

A Story of God's (Sovereign) Grace

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[0 : 00] Well, a few months ago, as I was taking one of my children a little bit further north for a running club that she's a part of, I saw a sign for a local church broadly announcing and proclaiming, your story's important.

And while it is certainly true that God loves us, that he cares deeply about us, that he knows us intimately, the sign pointed to an age-old universal temptation that faces human beings in all places and all times.

It's that temptation, that desire to make the story all about me. To steal the plot line from our Creator and to garner the glory for ourselves.

It's what Adam and Eve did in the garden. Taking and eating the fruit so that they could establish their own standard of what was right and what was wrong.

It's the same temptation that we read about today in Jonah chapter 1. And if we're honest with ourselves, it's the same temptation we face every morning we wake up.

[1 : 33] In Colossians 1, 15 through 20, the Apostle Paul clearly presents God's plot.

In summary, he states, Let us keep this in mind as we consider the first chapter of Jonah as a cautionary tale.

A cautionary tale for those of us tempted to steal the plot. Tempted to steal the plot by making the story about us instead of making it about God's sovereign grace.

But rest assured, even when we attempt to steal the story from our Creator, we discover, like we do in Jonah, that God sovereignly weaves both good and evil, obedience and rebellion, the mighty and the lowly of this world, and the entire pageantry of his creation into the plot of his enduring grace.

And so when we read through Jonah 1, 1 through 16, I'd ask for you to be on the lookout for three warnings that we will consider about elevating our story and stealing the plot.

[3 : 16] But before we do that, if you would join me in prayer, and then we will turn our attention to reading Jonah 1. Let us pray. Amen. God, we are thankful for your word.

God, for it is a bedrock of truth in a world that doesn't know what truth is. And God, we are thankful for your son, Jesus Christ.

God, we are thankful for your Holy Spirit, and we ask that your Holy Spirit might even now prepare our hearts for the reading and the teaching of your word. And all of this might be done for our good and your glory.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen. All right. So if you would join with me in turning to Jonah 1, we're going to read all the way up to the point where everybody thinks that Jonah is about, which is the big fish.

We're not even going to touch the big fish today. And so let's start with Jonah 1, verse 1. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

[4 : 35] But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found the ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his God.

And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.

So the captain came and said to him, What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your God. Perhaps the God will give a thought to us that we may not perish.

And they said to one another, Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

[5 : 56] Then they said to him, Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation, and where do you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you? And he said to them, I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, What is this that you have done? For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

Then they said to him, What shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us? For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.

He said to them, Pick me up and hurl me into the sea. Then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.

Nevertheless, the men rode hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore, they called out to the Lord, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.

[7 : 24] So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

Well, we see the first warning here in the first three verses.

And really, what we see before getting into that is, you know, in today's culture, in today's Christian culture, I would say, we make much ado about open doors.

And I remember, as a kid, pleading with God, God, would you just open this door or close this door? That way I would know what you want me to do.

So we plead with God for these open doors or the closed doors. Oftentimes, you know, it's more like, God, would you open the easy doors, and would you close the doors that would be hard for me to walk through?

[8 : 42] We also praise God. You know, we praise God when he opens the doors, especially the ones we want open in, and we have this sense of peace that God is working in our lives and moving us towards this one open door.

And we praise him for closing doors, and we see what would have happened maybe if we'd gone through that door, and we thank him for the protection that he's given to us. And then when we're talking with other people about decisions that we've made, we present this concept of open and closed doors as a way of saying, hey, yeah, you know, this is justification for why I'm making this decision.

And sometimes we fail to avail ourselves of what God has presented to us as a way of knowing what it is that we are to do to glorify and enjoy him forever.

We may ask for open doors, but do we look to Scripture where God has clearly laid out what it is that he requires of us?

Do we pray and seek the confirmation of the Holy Spirit as we consider, and do we ask for the wisdom to make these difficult decisions?

[10 : 05] Do we consult godly men and women that God has placed in our midst who have life experiences that can help us to know what it is that we are to do and to make a wise decision?

