

Sin Stinks - A Psalm of Descent (Jonah 1:17-2:6)

The old pastor in the book *Moby Dick* ‘had been a sailor and a harpooneer in his youth, but for many years past had dedicated his life to the ministry ... on either hand of the pulpit, the wall which formed its back was adorned with a large painting representing a gallant ship beating against a terrible storm off a lee coast of black rocks and snowy breakers ... [the pulpit’s] panelled front was in the likeness of a ship’s bluff bows, and the Holy Bible rested on a projecting piece of scroll work, fashioned after a ship... What could be more full of meaning?—for the pulpit is ever this earth’s foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world... the bow must bear the earliest brunt. ... every eye on the preacher. He paused a little; then kneeling in the pulpit’s bows, folded his large brown hands across his chest, uplifted his closed eyes, and offered a prayer so deeply devout that he seemed kneeling and praying at the bottom of the sea.

This ended, in prolonged solemn tones, like the continual tolling of a bell in a ship that is foundering at sea in a fog—in such tones he commenced reading the following hymn; but changing his manner towards the concluding stanzas, burst forth with a pealing exultation and joy—

“...I saw the opening maw of hell, With endless pains and sorrows there;
Which none but they that feel can tell—Oh, I was plunging to despair.
In black distress, I called my God, When I could scarce believe Him mine,
He bowed his ear to my complaints—No more the whale did me confine.
...My song for ever shall record, That terrible, that joyful hour;
I give the glory to my God, His all the mercy and the power.”

Nearly all joined in singing this hymn, which swelled high above the howling of the storm. A brief pause ensued; the preacher slowly turned over the leaves of the Bible, and at last, folding his hand down upon the proper page, said: “Beloved shipmates [turn to] the last verse of the first chapter of Jonah – ‘*And God had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.*’”

“Shipmates, this book [Jonah], containing only four chapters—four yarns—is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures. Yet what depths of the soul does Jonah’s deep sealine sound! What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet! What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish’s belly! How billow-like and boisterously grand! We feel the floods surging over us; we sound with him to the kelpy bottom of the waters; seaweed and all the slime of the sea is about us!

But what is this lesson that the book of Jonah teaches? Shipmates, it is a two-stranded lesson; a lesson to us all ... because it is a story of the sin, hard-heartedness, suddenly awakened fears, the swift punishment, repentance, prayers, and finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah.’

Those are the words of Herman Melville in his classic book. I want to read now from the inspired book of Jonah, his canticle or song in the fish's belly. Jonah 2:1, this is God's inerrant infallible Word: *Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' ⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head 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.*

I'm calling this a psalm of descent, it's the opposite of the Psalms of Ascent. If you're a note-taker we'll see 1. the setting, 2. the sin, 3. the Savior's love

1. **First, Jonah's Setting**

1:17 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. Then Jonah prayed...

Chapter 1 begins with the Lord ordaining Jonah to ministry in Nineveh, but when Jonah runs from God the chapter ends with the Lord ordaining a fish. This isn't the first or last time God used an animal to get a message across. He'll do it again in chapter 4, with a worm. In the prodigal son story in the NT, God uses pigs and the stench of being with them to awaken the son to his need to return from his stinking sin to his father's love, and God does it with Jonah here in an animal I'm sure smelled worse. God spoke before by animals to get the attention of a prophet going the wrong way. The prophet Balaam also rebelled against the Lord's will and God spoke to him through his donkey. And God speaks again through an animal to Jonah who's acting like a donkey. God gets the attention of this stubborn man by His creature.

And God still speaks today through this to stubborn men who rebel against God's Word. Mockers say a talking donkey must be a fairy tale with ogres. Jonah's story is laughed off as the stuff of Disneyland rides: men entering a whale (Hebrew can be whale or fish). They find it fishy and hard to swallow

100-some years ago critics of the Bible scoffed no man could be swallowed alive by a whale as its throat is too small. But later in history critics had to eat their words: whale skeletons big enough to eat critics came to museums.

