

The Healing Power of Thanksgiving

Jonah 1:17-2:10

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, November 19th 2023

I. Introduction — Jonah was experiencing deep depression

In 1636, in the midst of the Thirty Years' War, there was a German pastor by the name of Martin Rinkart who had a huge parish. During that one year, he buried 5000 of his parishioners. 5000 in one year, with an average of 15 burials a day. You can imagine the grief that he and the congregation faced. But in the midst of that pain, he wrote a table grace for his children that you will recognize as a thanksgiving hymn that we sing. It said:

'Now thank we all our God / With heart and hands and voices;/ Who wondrous things hath done,/ In whom His world rejoices. /Who, from our mother's arms,/Hath led us on our way/ With countless gifts of love/ And still is ours today.'

That was thanksgiving that was not dependent on his circumstances. Some of *you* have experienced a pretty rough year in 2023, and Gary and I and the deacons really feel for you and hopefully can adequately minister to you. I'm so grateful for the love that this congregation shows to one another. But some of you have gone through tough times. My mother is blind in one eye, very weak, very poor of hearing, and has had enough health issues that she is rarely able to eat a meal with us - or at least stay very long. And she misses that. She misses interaction with friends. And yet when she prays she is thankful for what she has. There are others, like Ken Howell, who have been homebound. And you know how social Ken was. This is hard.

Some of you have experienced worse things during the past few months - the death of loved ones, or even worse, the agony of broken relationships with friends or other loved ones who seem to have very little appreciation for the enormous sacrifices that you have made. That's painful. There have been surgeries, job losses, huge financial losses, and other troubles. And it is very easy to develop a grumbling spirit, and even to become angry, frustrated, resentful, and even bitter. On a human level that is totally understandable. Some people would say, "That is normal." But God doesn't want us to live in the realm of what is normal. He wants us to experience His supernatural love, joy, peace - and yes, the grace of thanksgiving. It *is* a grace. It takes grace to give thanks well. It's not just perfunctory thanks. It is a thanks that wells up from deep within us because it is produced by the Holy Spirit Himself. And I want to examine just one facet of this supernatural thanksgiving as we approach Thanksgiving Day. It is the healing power of thanksgiving.

Let me begin by giving a bit of background on why Jonah needed healing, and why that made him struggle with being thankful. His bad attitudes are normal reactions to the kind of pain he suffered, and his thanksgiving in this chapter is not normal; it is supernatural.

A. Classic symptoms of depression

Jonah was suffering with what is often described as deep depression. If you have never experienced depression or never worked with those who are depressed, it is very hard to relate to Jonah. Many times Christians just shake their heads at Jonah and wonder why he was so hard-hearted. I don't believe that he really was hard-hearted. Chapter 1 shows that he had compassion for the Phoenicians. They too were pagans, but he had compassion on them. While he doesn't want the Assyrians saved, he saves the Phoenicians. He could have just let them go down with him in the ship, but he did not. While he was insensitive to the plight of Nineveh (the capitol of Assyria), he was very sensitive to the sailors, teaching them about his God, so that when they pray to God they pray to Yehowah and repent of their sins. Jonah was not hard-hearted; he was depressed.

Jonah shows several of the classic symptoms for depression. Let me list seven of them:

1. He withdrew from people and complained about his isolation. That is so common - to withdraw from people, but then to feel bad that you are isolated.
2. Second, he was downcast and blue. In fact, those who have studied his blues speak of this as a deep sadness; an overwhelming sadness.
3. Third, he felt overwhelmed with what God wanted him to do; he just didn't think he could do it. He gives up on his responsibilities because they seem too much to bear.
4. Fourth, he sleeps when he should have action. In fact, in chapter 1 he is sleeping through a ship-sinking storm and the captain has to shake him awake. (Now, wierdly, the opposite can sometimes also be a symptom - insomnia, but sleeping when there should be action is very common.)
5. Fifth, he shows no desire to eat. He has completely lost his appetite.
6. Sixth, he excused his irresponsibility.
7. Seventh, he had lost all desire for living. He just wanted to die. In chapter 1 he insisted that the mariners throw him overboard. He thought that would end his troubles. He didn't dare commit suicide, but he didn't have any problem with them throwing him into the sea. In chapter 4:3 he says, "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!" In chapter 4:8 it says, "Then he wished death for himself, and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'" He was so depressed that he felt like he couldn't go on living. And chapter by chapter God forces Jonah to confront the inner hurts and to confront the bitterness that had led to his depression.

