

Jonah

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1:3a ESV)

And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. (Jonah 4:2 ESV)

And the Lord said, “Do you do well to be angry?” (Jonah 4:4 ESV)

And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11 ESV)

Marvelling at Mercy

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Jonah 1:17-2:10

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Introduction:

Good morning! Turn with me in your Bibles to Jonah chapter 2.

As you turn to our text, I want to very quickly address the whale in the room.

The Whale in the Room

Let me go ahead and make my confession: I am an educated, 21st century man and I testify this morning that I genuinely believe that a man named Jonah was swallowed by a big fish. I believe that he lived in the belly of that fish for three days after which he was spat out onto the shore so that he could preach to the city of Nineveh.

And I know that your unbelieving neighbours would point at this story as an example of how BLIND and RIDICULOUS our faith is. To be candid: I can *understand* why they might feel that way. We could easily remove this whale in the room if we just conceded that this story was an allegory or a parable and that it was never meant to be taken literally.

But we can't go that route, at least not if we want to read our Bibles that way that Jesus taught us to. In Matthew 12, we read about an exchange that took place between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." ³⁹ But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ **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.** ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (Matthew 12:38-42 ESV)

Jesus references the story of Jonah as *history*. He speaks of the great fish and the Ninevites in the same breath as Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. According to Jesus, Jonah was not a fictional character. He was three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish, after which he emerged from the depths and called on a wicked generation to repent.

So, there are some liberal scholars who are certain that this story *must* be an example of allegory, and there are some scientific scholars who are convinced that we *must* find a plausible explanation for how Jonah could have survived such an event, but that's not the posture we are going to adopt as we approach this text. We're going to read this story in the same way that Jesus read this story.

It happened. And to be clear: IT WAS A MIRACLE! It was a miracle that pointed forward to an even GREATER MIRACLE – the miracle of the resurrection!

God created the universe with a word. He is not a slave to its rules and limitations – He is the author of them! So, if Jesus says that Jonah lived in the belly of a fish for three days, then that is enough for me. If that's enough for you too, then I want to invite you to check your disbelief at the door, and to lean in to learn what God would teach us in this story because, as I said last week, this is not a story about a fish. This is a story about MERCY.

Look with me now, beginning in Jonah 1:17 and reading all the way through to the end of chapter 2. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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.

2 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.

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!”

¹⁰ And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. (Jonah 1:17-2:10 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

We left off last week with Jonah – the rebellious, reluctant prophet – sinking into the sea. He had been assigned to warn the city of Nineveh of God’s impending judgement. But Nineveh was one of the prominent cities in the Assyrian empire – an empire that utilized terrorist tactics to inspire

fear in the hearts of Jonah's people – an empire that taxed the Israelites and that made their lives miserable. They were a people who – in Jonah's eyes – did not deserve mercy.

Before we go any further, let's take a minute to define that word. Counsellor Mark McMinn gives this brief but helpful definition:

Mercy is a particular sort of kindness; mercy is **kindness to those who do not deserve it.**¹

That's a good definition and it brings us to the heart of this story. Jonah was running from God because he did not want the people of Nineveh to receive a kindness that they did not deserve. Jonah was running from God because he resented God's mercy. So, God made Jonah sit in a fish for three days on a divinely appointed time out so that he could gain some perspective on how AMAZING it is that we serve a merciful God!

To that end, let's read this Psalm and let's join Jonah in marvelling at mercy.

Marvelling at Mercy

In the belly of a whale, at the bottom of the sea, after a fit of rebellion, Jonah felt like he had disqualified himself from receiving the kindness of God. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt like you had done too much? Failed too frequently? Fallen too far? In this text, we find an example of what it looks like when a child of God cries out from the depths. And it is there, in that place of utter despair, that Jonah is finally helped to see how incredible God's mercy is. The first thing that Jonah marvels at is that:

1. God hears

Look again at verse 2:

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. (Jonah 2:2 ESV)

¹ Mark R. McMinn, *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling: An Integrative Paradigm* (InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition), 58.