And I bring that up because really this first warning is a warning against, well, not nearly against, but to beware of following and pursuing open doors.

Because when we look at Jonah's life, we can see here where in many ways, Jonah followed open doors in direct opposition to what God had called him to do.

God called him to go preach to the Ninevites. Jonah said, I don't want to do that. And he had open doors. He had a profession that allowed him to travel.

Oh, open door. He had a profession that provided him with at least funds to make such a trip. Huh, open door.

[11 : 20] He had an ability to go to the port.

Open door. There's a port nearby. Not only is there a port nearby, there's a ship in that port. Ah, and lo and behold, there are sailors there that are getting ready to depart to Tarshish, the furthest place away that I want to go from Nineveh.

And guess what? They're going to take me on as a passenger. Open door. Jonah using the very blessings of the God he is seeking to flee from just to follow his own plot.

And what plot is that? Well, God's plot was, Jonah, I want you to go to Nineveh and show them grace to be the mouthpiece that calls them to repentance.

Jonah's like, nope, nope. God, I want you to pour out your wrath and judgment on them. I don't want to offer them your grace. God says, Jonah, I want you to go tell the Ninevites how much I love them.

[12:45] Jonah says, no, no, no, no, no, no. No, no. God says, Jonah, I have an internal perspective here.

I'm looking at bringing these people into my kingdom. And Jonah says, no, no, no, no, no, God, these are the people that have hurt us.

These people have killed us. These people will invade our land if we give them the chance. No, no, no, I want you to totally obliterate them. So he flees using the very blessings that God had given him to turn his back on service to God.

Jonah didn't have very much compared to what we have today. Think of the resources that we have because we live in this time and this place.

Then how many of those conveniences and blessings can we use to justify turning our back on doing what God has called us to do?

[14:07] we're there with Jonah fleeing from the service of God and we turn from that to him getting on board ship to all of a sudden we are in a very chaotic scene.

Right? We see this supernatural storm that as the reader we know is God hurling this storm at this ship but all we see here are these salty sailors who are scared.

They have not seen a storm like this. And so there is a flurry of activity as they are taking their precious cargo. It is those things that make their livelihood.

It is those possessions that they will use to turn a profit to take care of their families and they are throwing it overboard in some chance to lighten the ship that it might break free from the storm.

The text tells us that the storm is so violent that the ship threatens to break apart to disintegrate.

[15:25] Now this is no small storm. This is a storm that places the lives of Jonah and not only Jonah but all of the sailors on board in jeopardy.

But it is because of Jonah that they are there. Right? Jonah, the plot stealer, the rebellious prophet who insists upon his own story instead of following God's story.

It's as if God is throwing this storm at this little vessel saying, Jonah, you need to make a plot correction. You're going in the wrong direction and I need you to turn around now.

And we see this chaotic scene taking place above deck and where is Jonah, the plot stealer, the one who God is trying to get his attention?

He's down in the hold of the ship. Is he cowering? No. He's fast asleep. Deep sleep. The word there is for sleep like you're in surgery asleep.

[16:47] I mean, this dude's out. And he doesn't even know what's going on.

Completely oblivious to the fact that his rebellion has his life in peril and also all of the sailors on board that ship.

So the captain comes down and he sees Jonah and he says, wake up! Wake up, you sleeper! What are you doing? Call out to your God.

Don't you know that we're in danger here? Perhaps, just maybe, your God will hear and he'll save us. the race is the question of how could Jonah sleep at a time like that?

Man, I've been on a very small ship and in the very small waves comparatively and not in the storm and let's just say, I did not enjoy that and we weren't even in the open sea but we were bouncing up and down and the hold is even worse.

[18:07] You get down in there, there's no air moving, start turning green, you wish you were back up on deck but there's Jonah fast asleep with a hardened heart oblivious and calloused to God's plot.

It's odd that while Jonah definitely doesn't have peace with God, he's found peace within himself. He's happy, he's content with what he's done.

gives me pause to think are there times in my life where perhaps I've wrested the plot from God's hands and attempted to make it all about me and in doing so have hardened my heart to what God's calling me to do.

