

Salvation Belongs to the Lord: *De Profundis*

Jonah 1:16–2:10

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Now let me invite you to take your copies of God's holy Word in your hands and turn with me to the prophecy of Jonah. We're going to read from chapter 1 verse 17 through the end of the second chapter. You'll find that on page 774 in our church Bibles. Before we read, as always, let's go to God together as we pray. Let's pray.

O Lord, we confess how prone we are to be satisfied with gifts and not to be led by the gifts back to the Giver, to love blessings but not to delight ourselves in the Benefactor. Tonight we pray that You would take hold of our hearts in their inclination towards myopia and xenophobia and pride exclusivity and self-righteousness and expose them to Your grace so that we begin to change. We're like this old building sometimes; we try to keep the rain out. We pray that that would be futile, that the Holy Spirit would find a way in despite our best efforts, that You would begin to penetrate by Your Word to the transformation of every heart, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Jonah chapter 1 reading from verse 17. This is the Word of Almighty God:

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.

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

'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. For 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. Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' 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 mountain. 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. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who

pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!

And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken to us in His holy Word.

A Prophet on the Run and the Purposes of God

Monday of last week one of you sent me the following story that was just too good not to use. A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because even though it was a very large mammal its throat was very small. The little girl stated that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible. The little girl said, "When I get to heaven I'll ask Jonah!" The teacher said, "What if Jonah went to hell?" The little girl replied, "Well then you ask him!" [*Laughter*] Steady on!

Tonight we're looking at verse 17 of chapter 1 through verse 10 of chapter 2 of the book of Jonah. It is of course the curious incident of the prophet who became fish food. The sad truth is, almost the only part of the story of Jonah that people remember from its forty-seven verses are the three that mention the great fish that swallow him. As George Campbell Morgan once put it, "Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have missed the great God." And so with that exhortation in mind I don't propose to waste any time arguing about the historicity of the fish episode. The Bible declares it to be true. As Christians, we sit under the authority of the Word not over it as though we were authoritative on our own, and so we will receive it as it is, the very Word and truth of God. Our concern is to meet the God who met Jonah. It is He who comes to us in this text to confront us and arrest us and bring us to the end of ourselves as He did the prophet in our story, to bring us home in faith back to Him. So let's not miss the great God because we've been starrng overlong at the great fish.

Jonah, you will remember, has been on the run. He wants a way out of being God's prophet if being God's prophet means he has to go and preach to Nineveh. So he has fled, he says, from the presence of the Lord. It's a fool's errand, of course, running from God, but sin festering in a human heart can exhort an extraordinary power of self-deception. Jonah knows better than the try to flee from the everywhere-present God but he gives it his best shot anyway. But while on the run to Tarshish, his ship is overtaken by a terrible storm, much worse than the one swirling around us right now, sent we are told, hurled in fact, by God Himself who always takes perfect aim. And the Lord stops Jonah cold in his flights. And so as the crew, remember, the crew struggling valiantly against

the storm to try and rescue the sinking ship, they're throwing everything overboard trying to preserve lives, and once all other possibilities have been exhausted, they reluctantly obey Jonah's instructions and they cast the wayward prophet into the sea. Jonah sacrifices himself and they are saved. It seems as though Jonah has reached a turning point, he is beginning to have a change of heart, as at last he submits to the judgment he knows he has caused and secures the deliverance of these pagan sailors. Even if he runs from his calling it seems God is going to use Jonah one way or another to bring salvation to pagans. And so Jonah is thrown into the teeth of the storm.

And just as the waters close over his head and he sinks into the depths, God displays yet again His sovereignty over His creation and He sends not this time a great storm to overwhelm Jonah but a great fish to swallow Him. And in the belly of that great fish Jonah has something of an awakening. The psalm recorded in verses 1 to 9 of chapter 2 provides a window for us into the lessons the prophet has only begun to learn as a result of having sunk to this terrible extremity. Would you look at the passage with me? Jonah 1:17 to 2:10? I want you to notice three themes here with me. First, the merciful wrath of God's discipline, then secondly the missing note from Jonah's song, and then thirdly the mysterious ways of the Lord's salvation. The merciful wrath of God's discipline, the missing note from Jonah's song, and the mysterious ways of the Lord's salvation.