In 1941 a man crawled through a big whale's gullet all the way to the belly, and he said famously in the *New Yorker* 'It was a pretty slimy trip, but there was plenty of room.'¹ James Boice writes that the skeptic's 'objection arose from a failure to distinguish between the Greenland whale...the whale best known to seamen of an earlier generation, and the sperm whale or cachalot, which...feeds largely on squid, which are often much larger than a man. Whalers have sometimes found whole squid of this size in a dead whale...'²

There's a story from 1891 of a man supposedly surviving being swallowed alive, but closer research by conservatives has actually proved it a fish tale,³ an urban legend (ocean legend). We shouldn't use that and we don't need it for our faith. If science says there's no natural way man can breathe in a fish 3 days, it's ok. This is supernatural. Where there's God's will there's a way. This is God's doing, v. 17 NKJV He *prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah*.

God specially prepared a special fish for a special occasion. One writer says He can 'appoint or raise up or create any sea creature He willed to swallow up Jonah! He could create an animal that allowed for a person to remain alive inside it. Or He could keep a person alive inside an existing animal.'⁴

The scientist Henry Morris wrote in his *Defender's Study Bible* the big fish 'could have been...a large whale shark or possibly some now extinct marine reptile...[or] a special marine animal created by God just for this purpose. The whole event is recorded as a miracle, and was so quoted by Christ...so it is a mistake to attempt to explain it as a purely natural phenomenon.'

It's one thing to know a man could fit in a sea creature, but surviving 3 days doesn't fit what we know of sea creatures today. Just like the seas don't stop raging today when you throw a guy overboard (1:15). Just like today the red sea doesn't part for men to cross on dry land. I take it by faith, not by sight. Jonah 1 isn't what we see happen; that's the point! This isn't 'mother nature' or a common natural occurrence, God the Father supernaturally ordained it!

If critics object 'but v. 17 doesn't or can't happen naturally,' I can agree! If they say 'that's impossible,' I don't have to argue with them, because the impossible is what my God specializes in! So I read Jonah 1 like Genesis 1. Both chapters are in the same Hebrew historical narrative. Jonah 1 uses a lot of the same language of Genesis 1. If you believe God created the heavens and the earth, the sea and all its creatures in 6 days, it's easy to believe God could do what Jonah 1 says He did with one of His creatures for just 3 days.

I don't need science to prove creation or this story even if it could. God says it; that settles it. Period! Whether or not you or I believe it, whether or not scholars say creation could happen in 6 days or man can be in a fish 3 days. We don't bow to science in Jonah 1 and we shouldn't bow to it in Genesis 1 or in Luke 1. A virgin conception, Jesus living inside Mary without a father biologically; the same scientists say that's as impossible as Jonah living in a fish biologically. But the angel Gabriel said *nothing is impossible with God* (Lk 1:37). It's the same in Acts 1, the resurrected Lord ascending to the sky.

One day...Pharisees came to Jesus and said 'Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign to prove your authority.' But Jesus replied, 'Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign...the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth...' (Mt 12:38-40 NLT). That settles it, it's just as the NT miracle of Jesus rising from the dead after 3 days in a grave (which again, the same scientists say couldn't happen anymore than Jonah's 3-day stay in a great fish's belly). But Jesus saw that as history and as an analogy to another miraculous sign that Jonah's death-like experience points us to. If Jesus says it, that settles it period. This is the setting, literal historical setting

But let's move from Jonah's setting (v. 1) to Jonah's sin (v. 2-5)

The focus of the text isn't on what's scientifically going on inside a fish, it's what's spiritually going on inside Jonah. Jonah has a lot of time to think on his sin, not only rebellion and running from God's Word, his racism toward Ninevites. The deep darkness inside Jonah is confronted by darkness inside a great fish. If he won't see the stench of his sin, God will make him smell it for 3 days and 3 nights. Jonah's cold heart now feels a colder home. God hates racism and loves all nations and wants His people to show love to all nations. God shows Jonah how disgusting and distasteful his sin is to God.

Think of how much smaller fish stink on the outside across a marketplace. How much must a huge fish stink on the inside? And you soaking in other dead fish and decomposing seafood. If your nostrils ever burned from vomit undigested food and stomach acid, that's a taste of what Jonah must have been in for 72 hours until v. 10 when the great fish vomits out the sinner. The gastrointestinal juices may have burned his eyes so the utter darkness is even blacker, and you don't have to be claustrophobic to fear the cramped quarters he was in, like falling headfirst in a narrow pit you can't get out of. Jonah feels physically externally what his sin is doing spiritually internally.

