting for their lives, petrified by the dangerous waters, Jonah was fast asleep in the bottom of the boat (verse 5). Jonah, running from God, is at perfect peace.

By the way, I often hear people say, "Well, I've got such peace about the decision I've made. It must be God's will." Sometimes the peace doesn't come from God, but from the enemy of God who is more than willing for you to feel good (temporarily anyway) as long as your disobedience smears God's good reputation. It's never God's will for us to disobey His Word, no matter how much peace we experience.

You probably remember what happened next. Jonah's resolve to disobey God was so firm, he chose *death* over going to Nineveh. Jonah 1:12—"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." Do you hear what this prophet of God is saying? The only option he mentions is, "Throw me overboard!" But there's another option that could well have spared the ship, and his own life perhaps. What's that? "I'm running from God! Turn the ship around and take me back to Joppa so I can obey God's call on my life.

Then the storm will cease.” Yet that’s apparently not even an option in Jonah’s mind. Going to Nineveh is out of the question in his thinking. “I’d rather die than take God’s Word to *those people!*”

That’s called *prejudice*...a cancer that’s alive and festering in our world today.

I met George close to fifteen years ago in Bucharest. George is a Gypsy. The Gypsies live in nations throughout Europe and wherever they live they are hated, simply because of their identity. The week after I met George we were teaching in Moldova, and while studying the curse of Ham’s son Canaan in Genesis 9:25, a church leader asked a revealing question, “I’ve heard that the Gypsies are the descendants of Canaan. Is that true?” Sadly, even God’s people at times tolerate ugly prejudice.

Jonah was simply reflecting the spirit of his proud nation. He hated the Ninevites and there was no way he was going there.

But God had other plans. God was going to get His message to Nineveh whether Jonah wanted to go or not. And He was going to use Jonah. So how did God bring about the change in His wayward prophet? God has His ways. In this case, He prepared an underwater taxi.

Jonah 1:17—“But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.”

Keep this in mind. The main character in the story of Jonah isn’t Jonah. This book is intended to teach us about God. As the words “But the LORD provided” indicate, God is sovereign. Time and time again, we see God at work orchestrating events to fulfill His purpose.

1:4 “The LORD sent a great wind.”

2:10 “The LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.”

4:6 “Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah...”

4:7 “But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine...”

4:8 “When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint...”

What’s God doing in this book? He’s correcting the faulty theology of His people, for they’d come to believe that He was a Jewish God, and that they possessed exclusive rights to Him. But the God of all creation would have none of their narrow-mindedness.

And so, God took Jonah into the classroom inside the belly of a huge fish. And while there, the prophet came to his senses. Jonah 2 records the prayer Jonah prayed while trapped inside that great fish.

Thomas Carlisle confessed, “I was so obsessed with what was going on inside the whale that I missed the drama inside Jonah.”

According to his own testimony in Jonah 2:8-9, Jonah learned the importance of expressing thanksgiving from inside a fish. He also teaches us that there are essentially two kinds of people in the world.

### I. There are people who worship idols (8).

Jonah 2:8—“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.” Chew on those words...

*Those who cling.* To cling speaks of attachment. The miser clings to his money. The word reveals the longings of a person’s heart, the intense affections that govern his life. And what is it that guides their lives?

*Worthless idols.* He gives his heart to empty, valueless creations of his own hands. *Idols.* He gives these worthless idols “God status,” but they are not real and can’t provide what he hopes.

There’s more than one kind of idol worshippers. We see two kinds of idolaters illustrated in the Jonah story.

**A. Some people believe in false gods.** The people of Nineveh certainly did. They gave allegiance to pagan deities, and prayed to them, and put their trust in them.

But they’re not alone. The KJV rendering of verse 8 begins, “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.” That’s a good way to describe a worthless idol. It’s a *lying vanity*. John Calvin observed, “Lying vanities are all inventions with which men deceive themselves.” There are physical idols before which men bow down. But there are also a host of unseen idols which usurp the place of God in every human heart, if we’re honest. This is why the apostle John finished his first epistle with the command, given to Christians, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols (1 John 5:21).”

