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The Book of Jonah
II. The Treasures of Darkness
Jonah 1:17 – 2:10, Isaiah 45:3

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“I will give you the treasures of darkness . . .” In fairness, what that verse is actually referring to is God’s promise to Cyrus, the king of Persia, that He will give to Cyrus all the hidden wealth of Babylon in return for Cyrus delivering Israel from out of exile in Babylon. But that image – *“the treasures of darkness”* – is simply too evocative to leave it at that factual meaning.¹ The church has long heard in that promise something more, something far more hopeful and powerful and true – namely, that there are certain good gifts of God which can only come to us through our experiences of dark times: *“I will give you the treasures of darkness.”*

This is not how we are accustomed to thinking about the dark times in our lives, the times of struggle and difficulty and fear and loss and so on. For example, when James, right at the start of his letter, says to us that we should, *“Count it all joy . . . when you meet trials of various kinds”*² – our immediate response is that James has lost his mind. How can we count as joy the very things that rip up our joy, as well as our hearts and our hopes? And yet . . . Though the Bible certainly favors “light” as the dominant image for Christian living – Jesus Christ is the *“Light of the World”*³ and we who follow Him are to “walk in the light and not in darkness”⁴ – there is, still, this steady undercurrent in the Bible about how the darkness is not only an expected part of the Christian life, but is even the place where our faith is not only most tested, but most increased. That the dark times in our lives, experienced through faith, are where our souls are most truly fashioned. Paul, for example, writing to the Romans, not only echoes James, but goes a few steps beyond:

*More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*⁵

So there are indeed, says Scripture, treasures to be found only in and through the darkness. Gifts of God’s mercy, power, and grace which can only be received when our hearts are broken, our hopes in disarray, our lives in turmoil and confusion. The treasures of darkness – God speaking to us, reaching out to us, working in us in ways not available when all is well and good and happy. Lessons that we can only learn when we turn to the Lord in helplessness and hopelessness. In fact, maybe that is part of the key to the “treasures of darkness” – that dark times are perhaps the only times when God gets enough of our attention to be able to reach us and to teach us. I came across

this quote in a wonderful little book entitled, Christ and Calamity, by the Luther pastor Harold Senkbeil:

*Calamities come in different sizes . . . But one thing about calamities, large or small: they get your attention. They lead you to think about God for a change. As C. S. Lewis wrote long ago: "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."*⁶

"I will give you the treasures of darkness . . ."

Which brings us to Jonah trapped in the belly of the whale. I don't know much about what it might mean, scientifically speaking, to be trapped in the belly of a whale, but I imagine it must be rather dark in there. A complete darkness mirroring the darkness within Jonah's heart in his flight from God and God's command. But whatever that darkness must have been like, it indeed proves sufficient to at last get Jonah's attention – to at last pull Jonah back towards the God he has fled and forsaken. And it is not too much to say that in the darkness of the belly of the whale, Jonah finally learns some very important truths – the treasures of darkness. And the first treasure of darkness Jonah receives in the belly of the whale is that at last he is able to recognize just how much his life depends upon God – just how much he needs God.

Three days and nights spent in the darkness of the whale gives Jonah plenty of time to reflect upon things. To take stock of his attempt to flee God and God's command. And slowly he comes to see something tremendously important – something which is often hidden from us in the bright light of happier days. He sees there, in the dark, how helpless he really is on his own. In the daylight, when life is good, we easily imagine ourselves to be self-sufficient, in control of our circumstances. In the darkness, though, all those illusions get stripped away. We are brought to our knees in helplessness and hopelessness and, maybe worst of all, in powerlessness. We run up against something which we cannot fix ourselves – and, at last, we begin to recognize how little control we really have over life's accidents and incidents. We at last recognize that there is no such thing as self-sufficiency for human beings on earth. We at last come to recognize that our only real hope and help, power and security, in life and in death, is to be found in God – the One who made us, and the One who alone can keep us in life. In the belly of the whale, Jonah at last turns around to face the God he thought he didn't need, the God he thought he could outrun. In the darkness, Jonah – and you and I – at last learn how much we really need God, and so learn truly how to pray:

*I called out to the Lord, out of my distress . . .
The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me . . .
When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.*

There in the darkness, we learn the truth of our need for God, the real depth of our dependency upon Him. We don't know how much we truly need Jesus, until that moment when Jesus is all we have. And so, there in the depths, we find the first treasure of darkness – our need for God, and the gift of prayer.

There in the darkness of the belly of the whale, Jonah at last turns and calls upon the Lord. Which opens the door to his receiving the second treasure of darkness. He discovers that in the darkness of his sin and rebellion, in the darkness of his fear and suffering, even in the darkness of the belly of the whale – that God has not abandoned Him. That God has not given up on him and just tossed him aside. That God is with Him still – even and especially in the darkness:

*I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.*

I was recently reading a series of testimonies to the life and work of Timothy Keller, the faithful and brilliant teacher and preacher who founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. One writer testified to the hope she had found in a sermon Keller had preached shortly after the attacks of 9/11. In a sermon on suffering, Keller had said: “*God doesn't guarantee a life free of suffering, but he gives us a suffering Lord who understands and **undoes our aloneness** in the midst of suffering.*”⁷ “*Who undoes our aloneness in the midst of suffering*” – what a beautiful way to express this second treasure of darkness we are given. We learn that God has not abandoned us in the midst of our troubles – and that He never will. We learn that, in fact, God draws even nearer to us in the dark, so that we should not be afraid. Sometimes in the darkness it can be hard to perceive this – but it is true. More than true, this great promise of our Lord and Savior is real – meaning, in the darkness we will discover that God is as good to us as He has promised:

