



3 | JONAH 2:1-10

A FISH AND A PRAYER

Everything in the life, including the greatest pressures and the greatest delights are God's gracious chisels that conforms us into the image of Christ and bring us the highest joy that can be experienced in God alone.

Outline

1. THE GRACE OF DIFFICULTY (2:1-2)

Difficulty Leads Us to Supplication
Difficulty Leads Us to Surrender
Difficulty Leads Us to Singing

2. THE GRACE OF DETACHMENT (2:3-7)

God's Providence in Our Solitude
God's Word in Our Solitude
God's Faithfulness in Our Solitude
God's Mercy in Our Solitude
God's Presence in Our Solitude

3. THE GRACE OF DELIVERANCE (2:8-10)

Delivered from Idols
Delivered for Steadfast Love
Delivered for Sacrifice
Delivered through Salvation
Delivered to Nineveh

Call to Worship

We see the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the depths of the sea. ²⁵For he speaks, and the winds rise, stirring up the waves. ²⁶Our ship mounts up to heaven; it goes down to the depths... ²⁸Then we cried to the Lord in our trouble, and he delivered us from our distress. ²⁹He makes the storm to be still, and he hushes the waves of the sea. ³⁰Then we were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought us to our desired haven. ³¹Let us thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! — Psalm 107:24-31

Songs

Lord, I Need You

What a Friend We Have in Jesus

Sweet Hour of Prayer

Speak O Lord

Give Me Jesus

Announcements

WELCOME: We are glad you are here! Be sure to grab a Welcome Packet if you are visiting with us.

Introduction

In 1972 **Joan Baez was a popular singer** and activist who was always working on a cause. During the Vietnam War, she traveled to the capital city of Hanoi with a peace delegation and was there during an American **bombing campaign that lasted 12 days**. She heard the explosions, saw the devastation, and was frightened to her core. She recalls that she learned to pray there.

We spent the whole time in the basement of our hotel. I have never been so afraid in my life. I thought I was going to die. But I learned something—when the flames start coming towards you everyone starts praying, even the atheists and the agnostics, but when the flames start fading away, we all go back to the structures and beliefs that we had before.¹
—Joan Baez, Hanoi, Vietnam (1972)

Even Joan Baez is no atheist in a warzone. We are going to see in Jonah how **God is not impressed** by the rote, mechanical and meaningless words that come from a cold heart. He has to take him to a place of complete vulnerability, **like a warzone at the bottom of the sea**. He wants us to talk to him like a needy child. He tests us through hardships and trains us in humble supplication through difficulties. Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish.

Before us is the story of how Jonah had to be stripped of comfort, all security, and all his prejudices, at least for this moment. With this deep stripping of his life, he was able to feel and know the presence of God like never before. This is Jonah's "undone" moment. Remember Isaiah's words.

Isaiah 6:5 | Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!

God's pursuit of you may come in the form of a great fish for Jonah, but for you it is a **tragedy, a life-changing trauma, a betrayal, or a trial that won't go away**. You are exhausted. But are you broken? Are you surrendered? God brings us to a point in our life to know him. Maybe you feel like **God is being silent**. Sometimes the people who suffer the most often feel God's silence the most. They feel abandoned.

Precious child of God, **you may feel so blinded by your suffering**, you may feel numb to God. Don't miss what God is doing. He's calling on you to **trust in him**. Lean not to your own understanding (Pro 3:5-6). He wants your **full surrender**.

God doesn't hide from us. We hide from God. C.S. Lewis in his book *Miracles*, reminds us that God never hides, but he is waiting for us to return to him. Lewis describes it as a game of cosmic hide and seek. We inwardly are hoping we don't find him. Suddenly, we sense someone or something breathing. He says God is not some impersonal silent object, but the living, breathing designer of everything about you:

"Look out!" we cry, "it's alive." ... Supposing we really found him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing he had found us?²

You may be angry. You feel God is hiding. What if you do find God, or more correctly, he finds you? To know him, first you must be stripped of everything.

Jonah preached about the God eloquently to the people of Israel, but his greatest encounter with God is in the belly of a fish. What we find is that **the fish that strips Jonah of everything**, even the hope of life itself, is actually an act of the **most precious, gracious provision of God**.

¹ David Watson, *Called & Committed* (Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, IL; 1982), 83.

² C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 124–125.

A FISH CALLED GRACE

In the life of Jonah, we find out that he's been thrown overboard by the Phoenician sailors. They've been **converted** and are **worshipping** and **praying and offering sacrifices** to the Lord of creation. Jonah surely thinks he is going to die in the sea. He is abandoned in the midst of the fierce and stormy Mediterranean Sea. And yet, he is not abandoned. God appoints a whale to swallow Jonah in order to save him from drowning. The **great fish looks scary** and strips Jonah of everything but is actually a vessel of God's grace!

Jonah 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.

The story of Jonah may sound outlandish at first, and we ask the important question: can a story like this be true? Is it even possible for a man to live inside a whale? On one hand, there shouldn't be much debate for the child of God since **our God is the God of miracles**. This event could have happened either way since God can suspend the laws of science to make his point to his prophet.