This brings us to the second type of idol worshiper in the Jonah story.

**B. Some people believe false notions about the true God (e.g. Jonah).**

In nearly every city and village I have seen in Ukraine and Moldova, the most beautiful building is the Orthodox Church. There it sits with a huge cross perched on top for all to see. That church proclaims allegiance to the true God, but in reality it also clings to all kinds of false notions about that true God, not the least of which is salvation by works rather than simple faith in Christ.

Back in 2006 in the village of Corjewoodz in Moldova, I met an elderly man one morning. He was walking on the foot path that went beside the Baptist church where we were teaching. I greeted him. He approached and said in Moldovan, “Isus este Baptiste?” Was Jesus a Baptist? Then he proceeded to lecture me in a language I could not understand. All I could pick up was his use of the word *martur*, ‘witness,’ and I realized he was a Jehovah’s Witness, one of over 1,000 JW’s in this village of 8,000 people. He too professed belief in the true God, but clung to a system filled with false notions about the true God.

In short, that’s exactly what Jonah was doing in our story. What kind of false notions found a home in Jonah’s heart? Frankly, some of the same erroneous beliefs that may have found a home in our hearts.

1. “*God exists for me.*” He’s my God. He does what I want. He makes my life successful and comfortable. He makes me healthy. He blesses my kids. He gives me peace and fulfillment. He’s basically a combination of Grandfather and Genie in the bottle. He exists, and He’s there for me, to do whatever I want.

Is that true? Is God a Genie in a bottle? No. “For from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:36).”

2. “*God blesses me because I deserve it.*” Granted, God blesses us greatly. He even blesses unbelievers with a host of good gifts, such as sunshine on their crops, a measure of health, peace in relationships, all blessings from his common grace. But He certainly doesn’t give us what we deserve. That’s an erroneous belief.

3. “*God wants me to be happy.*” This is a slippery one. Yes, He wants us to experience eternal joy and happiness, and He sent His own Son on a rescue mission to make that a reality. But He actually has a greater end in mind than my short-term happiness, which indeed is necessary for my eternal happiness. And that is His intent for me to be *holy*. Indeed, many of the things He brings in my life to accomplish this

holiness that leads to eternal joy might not make me feel very happy in the present moment.

Yes, this too is idolatry. When a person thinks these ideas about God, he is misrepresenting God just like the pagan who wrongly portrays God with his stone idol.

So the Ninevites were idolaters, yes, but Jonah learned that he was an idolater too. He had acted as if he deserved God's blessings and that the people of Nineveh did *not*. He did what we so often tend to do. He stopped recognizing his utter dependence upon the grace of God in his life.

God is full of grace. Indeed, the Scriptures declare God's Son, Jesus, was full of grace and truth. It's God's nature to be gracious, to show His unmerited favor to undeserving sinners. But those who cling to worthless idols don't experience His grace. They don't think they need it. They think they earn what they receive.

But here's the reality.

**C. All idol worshipers forfeit grace.**

1. *The pagan does.* That's because he doesn't believe in the true God of grace.
2. *The self-focused believer does, too.* That's because he misrepresents the God of grace. He distorts grace. He forgets grace.

A grace-less Christian (a contradiction in terms, but a reality at times) becomes several things, including stingy, self-absorbed, selective in his obedience to God, sour, and *ungracious*.

That's what Jonah learned inside that fish, about the ugliness of idolatry, not the Ninevites' idolatry, but his own! He learned that there are two kinds of people in this world. First, there are people who cling to worthless idols. Second...

II. There are people who worship the right God in the right way (9).

When a person begins worshipping the right God in the right way, it shows up. There will be clear evidence of it. Note four evidences that begin to show up in Jonah in verse 9, "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."

Jonah contemplates what he is going to do if the Lord mercifully allows him to leave the belly of this fish. He says he's going to the temple. He's going there to do four things that people who worship the right God in the right way always seek to do. It's the evidence of divine grace in their lives.

**A. They sing a song of thanksgiving.** Listen to Jonah, "But I with a *song of thanksgiving*." God loves when His people sing. That's why He gave Israel a song book, the Psalms. And He especially loves a song of thanksgiving. These kinds of songs give God something called *thanks*, that is, they acknowledge His gifts with appreciation.