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.⁸*

*And behold, said Jesus, I am with you always,
to the end of the age.⁹*

There in the darkness, Jonah – and we also – discover the second treasure of darkness: we learn that Jesus Christ really is with us, always, even and especially in the dark. To take us by the hand, to whisper in our ears words of reassurance and calm, to shelter us within His embrace of love and compassion and understanding. And so also we learn that we can therefore lean on Him, we can draw comfort and courage from His presence. As one of God's saints, Thomas Merton, once prayed:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead. I cannot know for certain where it will end . . . Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.¹⁰

And then, last, in the darkness of the belly of the whale, in the darkness of his shattered life, Jonah learns that not only is God with him in the darkness, but that God will always, in the end, deliver him from out of the darkness:

*The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O Lord my God.*

“*Yet you brought up my life from the pit . . .*” Indeed, so great a gift is this last treasure of darkness, this assurance of deliverance and salvation from the darkness, that Jonah ends his prayer with what can only be read as a shout from out of the belly of the whale: “*Salvation belongs to the Lord!*”

But perhaps the most interesting part of this third gift, this third treasure of darkness, is that Jonah gains this assurance of rescue and deliverance and salvation even before he has actually been brought out from the belly of the whale. Meaning that if, in the darkness, we have learned our need for God, and so call upon Him from the heart; and that if, in the darkness, we have also learned that God is with us always, even and especially in the darkness; then – this third treasure of darkness – then, even while we are still in the dark, even while we are still in our troubles and sorrows and sufferings, we can know already that God is going to get us through it. That we can know, even in the midst of the darkness, that God will lead us through the darkness and back into the light, back into better days. That we can firmly trust and steadfastly believe that the darkness will eventually be overcome through God’s mercy and power. That, indeed, He will redeem our lives from the pit. That, indeed, “*Salvation belongs to the Lord!*” That, indeed, He will bring us out of the darkness with a deeper faith, a greater trust, and a better discipleship.

I love this little scene in one of George Macdonald’s classic Christian tales: there is a woman who has met with a sudden sorrow, and she cries out bitterly to a friend, “*I wish I’d never been made!*” To which her friend quietly, wisely replies, “*My dear, you’re not made yet. You’re only [just now] being made – and this is the Maker’s process.*”¹¹ Or lines from one of Ibsen’s plays: one of the characters asks another, “*Who taught thee to sing?*” And the other answers: “*God sent me sorrow.*”¹² God not only will deliver us from the darkness, but He will bring us out of the darkness with a deeper faith, a greater trust, and a better discipleship. And we can count on that happening even before it happens – even while we are still in the midst of the darkness with Him.

For example, the Canadian pastor Mark Buchanan writes of a woman in his congregation whose husband had horribly betrayed her. Behind her back he engaged in multiple affairs and indulged a gambling addiction that squandered all of their savings. And then one day he just up and left her – left her destitute with young children to raise, no child support, no job, no income. Talk about being in the darkness. But, writes Buchanan, in the darkness she found exactly what Jonah found – the third treasure of darkness:

She took a cleaning job to feed herself and her children. One day, scouring a floor, she hit bottom. She was utterly alone, desperately weary.

Kneeling on wet tiles, her entire body suddenly, unexpectedly filled with light and strength. “I started to sing,” she says. “I couldn’t help myself. I suddenly knew, with complete certainty, that no matter what happened in my life, everything would be all right.”¹³

And so shall we find, even in the midst of the darkness, the trust and the truth that not only can nothing separate us from the love of God, but that our God is already working all things, even the dark things, round to good – round to the goodness of His everlasting Kingdom and of our membership in that Kingdom:

*In Thine arms I rest me;
Foes who would molest me
Cannot reach me here.
Though the earth be shaking,
Ev’ry heart be quaking,
Jesus calms my fear.
Lightnings flash
And thunders crash;
Yet, though sin and hell assail me,
Jesus will not fail me.¹⁴*

Indeed, says our Savior: “I will give you the treasures of darkness.”

¹ Paul Scherer, “The Friendly Dark,” in Facts That Undergird Life (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), pp. 120-124.

² James 1:2.

³ John 1:4-5, 9; 8:12.

⁴ I John 1:5-7.

⁵ Romans 5:3-5.

⁶ Harold L. Senkbeil, Christ and Calamity: Grace & Gratitude in the Darkest Valley (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), p. 5.

⁷ Quoted in Emily Belz, “Grow Smaller,” in Timothy Keller: A Special Commemorative Issue from Christianity Today, Fall, 2023, p. 68.

⁸ Isaiah 43:1-3.

⁹ Matthew 28:20.

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958), p. 83.

¹¹ Quoted in James S. Stewart, "God and the Fact of Suffering: Wearing the Thorns as a Crown," in The Strong Name, p. 147.

¹² Quoted in Stewart, p. 147.

¹³ Mark Buchanan, Things Unseen: Living in Light of Forever (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 2002), p. 57.

¹⁴ Senkbeil, p. vi.