B. Outward reasons for his bitterness

What was he bitter over? Some of the reasons for his bitterness are hinted at in 3:8. This verse is part of the king of Nineveh's decree for repentance. The king says, "But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands." The king picks out evil way and violence to summarize what was wrong with Nineveh. Now if you look at the Biblical and the archeological evidence of that time you will find that the evil and the violence were horrifying. Of all the ancient peoples, Assyria was one of the most barbaric, sadistic, and

cruel of the ancient peoples. It was what made them the most feared. Over the years I have subscribed to various archeology magazines, and purchased archeology books, and the Assyrian artifacts that have been dug up are filled with depictions of the most barbaric tortures that they inflicted upon conquered nations. Even during their leisure time, they liked to look at statues and frescoes that depicted torture and they even had toys of torture. Some of them are absolutely horrifying. They liked to skin people alive slowly just to relish the screams of pain. They tried to drag the torture out as long as they could to get more enjoyment from the screams. And yes, that is sick, isn't it? You might cross-reference Nahum chapter 3 where it talks about all the nations rejoicing when Nineveh is destroyed because of her cruelty. It says that even the *pagan* nations rejoiced at their destruction.

Now here is where it hits Jonah personally. (And this is only hinted at, so I can't be dogmatic. But it seems like a logical reading between the lines.) If you read 2 Kings chapter 14, you will find that Jonah lived in Gath Hopher. Assyria had attacked the region where Jonah lived. We know how Assyria treated those they fought against – making cruel examples of what happens to those who resist, by way of torture. So here is a possible reconstruction of what had happened: Jonah was one of the survivors who had probably witnessed the cruel torture and slow deaths of many friends and family members. Burned into his memory was the laughter of the Assyrians as they tortured people. Every time the Assyrians came to his mind his emotions churned with the memory of ghastly, demonic cruelty. And it would take a great deal to heal Jonah of this pain and to enable him to come to the place where he could love his enemy.

By the time he writes this book he has come to love his enemies and in doing so has conquered the hurts that brought on his severe depression. Step by step God brought Jonah out of his depressed state. And we can't look at all the steps that God took.

There are so many lessons that we could draw out of this book. For example, this book illustrates the principle that depressed people frequently need intervention. They are not going to figure it out on their own. Jonah wanted to crawl into a hole, but God wouldn't let him. Jonah wanted to avoid his pain, God helped to deal with his pain. Jonah felt overwhelmed with the task; God took him through it step at a time. Jonah tried to avoid action, God forced him to take action. Jonah sought to excuse his irresponsibility, but God kept reminding him of his responsibility and wouldn't let him off the hook. God asks Jonah two times, "Is it right for you to be angry?" And Jonah insists that he has a right to be angry. He's even angry at God. Jonah saw only the negative. God points out the positive sides of life, especially in chapter 4. In many different ways God showed his love to Jonah by bringing him out of his depression. So this is a great book for training those who counsel the depressed.

II. How to pray with thanksgiving

But this morning I'm not going to look at all of that. I just want to look at *one* facet of Jonah's healing, and that was Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving. Giving thanks when you do not feel like it is a God-ordained means of inner healing and strength. Now it may not make sense, but it works. And many of you have testified to me (after I have encouraged you to do this)

that thanksgiving has been revolutionary for you. Many people have testified to the supernatural healing they have experienced as a result of persistent thanksgiving. In 1 Thessalonians Paul commands us to give thanks *in* every circumstance. But in Ephesians 5:20, Paul goes further; he commands us to give thanks always *for* all things.

A. Where to start

Now where does Jonah start? Frequently depressed people have lost so much will to live that they can't even pray. They try, but they don't know how to put their prayer into words; their brain isn't working at full speed. Sometimes all they can do is to cry out to God, "Help me." During times like that it is helpful to *read* the Psalms or have someone else read an appropriate psalm to you, or to read out a prayer to God that someone else has composed. This is in effect what Jonah did in chapter 2. Almost every verse in this prayer is taken straight from the Psalms with a phrase or two added which personalizes it. Jonah had obviously spent much time meditating on the Psalms and it is obvious that he found the Psalms to be extremely comforting. If you ever come to the place where you have a hard time praying, try praying the Psalms. It will give organization to your emotions - and our emotions frequently need to be organized. They can often serve as the jumping off place for a short prayer of your own. Or even pray a prayer that someone else has composed, like the Valley of Vision book that has a collection of Puritan prayers, or perhaps some of the Anglican prayers. Prayers that are recited from memory or read can be accepted by God as well as those that are spontaneous.