In the start of chapter 1, we might wonder ‘what’s eating Jonah?’ His sin of hate and bitterness was eating him on the inside, like acid that destroys what it’s in. But now in the end of chapter 1, what’s eating Jonah is a great fish that he’s now inside, swallowed whole and maybe on the outside his flesh starts to experience destructive processes from stomach acid. Jonah feels for the first time the effects of his rebellion till he finally prays for God’s mercy

Is it any wonder in v. 2 Jonah describes this experience as ‘*distress*’? 2nd half of v. 2 in the KJV calls it ‘*the belly of hell*’? The Hebrew word *Sheol* is just their word for death, but often with a negative connotation. He wasn’t literally in hell, but it must have felt like a living hell. Maybe at first Jonah wondered if he was in hell after he died for his sin. But at some point in v. 2 he realized he was alive and he called out to God this ‘belly prayer.’ In the despair of his soul he cries from the depths of Sheol, or what John Bunyan calls a place ‘of despond’ or what Anne Shirley calls ‘the depths of despair.’

v. 3 remembers ‘*the deep...the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me...*’ He thinks back on when they first threw him into the depths of the sea. He was in deep without a paddle, he’s flooded literally and at the end of the verse he talks about waves and breakers that took him down as he was thrown overboard. And beyond just the physical, this is his poetical spiritual journey, in deep water, his heart is overwhelmed. I’m sure he’s flooded with waves of emotions passing over him and he’s sure he’s about to pass away. He’s in over his head literally, dying, drowning, sinking, all because of sin.

⁴ *Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight...’* He feels forsaken by God who he feels no longer looks at him because of his sin. It’s as if God is driving Jonah down to the depths of Sheol so the sinner will be out of sight. It’s as if he descended to hell in the sense of where there’s separation from God. Jonah feels he’s dying for his sin. ⁵ *The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head*

He’s surrounded, everything’s closing in on him, seaweed around his face. The book *Les Miserables* paints a similar picture: ‘He hurls cries of despair into the depths...He is in the monstrous deep. There is nothing beneath his feet but the yielding, fleeing element. The waves, torn and scattered by the wind, close around him hideously, the rolling abyss bears him away; tatters of water are flying around his head; a populace of waves spit on him; vague openings half swallow him; each time he sinks he glimpses...precipices full of dark; frightful unknown tendrils seize him, bind...and draw him down;

he feels he is becoming the great deep; he is part of the foam... he drinks in bitterness; the voracious ocean is eager to devour...billows overwhelm...he is alone in the terrible gloom of the abyss; he sinks, he strains, he struggles, feels beneath himself invisible shadowy monsters; he screams. Men are gone. Where is God? He screams...Help! ... He screams over and over.’⁵

² *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.'* I take v. 2 as him calling out for mercy in distress, crying out for grace in the *Sheol* he knows he deserves. Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, was the message of the prophets of Jonah's generation. This was a prayer in faith, I believe, because it says God answered, God heard and preserved his life.

I think v. 4 also shows Jonah's faith and his turning from his sin as he says *'yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'* That was the place of God's presence in Jerusalem in OT times and that was what Jonah had turned his back from in chapter 1, trying to flee God's presence. But now he turns back in faith, he looks back believing he'll live again to God's presence, the place of sacrifice and atonement for sin. I take this chapter as Jonah turning from his sin and trusting the truth of 1 Kings 8 about praying toward the temple:

'When Your people...have sinned against You, and when they turn back to You and confess Your name, and pray...then hear...forgive...and bring them back to the land ... whatever supplication is made by anyone...[who] knows the plague of his own heart ... forgive, and act...[it mentions even far away from the land of Israel, across the seas] when they come to themselves and repent...and pray to You toward their land...and the temple ... forgive Your people who have sinned against You...and grant them compassion... that they may have compassion on them [their enemies] that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God' (1 Kgs 8:33-39, 48-50, 60 NKJV)

Jonah 2 echoes much of that language and the whole book exemplifies that. But first Jonah had to be brought down low where he had nowhere to look but up: 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...* Note he calls Him *my God* and this psalm of descent turns to ascent, rising. In v. 6 he'd hit rock bottom. You can't go any lower than roots of mountains on the ocean floor, but Jonah says poetically he went down even lower *'to the land whose bars closed upon me forever...'* that's another way to say the gates of death, or the prison bars of Sheol, or 'down to Davy Jones' locker.'