Sometimes, in our apathy and our rebellion, we can lose sight of the wonder that God hears us. Who are we that God should care? David wrestled with this same question:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him? (Psalm 8:3-4 ESV)

David asks: “Why on earth does the God who hung the stars care about me AT ALL?” And Jonah had all the more reason to marvel at that mystery.

Here is a man who brazenly disregarded and disobeyed God’s clear command. Here is a man who had the audacity to say to his Maker, “No. I’m going to go my own way.” Here is a man who was willing to let an entire city perish with calloused disregard. Here is a man who was able to lie down for a nap while his crewmates fought for their lives. THIS man – this wicked, rebellious, disobedient man – only after he had plummeted to the most desperate of situations, finally cried out to God.

Some of you have been there. You’ve sat on the bathroom floor looking at a positive pregnancy test wondering what you’re going to say to your family. You’ve woken up with a splitting headache in a place you didn’t recognize with no recollection of what happened the night before. You’ve stared at the screen in an empty house knowing full well that your addiction was going to cost you your family. Some of you have been to that place – that seemingly unlovable place – that place where you felt like you couldn’t possibly be any further removed from the presence of God.

Jonah was in that place. He was surrounded by absolute darkness. Seaweed was wrapped around his head. He was devoid of hope. But there, in his distress, he cried out to God. As one commentator notes:

Jonah had delayed his prayer until it seemed too late for prayer.²

Was it too late? Is it ever too late? When we are at the end of ourselves and we cry out to God, does He look down and say, “*Now* you want to talk? *Now* you want my help?”

² Joyce Baldwin, Thomas Edward McComiskey ed. *The Minor Prophets - Volume Two – A Commentary on Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 569.

In desperation, Jonah cried out.

And God heard him.

That's the first thing that we learn in this prayer from the depths, and if you learn nothing else this morning then please take this in: God hears. Even when we don't deserve to have His ear. Even when we feel like a worm. He hears.

Second, Jonah went on to marvel that:

2. God disciplines

One of the reasons – humanly speaking – why Jonah was capable of such hard-headed indifference to the people around him was because he was filled with pride. He had convinced himself that he was doing what was right. It didn't matter that God's word said the exact opposite of what he was feeling. It didn't matter that his choices were leaving a trail of hurt and destruction in their wake. Jonah had positioned himself over and above God.

That's what sin is. Sin is an obstinate heart proclaiming that it knows better than God.

As we saw last week, Jonah had noble excuses to justify his rebellion. Assyria was wicked. Assyria was hurting people. Assyria did not deserve a warning. And if God could not see that for Himself then Jonah would take matters into his own hands. It is a sinful, prideful heart that dares to correct God.

But take note: God loves you too much to allow you to follow your pride into self-destruction. Look with me at verse 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. (Jonah 2:3 ESV)

Who cast Jonah into the deep? According to Jonah, it wasn't the sailors that threw him overboard. *God* cast him into the deep. Likewise, the waves and the billows belong to God, and they passed over Jonah at God's instruction. H.A. Ironside wisely observes here that:

A man is a long way on the road to recovery when he is ready to own the righteousness of his chastening, and when he sees that he is under the hand of God.³

A man who is at the end of himself is thankful to be under the discipline of God, because he has witnessed the futility of his own ways. When we are standing over the mess that we've made we are well positioned to understand that God's discipline is a mercy. As we read in Hebrews 12:6:

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives. (Hebrews 12:6 ESV)

Of course, not all adversity is the result of discipline. Sometimes we face trials as a test of our faith. Sometimes we face trials to loosen our grip on worldly things and to heighten our anticipation of glory. Sometimes we face trials for reasons that we won't ever understand in this life. But it is often the case that our trials come as a rod of discipline from our Heavenly Father who loves us. It is often the case that our pains are like a barbed-wire fence positioned just before the edge of the cliff alerting us that we are a step away from disaster.