B. When to start

OK, next question: *When* did Jonah start his thanksgiving? He didn't wait until he felt better. He didn't wait until he was delivered. Verse 1 says, "Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. And he said." He is thanking God in the belly of the fish. Can you imagine that? Verse 10 indicates that it was only after this prayer of thanksgiving that the fish spit Jonah out. The New American Standard Bible says, "Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land." The Septuagint translates it, "Upon this, a command was given by the Lord to the fish..." God wants us thanking him and praising him even while we are cast down and metaphorically in the belly of the fish.

Two of the psalms that Jonah quoted are Psalms 42 and 43, both of which deal with depression and in both of which the author *determines* (with a deliberate act of his will) that he is *going* to praise God even though he doesn't feel like it. It's like he grabs himself by the scruff of the neck and says, "Self, stop it! Stop being moody about everything that is bad. I will still praise God! I will still thank Him!"

I've given this illustration to you a few years ago, but since it illustrates this issue so well, I want to use it again. When I was a kid, my brothers and I were coming home from an all day climb in the mountains of Ethiopia. We loved hiking. But this time the fog was closing in on us. We didn't want to wait it out because night was coming on and the dangerous animals were starting to come out and make howling noises. So we were afraid and just kept going. In fact, we very foolishly began running downhill, which in those mountains you really should not do. We couldn't see but just a few feet ahead of us, but we were so confident we

were on a familiar home stretch that we kept running. It turns out that we weren't on the familiar home stretch. All of a sudden I tripped over something, and fell down skinning my knee and hurting my hip. I got up complaining to myself, nursing my wounds and feeling sorry for myself. I looked to see what had tripped me, and there was nothing there. I'm still convinced to this day that it was an angel who tripped me. By the time my brothers caught up to me the fog suddenly lifted slightly and I saw that I was a few feet from a huge cliff. If I hadn't tripped, I would have run right over that cliff. You can bet that I was thankful for the hard fall that I had experienced. I was thanking God over and over again for tripping me in that painful way. I just couldn't get over God's Providence. I kept saying, "Thank you Lord, thank you."

My thesis for this morning is that God wants you to have that kind of thanksgiving for your painful experiences, even before the fog lifts; even before you realize why God has brought your pain, discouragement, or difficulty. It is rare that God lifts the fog so that we can see the cliff that was avoided. It's rare. After all, God wants us to live our Christian life by faith, and not by sight. He wants us to be thankful *in* the fog and not just *after* the fog has lifted. And when we do that, God brings joy and healing and spiritual power. It may not make sense, but this is one of the steps that God has ordained to help us through our depression. Our act of thanking God when we don't feel thankful is really an act of faith that receives and channels God's spiritual provisions into our hearts. It's a tool of faith. We may say that we have faith in God's purposes, but if we are unthankful, we have no faith in God's good sovereignty. The ability to thank God in all things is an indicator of whether faith in Romans 8:28 is really present or not. If we really believe Romans 8:28, then we will be able to thank God in any circumstance. It doesn't mean that you won't seek to change the circumstance, but it is there for a reason.

What enabled Paul and Silas to thank God in prison even while the dried blood was still caked on their backs? Ephesians 5:20 is a key verse that has brought healing and strength to me during those times when I have been in the fog and had no idea of why God had allowed me to stumble into pain. But by faith I have thanked God, and He has brought His strength to deal with the pain. It's been remarkable. That verse reads, "giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." He says there is never a time when we should lose our thanksgiving: "giving thanks always." I know you will have your theological arguments as to why Paul couldn't have meant what he said. "What about that other person's sin?" You don't have to approve of their sin; you can rebuke their sins; but like Paul and Silas, you can still thank God for trusting you to experience pain from their sins. I know it seems strange, but there is nothing that is exempted from thanks: "giving thanks always for all things." That includes giving thanks for the *difficulty* you have been experiencing this past week; that includes even those most wretched of times when you feel like you are in the fish's belly; that includes facing the pain of the past like God forced Jonah to do.

