I love the story about a man who was walking along the edge of a cliff. He got too close to the edge, slipped, and fell over the side. As he was falling he saw a tree growing out of the wall of the cliff. He scrambled and reached and was able to catch one of the limbs as he passed by and stop his fall. As he was hanging there in that precarious situation, he looked down and realized that if he continued to fall, he would crash to the rocks far below. He looked up and realized there was absolutely no way he could climb back up the face of the cliff. Finally, in desperation he called out, “Is anybody up there?”

To his surprise, a voice called back, “I am here.”
The man shouted, “Who are you?”
And the voice answered, “I am God.”
“God! That’s great!” the man cried. “Is there anything you can do to save me?”

“Of course there is,” the Voice boomed. “Just turn loose.”
The stranded man looked down, then looked up again, and shouted, “Is there anybody else up there?”

As we journey through life, we want to know God’s plan. But then, when we come to an understanding of God’s plan, we want a different plan. We want to know if anybody else is up there.

Jonah was not very happy with the plan God had for his life. He was a prophet in the time of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians had treated the people of Israel with cruelty and brutality, and Jonah hated them. But God called Jonah to go and prophesy in Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire. Jonah didn’t want to go. So he did what most of us would do if God asked us to do something we didn’t want to do: he ran away.

Jonah’s journey away from God took him out on the sea heading westward toward Tarshish, which was at the other end of the world from Nineveh. A storm came up, and it became apparent that Jonah was the cause of the storm, so the sailors threw Jonah overboard. That’s how he came to be in the belly of the fish. (Actually not a whale. The Scripture says fish. Pinocchio was swallowed by a whale.)
In the belly of the fish, Jonah was at the end of his rope. His life had skidded off into the ditch. Again, like many of us who find ourselves in desperate situations, Jonah began to pray.

It’s a very eloquent prayer, but I wonder if Jonah is engaging in a little “foxhole theology.” The old saying goes, “There are no atheists in foxholes.” In other words, when the chips are down, then we turn to God. Or when we are deep in the valley, or holding on to the last limb for dear life, then we cry out for salvation. Maybe this prayer is sincere repentance on Jonah’s part, but given his behavior in the rest of the story, I doubt it. I think maybe Jonah just knew the right and pious words to say, and he said them, in the desperate hope of getting out of the fish alive. My guess is that God and the fish got so sick of Jonah’s foxhole prayer that the fish vomited him up on the beach.

Back on dry land, Jonah followed God’s call, although still reluctantly. He walked into downtown Nineveh and said, probably not that loudly, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Wouldn’t you know it, they listened! The whole city was converted by Jonah’s eight-word sermon, from the king down to the cattle in the barns! Jonah was so angry.

The last chapter of the story is God’s lesson for Jonah. The lesson is, “Get over your prejudice toward the Ninevites, because I love them as much as I love you, even down to their animals.”

The whole book of Jonah is a parable. Jonah is a story told to make a point or to examine an important issue of faith. It’s not like the other prophetic books in style; it’s not really a historical account at all. It was written several centuries after the historical Jonah lived. The point it is making for the Jews is this: God loves everyone, foreigners or not. It’s an important lesson to learn in any time.

However, there are other lessons in the story. I think we have all found ourselves where Jonah is in our Scripture text. Not literally in the belly of a fish, but lost in despair, at the end of our rope, overwhelmed by life, clinging to a hope that is at best desperate. Several years ago, I was in the belly of the fish when I read a devotional in The Upper Room that was taken from this prayer of Jonah. The author pointed out the translation of verse 8 from the New International Version of the Bible (1984, not 2011): “Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”

She went on to say how she had held on to anger and resentment toward someone who had hurt her and ignored the grace that God was extending both to her and her enemy. When I read that devotional, I was going through a painful time personally, professionally, and spiritually. That verse hit me with the force of a storm at sea: “Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.” Could I be clinging to idols while God was offering me grace?

Jonah was talking about idols that were actual objects of worship back in his time. Today we have updated our idols, but we still worship them. There are physical idols, like wealth and possessions and career and sex and recreation and all those things that we put above God sometimes. And I don’t mean to minimize the threat of those kinds of idols. But the new insight for me that day in prayer was the existence of emotional and spiritual idols that keep us from experiencing the grace of God.

Anger, bitterness, resentment, jealousy, prejudice, hatred, grief—these are not idols that can sit on a shelf, but they can invade your heart and your soul and take the place of God. God wants us to turn loose of those destructive parts of our lives and receive his healing, but we hang on for dear life. We cling to our problems. We worship our pain. And we forfeit the grace that could be ours.

It’s not a new phenomenon. In the fourth century, a young man visited his spiritual mentor, a monk named Sisoes, at his hermitage in the desert. The young man blurted out, “I was hurt by my brother in Christ, and now I’m angry, and I want to avenge myself.” The old monk tried to comfort him, but he also gave him a gentle warning: "Don't do that, my child. Rather, leave vengeance to God."

But the young Christian refused to listen to his mentor. Instead, he became even angrier and said bitterly, "I will not quit until I get even!"

When Sisoes saw that reason alone wouldn't change the young man's heart, he quietly said, "Let us pray, brother." After a pause,
he offered the following prayer: "O God, apparently we no longer need you to take care of us since we can now avenge ourselves. From now on we can manage our own lives without your help."

When the young man heard this prayer, he immediately repented. Falling at his master’s feet, he cried out, "Have mercy on me. I am not going to fight my brother anymore."²

Clinging to our worthless idols—physical, emotional, spiritual—will get us nowhere. It will destroy us. God has a better plan, and it's called grace.