I. The Merciful Wrath of God's Discipline

First of all the merciful wrath of God's discipline. That phrase, "merciful wrath," was coined by Martin Luther to describe the sometimes severe work of God's fatherly discipline in the lives of His children. There are some diseases, aren't there, for which the cure at times can seem worse than the disease itself. And there are sometimes when a Christian can wander so far from the path of faithfulness to God, when the virus of rebellion has spread so vigorously through our spiritual system, that nothing but merciful wrath, wounding medicine, can affect the cure. Sometimes God must bring us to the end of ourselves before we are ready to turn back to Him. Like the prodigal son, remember him? It was not until he is found sitting in the muck, longing to eat the scraps that the pigs were eating that we're told "he came to himself" and then he began to make the journey home. That is what God is doing in Jonah's life. It is merciful wrath. It is spiritual chemotherapy on the cancer of his rebellion - hard, sore, necessary.

Look at the psalm that he sings in the belly of the great fish. Jonah is reflecting on the experience of being cast into the waves at the height of the storm. And he says that for him it was like coming face to face with death. In verse 1 he says he cried out "in the belly of Sheol." Sheol is the Hebrew term for the state or the realm or the condition of death. "That's where I was; that's what I was expecting. I felt I'd arrived in the realm of death itself." "The floods surrounded him," - verse 3. The waves and billows passed over him. The waters are crashing over his

head, “closing over him,” verse 5, to take his life. His head, he says, is “entangled in the weeds at the bottom of the sea.” He could feel his life, verse 7, “fainting away.” It’s a terrible, chilling, graphic depiction of a drowning man, of what it felt like to come to the end of your lungs filled with air, to see death’s jaws closing over you.

The Necessary Instrument the Father Will Use to Call You Back

And there’s a spiritual component to this too - verse 4, “Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight.’” He’d been trying to flee from the presence of the Lord, hadn’t he? Well now he knows what being away from God really feels like, as God drives him away, strips from him the awareness of His presence. In chapter 1 and verse 15 the sailors were the ones who hurled Jonah into the raging storm but look at verse 3 of chapter 2. Here’s how Jonah now reads what happened to him. “You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas. All your waves and your billows passed over me.” He knows now this is God’s storm and he’s sinking under God’s ocean because God hurled him here having driven him from His sight. The smile of the Father is gone. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” - Hebrews 10 and verse 31.

So here is Jonah sunk, verse 6, “to the roots of the mountain.” That is to say he has hit rock bottom literally and metaphorically and now at last in the depths of the ocean abyss the reluctant prophet finally, desperately, cries out to the Lord. Verse 1, “I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried.” Verse 7, “When my life was fainting away I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.” Finally Jonah turns back to the Lord. But do you see what it has taken to get through to him? Merciful wrath; wounding medicine. God made fish bait of Jonah not to destroy him but to deliver him, and deliver him not just from the storm threatening to shipwreck the vessel, but from the sin that was making shipwreck of his life. What a sober warning this is. Do not think that God will withhold the surgeon’s knife if you will not take steps to deal with the causes of your sin-sick heart. He will do what He must to preserve you and to keep you if you are His child. He loves you and He will plunge you into the abyss if need be to win you back. Do not make light of the Lord’s discipline. Do not presume upon His grace. Merciful wrath, wounding medicine, is sometimes necessary, a necessary instrument your Father will use to call you back. Let Jonah warn you not to flee from the presence of the Lord or at least never to try and make the attempt, for God may well give you what you want for a season and drive you from His sight until in the darkness and isolation of your own rebellion you’ve learned the hard way not to presume any longer upon His grace.

II. The Missing Note in Jonah’s Song

But then secondly notice not just merciful wrath but the song that Jonah sings

here with a missing note. Jonah isn't running from God now, is he? He has begun to cry to God at long last. In fact the psalm that we read in verses 1 to 9 of chapter 2, that's not the prayer he prayed when he was sinking into the depths drowning, thinking he was about to die. No, the psalm that we are reading here is the song Jonah sings in the belly of the fish that God prepared in advance to rescue him. This psalm is his meditation on that experience; his memorialization of his desperate prayer on the brink of drowning and its wonderful answer as God delivers him. "You answered me," verse 1, "you heard my voice. You brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God," verse 6. "But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you, what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!" verse 9. This is a song marked with wonderful gratitude and I'm sure no small degree of relief. He isn't drowning! He's going to live! God has done it! Praise the Lord! That is as it should be. Jonah models for us a grateful heart. We ought to mark answered prayer and it should fuel our praises. We ought to give expression to God with gratitude for the ways that He hears and answers us.