So the first step is to thank God *where* you can, even if that means reading someone else's prayer or praying a Psalm. Jonah was so depressed that he didn't know how to even word himself, so he uses the words that someone else composed in the Psalms. You can do the same.

The second step is to do it right away. Jonah thanked God before the hurt had gone away. Jonah began thanksgiving even while he was depressed, and even while he was in the fish's belly.

C. What perspective to have

A third thing that can make our thanksgiving a reality is developing an eternal perspective. We so frequently measure our pains and our gains by time rather than by eternity. God shook Jonah free of that by making him face death. That *will* make you start thinking about eternity. Verses 2-5 says,

I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, and He answered me. Out of the depths of Sheol I cried. [he either died or at least had a near death experience. I believe he literally died as a type of Christ, and his soul went down into Sheol below the earth. But others take it metaphorically. I'm not going to be dogmatic. He goes on:] For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me; All your billows and Your waves passed over me. Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple. The waters encompassed me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head, I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; [And then verse 6 describes the rescue by the fish] Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God.

There is nothing quite like the prospect of dying to make a person realize that his concerns, frustrations, fears, hopes and priorities in life and the things he has gotten bitter over have been totally out of balance when measured by eternity. Moments before you die you're not going to be regretting that you didn't reach your financial goals, or that somebody robbed you of \$200, or that someone embarrassed you in front of a crowd. You're not going to be saying, "Oh, how I wish I had gotten a nicer house or boat." Right before death the only things you are going to be concerned about are those things that will last for eternity. Right before death most people have regrets that they didn't spend more time with their family; they regret that they weren't involved in evangelism and that they didn't develop their relationship with God more. For once they are beginning to measure life by eternal standards. Thanksgiving helps us to do that *now* because thanksgiving helps us look at life through God's eyes, and such an eternal perspective helps us to maintain a habit of thanksgiving. It's a circular relationship where thanksgiving feeds an eternal perspective and an eternal perspective further feeds thanksgiving. And God's Word says we shouldn't have to wait for death to think about eternity. We should always have an eternal perspective. We should always measure everything we do (including relaxation, sports, marital relationships, or whatever) by whether or not this will count for eternity. If you are not a believer, by definition you are not looking at life with an eternal perspective. Jesus said, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?"

D. With a proper view of God

A fourth thing that helped Jonah be thankful for that slimy, mucous-filled stomach of a fish was that he knew God was sovereign. You can't thank God *for* all things if God doesn't *control* all things. When he was in the boat he knew that this was *God's* storm, and he told the sailors that. He knew this was *God's* fish. He knew that was God's waves - both the literal waves and the metaphorical waves that he felt were drowning him. He says in verse 3, "All *Your* billows and *Your* waves passed over me." Jonah knew that nothing but the Sovereignty of God could have put him in the fishes belly, and nothing but the sovereignty of God would be able to get him out. But Jonah also knew the reality of Romans 8:28 long before it was written. He said in chapter 4, "I know that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, one who relents from doing harm." It didn't look like God was good, but his theology enabled him to believe so, and to give thanks by faith.

E. The results of praying with thanksgiving

Thanksgiving also has the power to move you from self-seeking, self-centered idolatry to servanthood. In verse 9 he says, "But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed." Thanksgiving is hard. That is why it is called a *sacrifice*. But in the verse before he implies that when we only do what we want to do (what's easy and fun), when we are self-seeking, we are idolaters, and we miss out on the mercy that we desire. Mercy doesn't come to idolaters. It comes to those who seek God, not to those who are self-seeking. Thanksgiving is the very opposite of being a self-seeking idolater, and God blesses that thanksgiving.

A further benefit of thanking God is that it helps us to focus upon the fact that our emotional security and help are totally from the Lord. So often we get down because people have hurt us or people have let us down or frustrated us. But Jonah's focus on God's sovereignty helped Him to realize that God was really the one who threw him into the ocean. Verse 3 says, "For *You* cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas." But he ends the Psalm by meditating on the realization that "Salvation is of the Lord." He would stop looking for salvation from men and from things and from circumstances. Those were all bound to let him down and discourage him. He would look to the *Lord alone* for salvation from his problems. Some of the most thankful people that I have met were people who had far less than I do. This past Tuesday I read a poem that I think illustrates this so well. I couldn't find the author of it, but it is titled, Forgive Me When I whine. It says,