That I've pursued my own story instead of caring about God's plot. But even in the midst of Jonah's hardened calloused heart, even in the midst of him running away from God, God's sovereign grace is at work.

Even in the midst of his rebellion. You see, the ship captain didn't have to go down into that hold. The ship captain didn't have to see Jonah.

[20 : 00] The ship captain didn't have to wake him up. What a grace that God gave Jonah in the form of that captain to come down and to wake him up.

Otherwise, Jonah would have plunged to a watery grave, along with all the other sailors. We see God's sovereign grace at work in the casting of lots.

These sailors aren't doing this, saying, let's see what Yahweh Jehovah God has to say about this situation. They're like, hey, this is how we figure out whose fault this is.

So let's throw some dice. Let's pick some straws. And whoever has the lowest number or the shortest straw, yeah, I guess that's the one who's causing all this trouble.

God in his sovereign grace ensures that Jonah pulls the short straw. It could have been sailor number two for all we know.

[21 : 08] But God sovereignly oversaw it to make sure that Jonah was identified. And then we see God's sovereign grace at work in Jonah's confession.

Now as soon as he pulls the short straw and they start peppering him with questions, he's like, yep, it's me. Hi, I'm the problem. Yep, it's me.

They say, oh, okay, so what are we to do, Jonah? You're the problem. Tell us what do we need to do here. And he says, just like you've done with your cargo, pick me up and hurl me into the sea.

And they'll say, they're saying, no, no, no, no, no, that can't be the answer, Jonah. That's not the answer.

We're going to, I tell you what we're going to do, Jonah. We are going to row our hardest. So they take their oars and it says they dug their oars into the sea, trying to get themselves out of this storm, but the storm doesn't relent.

[22 : 27] They don't make any progress. In fact, the text tells us the storm got worse. The harder they fought against it, the harder the storm fought.

But we're not much different than the sailors, are we? we're invited to join God's plotline through the free grace offered by Jesus Christ.

Yet there's something that we can't give up, is there? It's that age-old temptation, that idea of making the story all about me, of self-reliance, which is so strong, even in our country.

No, no, no. We want to be like the sailors and say, no, God, God, I got this. Let me just roll a little bit harder. Let me know that in some way I contributed, that in some way I earned it.

just like the sailors struggling to toss Jonah overboard, we struggle to accept God's rescue presented in the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

[24 : 00] We find ourselves fighting against the prophetic words of Caiaphas in John chapter 11 when he says, better that one man die than the whole nation perish.

But we want to work for it. We want to earn it. We want to grasp for ourselves through our own efforts the rescue that is freely and graciously bestowed upon us through faith in Jesus Christ.

after all, like our first parents, we love pursuing our own plot line. We want to make it all about us. In closing, we see that just like Jonah, our story is not the main plot line.

Instead, the main plot of Jonah's life and of our lives is that of God's sovereign grace pursuing us. God's sovereign grace pulling us into his story. His story of reconciling all things unto himself by making peace with us through Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

[25 : 30] So when you're at the end of the rope in your story, when you dug the oars in deep and you're not getting anywhere and the storm waves keep crashing against you, when you are hopeless, helpless, and even numb to God's plot, the heavenly father is poised and ready to rescue you.

he is there to pull you into his gloriously grand plot. You don't need to hold on, you don't need to row hard, because the work is done.

Christ, the son of God, has made peace with God for you. In other words, your story is important. God, it is never more important than when it is woven into God's grand plot of making all things right.

Let us pray. Oh God, we thank you for your word, we thank you for the life of Jonah, we thank you for his struggles, for in them we see our own.

[26 : 58] God, more importantly than seeing our struggles, God, we see your sovereign grace, your grace at work, and even the most mundane things, in the storms, in the casting of lots, and people waking up Jonah.

God, we ask this morning that you might allow us through the power and presence of your Holy Spirit to see your grace at work in our lives, that we might trust you and not ourselves. In Christ's name we pray, amen. Amen.