Such was the case for Jonah. And He was thankful. God's discipline was mercy. Jonah marvelled at the God who cared enough to intervene. But not only does God hear, and not only does He discipline, but Jonah marvels here at the fact that:

3. God restores

Look with me at verse 4:

Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.' (Jonah 2:4 ESV)

³ H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, (New York, NY: Bible Truth Depot, 1928), 206.

The word that Jonah uses here for “driven” is the same word that is used in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve were “driven” out of the garden of Eden. As he descended deeper and deeper into the depths, Jonah was struck by the relational nature of his sin. His rebellion had caused a rupture in his relationship with God.

And that, in fact, is the very worst thing that your sin does. It separates you from the God who made you.

The irony here is that Jonah WANTED to separate himself from God. Do you remember why he fled to Tarshish in the first place? Look back to verse 3 of chapter 1:

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish **from the presence of the Lord.** (Jonah 1:3a ESV)

You see, that’s the thing about our sin. We convince ourselves that God is the OBSTACLE to the life that we desire, and we do everything that we can to flee from Him.

But it is a terrible thing to open your eyes and realize that you are separated from the Living God. It is a fearful thing to realize that you have positioned yourself as an enemy to the Author of heaven and earth. It is a sorrowful thing to realize that you have been cast out of the presence of your Heavenly Father.

In the depth of his despair, Jonah sensed the rift that his sin had created. But he also believed that the mercy of God would somehow bridge the great chasm. From the belly of the fish, Jonah could declare: “I shall again look upon your holy temple.”

THAT is a prayer of faith. No matter how deep you have sunk into your sin. No matter how far removed you feel you have become from God. If you call upon his name in faith, there is RESTORATION for you. As Peter preached in his great sermon at Pentecost:

And it shall come to pass that **everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.** (Acts 2:21 ESV)

EVERYONE who calls upon His name shall be saved. There is salvation for the drug addict. There is salvation for the hypocrite. There is salvation for the coward. There is salvation for the thief, for the murderer, for the child-abuser, for the terrorist – EVERY-SINGLE-ONE who calls upon the name of the Lord will be restored!

Does that mercy feel a bit too radical – a bit too scandalous to you? It felt that way to Jonah too, remember? He was in the fish because he didn't think that God's extension of mercy to Nineveh was fair. But here, under the weight of his own sin, the scandal of mercy looks like really, really good news! It looks like the kind of news that can deliver a man from death to life. And that's the final thing that Jonah marvels at in this psalm. Because of His great mercy God hears, God disciplines, God restores and finally:

4. God revives

Look again at verses 5-6:

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; (Jonah 2:5-6a ESV)

We don't know how deep into the sea Jonah sank before he was swallowed up. It is likely that Jonah wouldn't know either. The trauma of a near-drowning experience combined with being consumed by a giant fish would have almost certainly caused Jonah to faint. At some point, he regained consciousness. He was covered in seaweed. The darkness inside the fish in the depth of the sea would have been unlike any darkness that Jonah had ever experienced. He would have been wondering, "Am I dead? Is this Sheol?"

Therefore, Jonah doesn't use language that describes being rescued from a fish – he uses language that describes a rescue from death itself. Remember, in verse 2, he declared:

out of **the belly of Sheol** I cried,
and you heard my voice. (Jonah 2:2 ESV)

Jonah understood himself to be in the realm of the dead. In verse 6, he describes the bars as having closed him in forever. When the fish spat him up onto dry land, Jonah saw himself as one who had been to death and back again.

And that, in fact, is exactly the way that the New Testament describes our plight as sinners.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1 ESV)

DEAD! Not deceived. Not misguided. Not wayward. The Bible describes men and women who are living in separation from God as dead. Apart from God, we are as hopeless as Jonah – trapped in darkness descending to the roots of the mountains.

We don't need a reformation. We don't need a reorientation. We need a REVIVAL!