Today upon a bus, I saw a lovely maid with golden hair; I envied her – she seemed so gay, and how, I wished I were so fair; When suddenly she rose to leave, I saw her hobble down the aisle; she had one foot and wore a crutch, but as she passed, a smile. Oh God, forgive me when I whine, I have two feet – the world is mine.>

And when I stopped to buy some sweets, the lad who served me had such charm; he seemed to radiate good cheer, his manner was so kind and warm; I said, "It's nice to deal with you, such courtesy I seldom find"; he turned and said, "Oh, thank you sir." And then I saw that he was blind. Oh, God, forgive me when I whine, I have two eyes, the world is mine.>

Then, when walking down the street, I saw a child with eyes of blue; he stood and watched the others play, it seemed he knew not what to do; I stopped a moment, then I said, "Why don't you join the others, dear?" He looked ahead without a word, and then I knew he could not hear. Oh God, forgive me when I whine, I have two ears, the world is mine.>

With feet to take me where I'd go; with eyes to see the sunsets glow, with ears to hear what I would know. I am blessed indeed. The world is mine; oh, God, forgive me when I whine.¹

That's being thankful that things aren't worse. It's focusing on what we *have*, rather than on what we *don't* have.

One last benefit of thanksgiving is deliverance. This shouldn't be the only point that we focus upon, but it is interesting that Jonah was delivered *at the very point that he came to thanksgiving*. Verse 10 says, "So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land." Thanksgiving delivers. It is not always a physical deliverance, but there is always a spiritual deliverance. For forty days Jonah was emotionally stable. He was freed from his depression. God's work in his life enabled him to preach his heart out for those forty days. And by the way, I should mention that depression strikes even the most godly of men on occasion. It's not uncommon. A couple of weeks ago I read a long list of famous preachers who faced depression. I told someone this past week that Charles Spurgeon turned in his resignation 36 times in the 39 years of his ministry. You are not the only ones who sometimes feel like giving up. Anyway, the church refused to accept his resignation. They knew his tendencies to be discouraged. And so there can be ups and downs in even a godly man's life. So for forty days Jonah mastered his emotions. He was delivered for that time.

It was only after Nineveh repented that Jonah's old thoughts and feelings of how unfair this was began to bring on the depression again. And this can so easily happen – people will get over their depression, only to start feeling badly again because they aren't disciplining their thoughts. There is an old saying that goes like this: "To praise God for our miseries - ends them. To praise God for our blessings - extends them." Thanksgiving is a powerful tool for spiritual healing, but we must use it. Just to review the steps:

1. The first step is to thank God where you can, even if it means reading or reciting your prayers of thanks.
2. The second step is to do it right away, even in the midst of the pain.
3. The third step is to relate what you are thanking God for to eternity. Measure it by eternity. Your thanksgiving will become a lot more real when you do that. In light of eternity, the pain you are going through diminishes. As Paul said, it is a momentary and light affliction compared to the eternal weight of glory awaiting us. And if you know what Paul went through, to say it was a momentary and light affliction is saying something.

¹ Source Unknown.

4. The fourth step is to remind yourself that God is sovereign over your problem. Since He is a good God, this will give you a rational basis for thanking God. If God is sovereign and good, it *is* rational to thank Him for what He has brought into your life. Meditate on His sovereignty and include *that* as a reason for thanksgiving.
5. The fifth step is to take the effort to think of things to thank Him for, or what Jonah calls the sacrifice of thanksgiving. It's a sacrifice; it's hard work; it takes effort. It doesn't come easy. Sacrifices rarely do. But they do pay off.
6. The sixth step is to not depend upon other saviors and other sources of security and to realize that God alone is your source of salvation. Too many times we look to vitamins to be our savior, or food, or medicine, or a pastor. It's not as if those things aren't good; they can be when blessed by God. But though God uses means (I'm not discounting the use of vitamins and minerals - I take them), we must recognize that *only God can bless those means* (that's the point - *only God can bless those means*) and that salvation is of the Lord. Thank Him for that.

Having done all that, God has promised to deliver you. It may not be in the way *you* anticipated, but He will deliver you. That is exactly the promise of Psalm 50:14. It says "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, ...in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me." God will bring the exact rescue or deliverance that we need, and through our thanksgiving we will honor Him. God says, those who honor me, I will honor. I urge each one of you to begin thanking God for all things, even when you do not feel like it. Amen.