But there is something missing. Reading Jonah's song of praise here is like listening to someone play a perfectly tuned piano with one key missing from the keyboard. There's a good deal of beauty but there's one vital note that never sounds. It is the note of repentance. Jonah is changing, God is at work, but his change, like most changes, is gradual. It comes in fits and starts like the blind man. Remember him - Mark 8 verse 24 to whom Jesus restored his sight? At first when Jesus touched him he saw men looking like trees walking; his vision was still indistinct and blurry. Then Jesus touched him again and at last he was able to see fully. He saw everything clearly. That is how God often deals with us, isn't it? We're all in process. And some of His most important lessons, some of the deepest changes in our hearts and lives that is the fruit of His work, it comes in stages. And so it is with Jonah. He has come a long way from his unbending rebellion to this point as he sings out his worship in the belly of the great fish but he has not yet come far enough. The one note that needs to sound loudest and longest and clearest is missing altogether from his song. The xenophobia and prejudice that made him flee in the first place, his horror at the very idea of reaching the Ninevites and seeing them delivered from the wrath to come, it's a festering sore that still remains in his heart - unaddressed, unrepented of.

Persisting Prejudice and Self-Centeredness

Look at verses 8 and 9. "Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!" Of course his denunciation of idolatry there is perfectly orthodox, profound even. "Those who pay regard to idols forsake their hope of steadfast love" - that word, "steadfast love," is the Hebrew term "*hesed*." It means covenant love; loyal, faithful love; the redeeming love of God for His own chosen people. Idolaters, Jonah is correct in saying, have no share in the redeeming love of God. It's all true, but do notice

how Jonah sets himself up in contrast to the wicked idolaters. “They pay regard to worthless idols and they face God’s wrath and that’s the way it’s meant to me. But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You. Unlike them, you see, I know who God is.” There is a self-congratulatory note, a self-centeredness here that still persists. It clings to his heart tenaciously. Jonah’s whole problem has been in thinking that belonging to the people of God made you better than other people, made you more meritorious, more worthy than other people. He really believes he is superior to idolaters who don’t know the Lord. He may even be hinting here that God has saved him because he deserves to be saved. Certainly the rest of Jonah’s story bears out the point as we will see that he has not yet relinquished his fundamental rejection of God’s call on his life to go to Nineveh for its salvation. He thinks outsiders are beneath him.

Rebuking Scorn and Resounding Praise

And read in that light, the very last line of Jonah’s song, “Salvation belongs to the LORD!” drips with irony, doesn’t it? It really does sum up the message of the whole book of Jonah. Salvation belongs to the Lord; God will save sinners and recalcitrant, wayward prophets for that matter, where and when and however He chooses in sovereign love, omnipotent grace. But as Jonah breathes out these last words God causes the great fish to be sick to its stomach. Notice that? Verse 10 - it doesn’t “spit him out”; that’s not the language. He “vomits Jonah onto dry land.” Jonah’s song is nauseating, literally. His hypocrisy may not stick in his own throat but it certainly sticks in the throat of the great fish. We are all in process like Jonah, it’s true. God isn’t finished with him yet; praise God He’s not finished with us yet either. But I do think we should take the exposé of Jonah’s hypocrisy here for the rebuke it’s intended to be. Is the Lord putting His finger on some area of inconsistency in your Christian walk, some place where you say one thing and do the other, some dimension of your thinking where you use orthodox words to cover selfish, prideful attitudes? Do you still struggle with the xenophobia and racism that festered in Jonah’s heart? He is a prophet of God, a preacher of the Word sent to Nineveh, and he can only think of the pagans with disdain. The church is a missionary society, you know. The church is a missionary society. We are sent to the nations. We’ve been hearing about a trip to Peru already; we’ll hear more later. Sent to the nations. Our reason for existing is to bring glory to God and extend His praise from shore to shore. It is to reach “the other” with the Gospel of grace, not to keep it to ourselves but to give it away. There is no excuse, Jonah’s story is reminding us, for superiority complexes among the people of God; no excuse.

