

OUT OF THE DEPTHS
JONAH 1:17-2:10

Most of us want our lives and circumstances to be smooth, calm, predictable, trouble-free, and stress-free. We define a good *day* as one in which everything went according to plan and everything turned out as we hoped it would—a day in which we had very few problems, setbacks, delays, or obstacles. We define a good *year* as one in which we were healthy and prosperous; in which we had very few if any crises, traumas, or tragedies. And at the end of a good day or a good year it is not uncommon for us to say, “Thank you, Lord, for being so gracious!”

It is *not* so common for us to thank the Lord for being gracious at the end of a bad day or a bad year—days or years in which we encounter *lots* of troubles, traumas, or tragedies. We don’t tend to associate hard things or bad things with God’s grace, and when we encounter such things, we often pray, “Lord, be gracious by delivering me, and please do it ASAP.”

But I would suggest to you that God’s grace may be most abundantly lavished on us and most profoundly experienced by us at our lowest points, when we are in the *midst* of troubles, traumas, and tragedies. It is often when we are in the depths of despair that we discover the depths of God’s grace.

Scripture is replete with many examples of this. We are going to be looking at one in the Book of Jonah. Last week we left Jonah in a precarious situation. You’ll recall that he had received instructions from the LORD to go to Nineveh and preach against their wickedness. But, in protest, Jonah ran away from the LORD because he hated the treacherous Ninevites. He suspected that if he preached to them, they would be receptive to his message and repent of their sin, in which case God would be merciful and they would be saved. And Jonah did not want to participate in their salvation. He wanted them to be condemned.

But after boarding a ship to Tarshish, a city in the westernmost part of the Mediterranean world, God sent a huge storm that threatened to break up the ship. The sailors, unaware of Jonah’s flight from Yahweh, began praying to their gods and throwing cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone below deck where he laid down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain found him there and was incredulous, scolding him for his indifference and imploring him to pray to his God. As far as we know, he never did.

Desperate to find a solution to their worsening plight and fearing that divine wrath for the wrongdoing of one of the men on board was the reason for the fierce storm, the panicked sailors decided to cast lots to see who was responsible. The lot fell on Jonah. After a series of questions, he confessed that the storm was, indeed, his fault, and that the only way the storm would abate is to throw him overboard. Reluctantly, the sailors did so. The storm immediately subsided, and the sea became calm, prompting them to worship Yahweh, the God of Israel.

This is where we left off in the story of Jonah last time. We pick it up in chapter 1 **verse 17**. *17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

When Jonah was thrown overboard, he thought for sure he was plunging to his death. And as he floundered in the billowing sea, he must have been terrified, for there are few things more frightening than drowning in the open sea. But don’t think that when Jonah saw a massive fish approaching him with its mouth wide open that he exclaimed, “Oh wow! This is providential! And what timing! This big ol’ fish is my salvation!”

No! Jonah must have thought, “My sin must be *really* offensive to the LORD to warrant this kind of punishment!” For if there is one thing more frightening than drowning in the open sea, it’s being eaten alive by a wild animal.

Notice that it was Yahweh who “appointed” the fish. Not, necessarily, that He *created* the fish right then for the express purpose of saving Jonah (though He could have), but that He appointed this sea creature be at this particular place in the sea at the very time Jonah was thrown overboard, and that He compelled the fish to swallow him whole.

What kind of a fish this was, we can only speculate. Some have suggested a sperm whale, some a *dogfish* (the stomach of which is so large that the body of a man in armor was once found in it), and others a whale shark. A little more than a year ago (June 12, 2021), a commercial lobster diver named Michael Packard survived being swallowed by a humpback whale in forty-five feet of water off the coast of Cape Cod. While I suppose it would be nice to know what kind of fish it was, I'm quite sure that even if we *did* know it would not satisfactorily answer skeptics' questions as to how Jonah could survive inside its belly for three days and three nights.

Obviously, Jonah had to have oxygen so he could breathe, he had to have been protected from the acids in the fish's stomach, and he had to have been kept from being digested. Which means God not only did a miracle by providing the fish to swallow Jonah within seconds after he was thrown overboard; He performed a miracle by preserving him inside the fish.

But keep in mind that these are not the only miracles in this passage. God brought the great storm, God caused the lot to fall on Jonah, and when Jonah was thrown overboard, the storm stopped. To top it off, God opened the spiritual eyes of pagan sailors who, until that time, were idolaters because they were ignorant of Yahweh, the one, true God, convincing them to believe in Him and compelling them to worship Him. Why should we then be surprised when the text says that God "appointed" a "great fish" to swallow Jonah, or that he was preserved alive in its belly? Either God is fully capable of controlling all events in this world, or He is not. (Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion*. S. 548).

God is sovereign. God is all powerful. He can do whatever He pleases. Nothing is *impossible* for God, and nothing is too *hard* for Him.