*Thank You, Lord, for saving my soul. Thank You, Lord, for making me whole. Thank You Lord, for giving to me, Thy great salvation so rich and free.*

*Give thanks, with a grateful heart. Give thanks, to the holy One. Give thanks, because He's given Jesus Christ His Son. Give thanks.*

But of course, singing on Sunday ought to lead to something else Monday through Saturday. Jonah identifies that next. "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, *will sacrifice to you*." Here's a second evidence of grace in the life of the person who worships the right God in the right way.

**B. They bring sacrifices to God.** That's what I'm going to do when I get out of here, says Jonah. With a song of thanksgiving in my mouth, I am going to sacrifice to You, Lord.

Wait a minute. If God pardons and restores a sinner on the basis of His grace, and not the sinner's works, then why is Jonah resolving to make a sacrifice? Why did the Jews bring sacrifices to God? Why did they travel up to the temple in Jerusalem, and bring a lamb, and give that lamb to a priest, so the priest could kill it?

In short, it boiled down to two reasons.

1. *In so doing they admit they are not worthy.* As sinners we cannot approach a holy God. We are not worthy. We must enter His presence through the means He graciously provides. That means is atonement. He says that when an innocent substitute is sacrificed, our sin is covered.

So we must come to Him through a blood sacrifice. For Jonah it was perhaps a lamb. Next year, another lamb. The next, another, then another. For us it is the Lamb of God, who made one sacrifice. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree (1 Peter 2:24)." "Because by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (Hebrews 10:14)." "God made Him who had not sin to be sin for us, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor 5:21)."

This is what people who worship the right God in the right way do. By coming to God by means of a sacrifice they admit that they are not worthy. I can't come on my own. I come in the way You have provided, through the atoning sacrifice of another.

But there's another motivation in this.

2. *In so doing they admit God is worthy.* "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you." The sacrifice says, "You are worthy. You are worthy of this cost, of this death of a substitute. I give this to You because You are worthy, and I gladly give You everything I have."

This too is why we give our sacrifices to Him. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God-this is your true and proper worship (Romans 12:1)." What do we offer Him? Not lambs, but ourselves and all we have. We are *living* sacrifices.

May I extend a word of thanks to you, church family? Your generous gifts of money and time and service week after week make ministry happen in this community and throughout the world. Thank you for bringing sacrifices to God so that others may know about His sacrifice.

Notice Jonah's next words, "What I have vowed I will make good." With that statement Jonah reveals a third evidence of divine grace in the person who worships the right God in the right way.

**C. They keep their promises to God.** When Jonah became a prophet, he took a vow to preach God's Word whenever and wherever God told him. Jonah was breaking that vow when he headed for Tarshish, but now he's ready again to obey, to keep his promise to God. He's learned his lesson.

We, too, have an assignment, a vow to keep. Jesus told us in Matthew 28:19, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." He also said in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The day we became a Christian we made a promise to the Lord. "I will follow You. I will obey You. I surrender all to You, for You are my Lord and Savior, and I want the world to know about You, the One and only Savior. I belong to You now. Use me however You want. I am Yours, bought with the price You paid."

My grandfather told me something I'll never forget. He was in his 80's and death was approaching. I was in my early 20's with life in front of me. He told me about how he preached God's Word as a young man. He preached in the coal mines of West Virginia, as well as in a rescue mission in Huntington. He believed God had called him to preach. But then he got distracted, not necessarily with bad things, good things like work and raising a family and so on. "I was like Jonah," he told me. "I ran from God and what He wanted me to do with my life."

I don't want to become a Jonah. I want by God's grace to keep the promise I made to God, to live for His purposes in obedience to His call.