Grace is found in a relationship with God. Privately, we express this relationship in prayer. Publicly and corporately, we express it in worship. If you are in the grip of idolatry, pray and worship, and you will find God’s grace.

In the 1940’s, America was just beginning to break down the barriers of racial prejudice. Branch Rickey, the manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, was about to strike a blow against that idol by signing Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play major league professional baseball. But before Branch could find the courage he needed, he paid a visit to his pastor, Wendell Fifield. (Rickey, as well as Jackie Robinson, were Methodists.)

Rickey barged into the pastor’s study one afternoon and said, “Don’t let me interrupt. I just want to be here. Do you mind?” For forty-five minutes, the two men passed the time without words. Rev. Fifield continued his work, and Branch Rickey paced up and down in his office, pausing occasionally to look out the window.

Finally Rickey broke the silence by pounding on the pastor’s desk and shouting, “I’ve got it!”

"Got what, Branch?" the minister asked.

Rickey told his pastor, "This was so complex, fraught with so many pitfalls but filled with so much good, if it was right, that I just had to work it out in this room with you. I had to talk to God about it and be sure what he wanted me to do. I hope you don't mind.” He paused and then said, “Wendell, I’ve decided to sign Jackie Robinson.” As he left the room, he said, "Bless you, Wendell."³

When he announced that decision, one journalist told Rickey he believed “all hell would break loose.” Rickey replied, “I believe all heaven will rejoice.” He found the courage to make history through the grace of prayer.

A second way to find grace is through forgiveness. If you are clinging to the idol of anger, resentment, hostility, or bitterness over the blows you have been dealt, God offers forgiveness to you so you can offer forgiveness to others. If that emotional and spiritual pain has become a part of who you are, God says, “Turn it loose. Let it go. Find the grace of forgiveness.”

One of the most gripping photographs of the Vietnam War was the picture of a nine-year-old girl running naked down a dirt road, her body burning from the chemical agent called napalm. The little girl, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, was hospitalized for 14 months and had 17 surgeries to repair her skin. Despite the miraculous recovery, however, Kim was seldom free from pain and nightmares—and anger.

She said, "The anger inside me was like a hatred high as a mountain, and my bitterness was black as old coffee. I hated my life. I hated all people who were normal, because I was not normal. I wanted to die many times. Doctors helped heal my wounds, but they couldn't heal my heart."

As an adult, Kim found a Bible in a library and began reading the New Testament. She had many questions, since she was raised a Buddhist. Her brother-in-law knew a Christian, who talked with Kim and invited her to a Christmas service at his church.

The end of the service was a turning point in Kim’s life. "I could not wait to trust the Lord," Kim said. "[Jesus] helped me learn to forgive my enemies, and I finally had some peace in my heart. Now when I look at my scars or suffer pain, I’m thankful the Lord put his mark on my body to remind me that he is with me all the time."⁴

Grace comes to us through prayer and worship, through receiving and offering forgiveness, and by engaging in ministry. It’s easy to be consumed by your idols if that is all you ever think about. If you dwell on your pain, all you’re going to do is hurt. But if you get busy helping others, if you focus on using your gifts to do Kingdom work, the grief will go away, the bitterness will dissolve, and you will be happy again. Not immediately, and not
always completely. But your service in the ministry of Jesus Christ will be a grace for your life. And it will make a difference for somebody else.

Craig Groeschel is the founder and pastor of Life Church, who began ministry as a United Methodist pastor. (One that got away.) When Craig was a new believer he decided to wear a little cross pin on his shirt. He would buy a dozen at a time, and if anybody commented on the pin, he would give them the pin as a gift. One time in a convenience store, the clerk said something, and Craig tried to give her the pin. She refused at first, but finally accepted the gift.

Several years later, Craig was walking out of church one Sunday when a woman stopped him and said she had to thank him. Trembling as she spoke, she explained, "You probably don't remember me, but years ago you gave me this." She reached into her purse and pulled out the small cross pin. "When you offered me this cross, my life couldn't have been any worse. I didn't feel worthy of such a generous gift. But God showed me that he still loved me. My life is different today because of what you did for me."  

Sometimes we find ourselves stranded, lost, covered with slime in the belly of a fish, clinging to worthless idols. Some are physical. Some are emotional. Some are spiritual. God gives us grace to come out of that fish through prayer and worship, through forgiveness, and through service in ministry. Are you ready for that? Are you ready to breathe the fresh air of grace again?

Jonah was a runner. He ran from the grace of God. But God caught up with him.

Forrest Gump was a runner, too. If you read the book or remember the movie, running was something Forrest did throughout his life. He tore out of his leg braces as a child as he was running away from bullies. He ran the football for the University of Alabama, sometimes right out of the stadium. He ran through the jungles of Vietnam in the Army. Finally as an adult, Forrest ran across the country several times. According to the story, he crisscrossed America for over three years. Then, in the middle of the Utah desert, he stopped. A whole crowd of people was following Forrest, and they waited to see what word of wisdom he was going to say. He looked at his followers and said, “I’m pretty tired. I think I’ll go home now.” As he walked through the stunned crowd, his narrator’s voice said, “And just like that, my running days were over.”

Are you pretty tired of clinging to worthless idols, whatever that means in your own life? Are you pretty tired of forfeiting the grace that could be yours? Are you ready for your running days to be over? Are you ready to come home? Maybe today you can start that journey. Maybe today God has caught up with you.

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