That fact did not escape Jonah's notice. Jonah finally woke from his spiritual funk to appreciate what God had done. We read in chapter 2, **verses 1-2**. *¹Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ²saying, "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.*

In chapter 1 the captain of the ship asked Jonah to pray to his god, and Jonah remained silent (1:6). Here, for the first time in the story, Jonah speaks directly to Yahweh in response to his deliverance from drowning. He fully expected to die in the water, and he is amazed that God had delivered him in spite of his disobedience.

Verse 2 is the first stanza of a psalm of thanksgiving that Jonah composes while inside the fish. As we will see, the poem recounts Jonah's distress in the water and gives thanks for his rescue. But it begins with his cry for help. He uses two metaphors that are actually birthing images. The word translated, "distress", is a word that is specifically used of labor pains in childbirth. It signifies being tied up in a tight place, as when a child is distressed just before coming out of the birth canal. Likewise, the phrase, "out of the belly of Sheol," is a metaphor. Sheol is the place of the dead in the Old Testament, and so Jonah is conveying the idea of being re-born. Jonah is saying, "I was as good as dead, but I've been born again" (Bruckner, 70).

Verse 3.

³For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.

Jonah is describing his progressive descent into a watery grave. In verse 3, he is on the surface of the sea where he is helplessly being battered by currents and breaking waves. It is interesting that even though it was the *sailors* who threw Jonah overboard at *his* request, Jonah identifies Yahweh as ultimately the one responsible for doing it. "You cast me into the deep," Jonah says. Jonah recognizes that Yahweh created the perilous storm and orchestrated the circumstances that would inevitably lead to Jonah being thrown overboard. In other words, the sailors were following God's script—it was *His* plan.

He goes on in **verse 4**.

⁴Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'

In this, the third stanza, Jonah is alone in a vast expanse of sea, where he feels banished from God's presence. *Sight* should probably be translated, "presence," for it is a technical term for being in the temple, the place where Jonah had spent most of his days as a prophet. That interpretation is reinforced by the next line, "I shall again look upon your holy temple." In Hebrew poetry, this is called synonymous parallelism where the second line restates the first line in different words.

For the few seconds that Jonah was floundering in the sea, his whole life flashed before his eyes, and he was filled with regret. He finally came to the realization that his recent rebellion had nullified a lifetime of service to Yahweh. His celebrated service in the Temple—the most privileged place in the world to serve—was finished. His role as a spokesman for Yahweh—the most privileged vocation in the world—was over. The foolish choices he had made in the last few days would define his legacy.

But it is here, in this humiliating, desperate, and perilous circumstance that he looks to Yahweh for salvation. He realizes it is no longer possible to return to his place in the presence of Yahweh at the temple, but he *can* turn and *look upon* or *look toward* the holy temple. The same Hebrew word is used when the wandering people of Israel were dying of snakebite in the wilderness. At the Lord's instructions Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole, so that when anyone bitten by a snake *looked upon* it, they would live (Num. 21:9). Somehow Jonah feels that looking toward the temple will comfort him and provide some relief from his distress.

Verse 5.

*⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head*

In this stanza Jonah is engulfed and surrounded by water, and he's sinking to the bottom of the sea. It is a frightening descent because he's not just sinking in deep, dark water. Things living *in* the sea are rubbing against his skin and feel as though they are reaching out and grabbing him, trying to strangle him.

Verse 6. *⁶ 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.*

Jonah is anticipating that the sea floor will be his grave. "Bars" is a play on words, for it has two meanings in Hebrew. It can mean either "bars" on a prison cell, or "sand bars." Both meanings are relevant to Jonah's distress. He is about to be imprisoned forever in a grave of sand (Bruckner, 74). Yet he ends this verse with an emphatic declaration that summarizes his gratitude. He had sunk as low as he could go, but God brought him up from the pit. He was dying, but Yahweh rescued him.

And now, the refrain. **Verses 7-9.** *⁷ When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. ⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. ⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!*

I don't know how this refrain strikes you, but it creates some dissonance in me. Verse 7 is fine. That Jonah would cry out to the LORD in his desperation is altogether appropriate. Yet the content and tone of verses 8 and 9 seem a bit pious, self-congratulatory, and self-righteous.

I say that because Jonah is contrasting himself with idolaters, which are presumably the Philistine sailors and the Ninevites. His declaration that they "pay regard to vain idols" is intended to convey how displeasing they are to the LORD. But it's his statement that begins with, "But I..." that is most disturbing. He's comparing himself with unrighteous idolaters, and I detect an attitude of superiority. "I believe in the one, true God; I offer sacrifices to Him, I will keep my promises to Him."

The fact is chapter one revealed that the pagan sailors were *more* righteous than Jonah. They feared God; they cared about Jonah's fate; they tried everything they could to save him. On the other hand, Jonah had been faithless, reckless, defiant, and selfish. And why would Jonah even be *thinking* about idolaters while lying in the slimy belly of a fish with a bunch of kelp wrapped around his head?

Therefore, I have concluded that this psalm reflects Jonah's imperfect heart and distorted beliefs. It is his sincere attempt to praise God, but it is tainted with presumption and pride. It doesn't take a scholar to conclude that Jonah's words express profound self-centeredness. He uses the pronoun "I" ten times in eight verses. He also says "my" seven times.