That's part of the reason why it is often not until a person has hit rock bottom before their eyes are finally opened to see their plight. Jonah didn't understand the danger when he was fleeing from God to Joppa. He didn't see his depravity when he climbed into the boat. He didn't comprehend his desperate plight when he was sleeping in the cargo hold. But, from the belly of the beast he finally came to realize that he was a dead man who needed revival!

And, thankfully, our God is a God who brings dead men to life! Jonah goes on to proclaim:

yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O Lord my God.
⁷ When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple. (Jonah 2:6b-7 ESV)

Jonah declares: "You are the God of revival!"

In the same way, the Apostle Paul goes on to proclaim in that passage we read from Ephesians:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, **made us alive together with Christ** (Ephesians 2:4-5a ESV)

Jonah was a sinner. Jonah was a rebel. Jonah deserved to be separated from the presence of God forever. Jonah deserved to sink down into the abyss. The gates of Sheol rightfully closed behind him, and they never should have opened.

But GOD!

But God is rich in mercy! But God possesses a great love! But God extends an incomprehensible grace! But God is in the business of scooping dead sinners up out of the pit and of launching us into the world as trophies of His kindness!

Jonah deserved hell but God sent a fish to preserve his life. He allowed Jonah to come to the end of himself, and then he brought his prophet out from the pit of death back to engage with his mission.

¹⁰ And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. (Jonah 2:10 ESV)

Thus, chapter 2 concludes with a chastened prophet, brought from death to life, marvelling afresh at the mercy of God.

Conclusion

But I can't finish a sermon on Jonah 2 without making one final observation.

Here's the thing: In two weeks – spoiler alert – we are going to see that Jonah never really learned his lesson. Even after this traumatic experience and this fresh reminder of how we ALL need the mercy of God, Jonah still had no mercy in his heart for Nineveh. When they repented, he wanted to DIE.

And here's another crazy thing: Nineveh's repentance didn't even last! Assyria returned to her prideful ways and God ultimately sent the Babylonians to supplant her as the global power.

So, the prophet didn't learn his lesson, the Ninevites didn't learn their lesson, and everybody died.

So, what was the point?

According to Jesus, the story of Jonah was like a neon sign pointing forward to something greater. Do you remember what Jesus said? Let's end where we began this morning. In Matthew 12, Jesus said:

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. ⁴¹ 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. (Matthew 12:40-41 ESV)

What a wonder it must have been for the people of Nineveh when Jonah – a man who had been to the realm of the dead and back again – walked their streets and called on them to repent. But, as Jesus tells us in Matthew 12, the people of Nineveh saw NOTHING in comparison to what we have seen! Jonah sank to the depths of the sea, but Jesus descended into death itself! For three days Jesus was in the grave. But on the third day, he stepped out of his tomb with the keys of death and hades firmly in his grip! And he's bringing dead hearts to life! And he's bringing lost souls to repentance!

And unlike Jonah, Jesus calls to us with a heart that is FULL of mercy! He offers a kindness that none of us deserve, and he DELIGHTS to save sinners! I love this old quote:

There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us.⁴

Truly, something greater than Jonah is here!

You can have resurrection life today because there is a savior who suffered death for you! He descended into the depths *for you* and he will meet you in the depths *so as to lift you out!* Unlike Jonah, who was willing to die so that his enemies would face the justice they deserved, Jesus died

⁴ Richard Sibbes as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Prayer That Turns The World Upside Down*, (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 89.

so that his enemies could be set FREE from the justice they deserved! I was one of those enemies!
And so were you! We all were! But, as the Apostle Paul writes:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, **made us alive together with Christ** (Ephesians 2:4-5a ESV)

Are you at the end of yourself? Good. There is no better place to learn about the mercy of God.

He is overflowing with a kindness that you do not deserve. Cry out to Him, and marvel with Jonah that God hears, and He disciplines, and He restores, and He revives! This is who He is. This is how He loves. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.