Jonah felt like he was in no man's land never to return, locked behind bars. 'Davy Jones' locker' is a phrase from Moby Dick and other 1800s novels like *Treasure Island* and Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*.⁶ Dictionaries say it means 'the bottom of the sea, especially the grave of those drowned at sea' (*Concise Oxford English*). I found interesting an 1898 *Dictionary of Phrase* says 'Jones is a corruption of Jonah, the prophet, who was thrown into the sea. Locker, in seaman's phrase, means any receptacle for private store...'⁷ Dead men go there and tell no tales, but one man as good as dead, v. 6 says his life was brought up from the pit, with a tale to tell of a savior's love. The end of v. 6 says: '*yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.*'

And this takes us from Jonah's sin in v. 2-5 to his savior's love in v. 6

In the depth of the pit God's love reaches down to this undeserving sinner. As Corrie ten Boom said in *The Hiding Place*: 'there is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still.' Jonah was in the deepest and darkest pit but God, he says in v. 6 '*but You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God*' (NASB). It's like Eph 2:4 after describing us in the pit of sin, in the depths of depravity and deadness spiritually, '*but God...because of his great love...made us alive...*' It's like Rom 5 says '*while we were still helpless... But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*' (v. 6, 8 NASB). v. 6 is salvation psalm language:
 -Ps 49:15 '*But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol...*'
 -Ps 30:3 '*O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit.*'

I was sinking deep in sin, Far from the peaceful shore,
 Very deeply stained within, Sinking to rise no more;
 But the Master of the sea Heard my despairing cry,
 From the waters lifted me, Now safe am I.

Love lifted me![2x] When nothing else could help [God's] love lifted me.

The great miracle in this chapter isn't the sea creature, it's the Savior's love. And it's God's love that takes us to rock bottom to lift us up as we look up. We need to look higher than Jonah's deliverance to the greater deliverance of Jesus who went through the belly of the hell of God's wrath on the cross. He actually went to Sheol for 3 days. He cried out to God in greater distress but was not answered. He was cast into a deeper darker pit, surrounded not by crushing waves, but crushed by the fury of God's anger toward sin. Jesus not only felt like He was out of God's sight like v. 4, the Father did turn His face away from His Son bearing sin that God hates. This is the Savior's love

The same word 'pit' in v. 6 is used of Christ in Ps 16:10, where David spoke of Messiah who God would not leave in the pit or forsake His soul in *Sheol*. Jesus on the cross cried the words of another psalm about being forsaken by God, Jesus suffered the pit of hell, but the bars of death couldn't hold Him. And for those who repent like Jonah, He redeems our life from the pit and crowns us with His love and compassion so we can show that to others. We don't look to the temple in Jerusalem anymore, we look to Jesus who is the temple in the NT for Christians. God's presence, sacrifice, and atonement is all in Christ, and His mercy is for all who call out to Him in faith. If you see your sin for the stinking wretchedness it is and trust Him alone, He forgives. Sin stinks but there's sweet grace. If life is in the pits of despair, there's hope

Sin and despair like the sea waves cold, Threaten the soul with infinite loss;
 Grace that is greater, yes, grace untold, Points to the Refuge, the mighty cross...
 Grace that will pardon and cleanse within...Grace that is greater than all our sin.

We sing, sin 'had led me to the grave. I had no hope that you would own a rebel to your will, if you had not loved me first, I would refuse you still...as I ran my hell-bound race, indifferent...you looked upon my helpless state... I beheld God's love displayed, [Christ] suffered in my place, He bore the wrath deserved for me, now all I know is grace.' Jonah was running from God in chapter 1, he was indifferent to those around him, his sin led to a watery grave, he felt he was hell-bound, this rebel had no hope, *but God* looked on his helpless state and loved him first so Jonah could love back.

If you're going through a deep dark time, may this encourage you there's no pit or place so deep or dark where God's love is not deeper still, as Corrie ten Boom wrote, even in a concentration camp. Even in the prison of a great fish, the Savior's love is there. The application in v. 9 '*voice of thanksgiving*' isn't based on circumstances, we're thankful *Salvation belongs to the LORD!*

¹ *The New Yorker*, May 31, 1941, p. 9.

² James Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 1:283.

³ <http://www.reasons.org/articles/a-modern-jonah>

⁴ Eric Redmond, in *Exalting Jesus in Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, p. 22-23.

⁵ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, volume 1, chapter 8, "The waters and the shadow."

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Davy_Jones%27_Locker

⁷ <http://www.bartleby.com/81/4705.html>