Jonah's perceptions of reality are skewed and hypocritical. His declarations contradict his actions and attitudes in chapter 1. He is making vows but he is not repentant; he recalls his trust in Yahweh yet there has been little evidence of it; he uses a lot of dramatic and descriptive words for his own deliverance; but has only a few reticent words for the Ninevites and the sailors (Bruckner, 81). Jonah has not left his fundamental beliefs about idolaters, despite his encounter with exemplary sailors. Nor has he lost his convictions about the Ninevites being unworthy of God's grace and mercy. His basic beliefs have not changed, as we shall see later in the story.

In short, Jonah is both grateful and defiant. He will go to Nineveh because Yahweh has made it clear that he *must* go, but he will protest again later. This is an unresolved tension in the story. Jonah prays what he is capable of praying—and nothing more. God accepts the prayer for what it is: a stiff but sincere expression of thanks for not drowning. He uses formal poetry to express himself precisely *because* he is in the slime of the belly, going back to old familiar clichés and forms of psalms he knows by heart (Bruckner, 81).

Jonah has looked to God, and that is enough for his deliverance, because God unconditionally answers those who call out in distress, whether their issues are fully resolved or not. He accepts Jonah's thanks and saves him even though he still carries a lot of baggage.

How do I know? **Verse 10.** *¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.*

In the Old Testament, vomiting is typically a metaphor of judgment. But here it is a metaphor of salvation. Jonah is vomited by the grace of God.

In closing, let me identify a few principles from this passage. I already mentioned the first one. *Nothing is impossible with God, and nothing is too hard for Him.* As I said before, either God is fully capable of controlling all the events in the world, or He is not. And so, it is not difficult for me to believe that a fish swallowed Jonah and that he survived three days and nights in its belly. If God created the universe out of nothing by merely speaking a few words, this is easy. Besides, you need to know that Jesus believed this *literally* happened. He said, *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 (Matt. 12:40).*

Second, *many will not encounter the depth of God's grace until they are in the depths of despair.* We have a phrase in our culture that speaks of this: We call it "hitting rock bottom." It describes when you've finally come to the end of yourself, when you've run out of options, when you can do nothing to improve your lot—when you are utterly helpless. Though hitting rock bottom feels awful, it is only when some people hit rock bottom that they are compelled to look up and cry out to God for salvation. The Psalmist said,

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

² O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! (Psalm 130:1)

Someone else said it this way: *"You'll never know that Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you've got; and when Jesus is all you've got then you'll know that he's all you need."* God's grace is most abundantly lavished on us and most profoundly experienced by us when we are at our lowest. Which ought to impact the content of our prayers. When we have loved ones who don't know the Lord or who have drifted from the Lord or who are living in rebellion or disobedience to the Lord, it's a good idea to pray that they would hit rock bottom, for it may be their only hope.

Pray that God would help them understand the spiritually precarious position they are in, that He would bring them to the end of themselves, that they would see their desperate need for the Savior, and that they would cry out to Him from the depths. If that were to happen, even if they

experience temporary misery and despair and desperation, it would be the best thing that could happen to them.

The final principle I'd like to share from this passage is: *God doesn't wait until we "get it right" before He saves us. He comes to our rescue when we cry out to Him in desperation, even if we don't "have our act together."* Remember, the fundamental truth of Scripture is that salvation is the gift of an incredibly generous and gracious God and that He saves people who have done nothing to deserve it and who are incapable of earning it. It is given to people who simply call out to Him in their desperation and, because He is compassionate and merciful, He responds unconditionally. He doesn't require us to jump through hoops, or get our acts together, or even get rid of all our baggage. It's not that He is unconcerned about those things. He is! But He'll work on those later, just as He did for Jonah.

Let's close our time this morning with a song that could have been written about Jonah. "I Will Wait for You"

Out of the Depths
Jonah 1:17-2:10

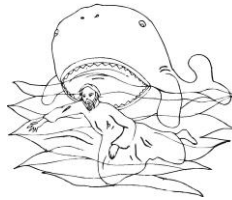
Main Idea: We discover the depth of God's grace when we are at our lowest.

What's eating Jonah? (1:17)

The deepest prayer ever prayed (2:1-9)

Jonah's near-death experience

A cry of desperation ((2)



Trouble on the surface (3)

Finally coming to his senses (4)

Spiraling down (5)

Hitting sandy bottom (6)

Jonah's refrain (7-9)

Eleventh hour conversion (7)

Not as bad as those guys (8)

Resolutions and conviction (9)

A dishonorable discharge (10)

Principles from Jonah 1:17-2:10

- Nothing is _____ with God and nothing is too _____ for Him.
- Many will not encounter the depths of God's _____ until they are in the depths of _____.
- God doesn't wait until we "get it right" before He saves us. He comes to our rescue when we _____ out to Him in our _____, even if we don't "have our act together".