Our brothers and sisters in China are seeking to do that. Over a decade ago, in a conversation with Mark Fehrman, a missionary who trained God's servants in China until the Lord called him home to heaven, I learned some amazing things about what God is doing in that vast country. Did you realize there are more Christians in China than in America? According to estimates there are at least 60 million (some say the number exceeds 100 million) born again followers of Christ in China. The number is increasing, some estimate, by 30,000 per day who are repenting and trusting in Christ. Why? Ultimately, it's because of God, for sure. But God uses instruments, and Chinese believers are taking seriously their calling to evangelize the lost, no matter what the cost. They are not living for this world, but for the life to come. And so they are proclaiming Christ to non-believers even though it may mean loss of property, loss of freedom in prison, loss of family, and even loss of this life.

*What I have vowed I will make good.* I'm going to keep my promise, said Jonah. And he did. Jonah eventually obeyed God in chapter three. He preached in Nineveh. And by God's grace, a city in excess of 120,000 repented!

Again, let's be honest with ourselves. We're often like Jonah. We too are prone to neglect our vows. When Christ saved us, we promised Him we would live for Him and seek to tell others about Him. And we do for awhile. But then we start getting preoccupied with our own little world and forget the lost people and lost nations out there. We become, like Jonah, *ingrown*.

Since that's our tendency, *Prone to wander, Lord I feel it*, we need constant reminders of who we are and why we are here, which happens every time we gather on the Lord's Day. And He is so gracious. Watch what He does with Jonah. Watch how He pursues Jonah with that fish, brings him back to his senses, renews his resolve to fulfill his vow the Lord, and then uses him to reach a city for His glory.

I'm thankful for how the Lord is pursuing us as a church, and I commend you for your desire to see Christ made known in this community and in the countries of the world.

Jonah reveals one final evidence of grace in the lives of those who worship the right God in the right way.

**D. They affirm that salvation comes from God.** Listen to the final words of Jonah's prayer from inside that fish. Verse 9—"Salvation comes from the LORD."

That's what God wanted Jonah to acknowledge. Yahweh is the One who saves. People cannot save themselves. He must save them. And that's what He is doing, *saving people*, through His Son, through the cross and empty tomb of His Son, which Jesus said Jonah foreshadowed (Matt. 12:40 "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.").

Jonah points us to Christ. The point of the Jonah story isn't to prove that God can keep a man alive inside a huge fish (which He can), but that God can powerfully and graciously raise a man, even from death, and make him live to His honor.

That's God's agenda. He is saving people by His grace and for His glory. And that's the agenda He wanted Jonah to get on board with. And us.

Make It Personal: If I am truly thankful...I will see three things.

1. *I will see the world the way God sees it.* “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.” If I am truly thankful I will see the world as God sees it.

We need help for that to happen, for we're prone to lose God's perspective on the world. I find that reading good biographies can help. Putting a map up can help too, and just look at it regularly, and pray for the continents you see. This is God's world, and when I'm truly thankful I'll see it as He sees it.

2. *I will see my possessions the way God sees them.* What I have isn't mine to hoard. It's on loan to me to use for God's kingdom purposes.

Brothers and sisters, this is why we support missionaries. This is why we send folks from our congregation to serve in the harvest fields around the world. We didn't send Erin, or Gary and Nancy, or Jade, or others because we didn't *want* them around here, or because we wouldn't benefit from having their gifts around here. We sent them because we want to have a heart that reflects God's heart. Are we interested in reaching this community? Yes. And the world? Yes.

We're going to stretch ourselves this coming year. Next Sunday we'll be voting on the 2020 budget which will include funding for a part-time Associate Pastor position. We'll also be hearing a message from Matt Wilson, who the combined board is recommending for this position. You have always been a gracious congregation. Now we have new opportunities to reach this community and beyond. May the Lord continue to give us His perspective on our possessions.

3. *I will see God as worthy of my song, my sacrifices, my all.*

I think it's significant that when Jonah was running from God he realized how much he needed to express thanksgiving. In today's community groups we'll be discussing the question, “Is there a particular time in your own life when the Lord taught you a similar lesson?” We'll be sharing those answers together. You won't want to miss it.

**\*\*Special Harvest Offering**—As we conclude this service we'll be given the opportunity to participate in a special thanksgiving offering. We'll be giving this year's offering to our missionary Donna Messenger, to help with her recent ministry trip to Ukraine.