An Imperfect, Yet Answered Prayer

But do notice before we move on that the prayer Jonah prayed as he sank into the sea was still a prayer God answered. With all its imperfections, all its sin even, God heard and answered. That is part of the wonder of the story, isn’t it? One of the big lessons to learn here is not just how God is at work in Jonah’s sin-

sick heart but it is the display that we have of the Lord's extraordinary gracious heart. Jonah turns to God for rescue; he doesn't turn yet in repentance. In fact the whole book of Jonah comes to a conclusion as we'll see eventually, God willing, and we're still not really sure if Jonah repents. His heart hasn't changed as he prays and God condescends to hear him anyway. Jonah is a hard-hearted, stubborn man. He's sinking into the ocean. The waves wrap around his head. His life faints away. He feels like he is entering Sheol himself and he still doesn't think to himself, "You know, maybe the Lord's trying to get my attention here. Maybe there's something I should be learning." No, he simply asks God to save him and He does. Here's the grace and compassion of the Lord even when our prayers are so hypocritical they would make a great fish sick - the Lord hears our cries and He answers us. That is stunning. The great fish threw up as Jonah prayed but God answered when Jonah prayed. God loves to answer the cries of His messed up, broken down, wrong-headed children so cry to Him and flee to Him and pour out your heart to Him. He will hear you. And praise the Lord that that is true.

III. The Mysterious Ways of the Lord's Salvation

The God who pursues us in merciful wrath, Jonah's song with the missing note, and then finally the salvation the Lord gives in mysterious ways. Let me circle back around and think again with you about the great fish as we close. Chapter 1 verse 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." God appointed the fish before Jonah came on board ship at Joppa, before Jonah decided to flee from the presence of the Lord to Tarshish, before ever he had heard the call of God to go to Nineveh in the first place, God had ordained and prepared the fish that would rescue him. Salvation really does belong to the Lord. Before Jonah was aware of what would happen, God had already made provision for his deliverance. God's salvation is His sovereign gift, prepared and provided long before we ever even knew we needed or wanted it. "God has demonstrated his love for us in this, in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." We can't throw God a curve ball. There are no unexpected eventualities in your life for which His grace is unprepared. Did you hear that? There are no unexpected eventualities for which His grace is unprepared; none! Jesus is a perfect Savior to sinners no matter the pattern and contours of your particular sin. He is suitable to us, Hebrews says, shaped perfectly to our need. Salvation belongs to the Lord and He has provided in Jesus, prepared a Savior in advance for us in Jesus.

Pointing to a Greater and Better Jonah

Jonah's sojourn in the fish for three days and three nights, Jesus said, is itself a pointer to that truth. In Matthew 12:38 we read, "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Jesus saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.' But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign. No

sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it for they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And behold, something greater than Jonah is here.” Reluctant Jonah’s stay in the belly of the great fish was a pointer, Jesus is saying, to the one who came willingly to save the lost, who really did descend all the way down to death itself, to gladly make Ninevites and pagans like me and you into true worshipers of the living God. It is one of the greatest ironies, I think, of the book of Jonah, that the fish is a Savior, that the runaway prophet is a type of Christ. God gives His salvation in mysterious ways. He puts His Son on a cross. He puts His Son on a cross! He hurls Him into death that by such means we might live. Jonah preaches the Gospel to us, doesn’t it? And so as we face the hypocrisy of our own hearts, exposed in the mirror of Jonah’s life perhaps, we need to turn to the greater than Jonah to whom Jonah’s story points us. We need to turn to Jesus Christ because He is a Savior suitable to us, one who meets our need, one who is able to save to the uttermost all who come to God by Him, and He can make us clean.

May the Lord bless to us the ministry of His Word. Will you bow your heads with me as we pray?

Our Father, many of us tonight are perhaps subject to merciful wrath, to wounding medicine, as we try and work and labor to bring us back. Please save us from Jonah’s mistake that as we finally begin to cry to You, let our cry, our deepest, longest, loudest cry, be a cry of repentance as we forsake the sin that necessitated Your fatherly discipline. Have mercy on us and restore us and renew us and give to us the grace of repentance. Help us to flee to the greater than Jonah that we may know His cleansing grace and marvelous love. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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