The Massive Size of Sea Creatures

Scientifically speaking, a human can survive in the belly of a fish, and it has actually happened in recent history. It is not impossible to survive in a whale. A sulphur-bottom whale and a whale shark have no teeth. They feed by submerging their lower jaw and straining out the water, swallowing any food. At one time, a one-hundred-foot Sulphur Bottom whale was captured off the coast of Cape Cod. The mouth was about twelve feet wide, big enough to swallow a horse. These kinds of whales have four to six compartments in their stomachs. A man could find lodging in any one of these compartments. In the head of this whale is a wonderful air storage chamber. It is an enlargement of the nasal sinus passage measuring seven feet high, seven feet wide, and fourteen feet long. If the whale has an unwelcome guest, giving him headaches, he swims to land and rids of his offenders.³

Sailor James Barley

In February 1891, sailor James Barley and another sailor went missing as they capsized while harpooning sperm whales. The whale was found and put to death, and its blubber removed. The next day its stomach was hoisted onto the deck, and inside was sailor **James Bartley**, who was unconscious but shockingly alive. After being revived, he resumed his duties aboard his ship.⁴ There is no debate as to whether this is possible since we have the first-hand account of this in recent history.

The Bleached Sailor

Ambrose John Wilson (in 1927) wrote about a case of a whaling ship sailor near the Falklands who was swallowed by a large sperm whale. Later the whale was harpooned and when it was cut open on deck, the surprised crew found their lost shipmate unconscious in its belly. Although the sailor had been **bleached by the whale's gastric juices**, the deathly looking whiteness never left his face, neck and hands.⁵

An Ancient Jonah Seal

Not only that, but we have also more than the biblical account recording Jonah's episode with the fish. There is a seal of the ring belonging to the reign of **Amasis II of Egypt** (570–526 B.C.) that shows with

³ Rod Mattoon, *Treasures from Jonah*, Treasures from Scripture Series (Springfield, IL: Rod Mattoon, 2003), 62–63.

⁴ Richard D. Phillips, *Jonah & Micah*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 65.

⁵ Ambrose John Wilson, *Princeton Theological Review*, vol 25 (1927), 636.

remarkable clarity **a man emerging from a whale**. The figure has been identified by the archeologist who discovered it as Jonah.⁶

Not About the Work Inside the Whale but Jonah

Now we **don't want to spend so much time** focusing on **what happened inside this fish**. Our text focuses on **what happened inside Jonah!** Jonah had turned and ran from the presence of the Lord, but the Lord would not turn from Jonah. Instead, he sent a fish after Jonah. Here we meet a fish called grace! God used this great difficulty to do good to Jonah and to the population of Nineveh. Our difficulties and trials in life are an expression of the grace of God because they make us stronger as believers.

Jonah is not praying at all in chapter 1. God puts him in a situation now where he has to pray. It happens to be in the belly of a great fish. God's gracious nature toward Jonah is intent on turning this stubborn man to a tender man. If you work your way through Jonah's prayer, you notice **something happening inside Jonah. His heart is changing**.

Key Thought: Everything in the life, including the greatest pressures and the greatest delights are God's gracious chisels that conforms us into the image of Christ and bring us the highest joy that can be experienced in God alone.

1. THE GRACE OF DIFFICULTY (2:1-2)

Jonah was curved inward. Martin Luther once said that man is hopeless without Christ for a very clear reason.

Man is "incurvatus in se" (Latin for "bent/curved inward toward oneself.")—Martin Luther⁷

He said this even before we had smartphones and tablets. It takes a great fish swallowing Jonah, but we finally see the prophet has **stopped running, stopped sinking self and is praying to God**. Jonah begins to pray. When he hits the water, he recognizes he is in serious trouble. He's stripped of everything, and this frees him to begin to pray. Jonah is in the middle of the Mediterranean, and he is at the express mercy of God.⁸

Maybe you find yourself there right now. You've been running from God, if you are honest. **Suddenly life has gone dark**. Let me ask you, what's your whale? What is it that is crushing you and bringing you to see your need of Christ? Realize that God is in charge of the great fish (and small fish) in your life. Embrace God's sovereignty and do as Jonah did: pray.

DIFFICULTY LEADS US TO SUPPLICATION

Jonah 2:1 | Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish.

The place of prayer. There was Jonah in the belly of the fish. He was no longer ignoring God's call. God gave him a **foam blubber mattress. Slimy. Dark. Gloomy. He had to be afraid**. Surely, he was tempted to despair. But instead of despair, difficulty sends Jonah to prayer, like it does most of us. Jonah had been running from God, enjoying his comfort zone. Difficulty is a wonderful tool from God to get Jonah back on track. What is it that is revealing your deep weakness, your powerlessness, your total inability to change your circumstances? Don't get bitter. **This place of suffering is the blessing** that brings you to God in prayer.

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 284, cf Frank Knight, *Nile and the Jordan* (London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1921).

⁷ Martin Luther in Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 88.

⁸ Redmond, *Exalting Jesus in Jonah*, Jon 2:1–10.

The breakthrough of prayer. So much is **happening inside Jonah** that wasn't possible when he was comfortable in his town near Nazareth. How long had it been since Jonah had opened his heart to God? How long since he had prayed, really, from the depths of his soul? As far as we can tell, **praying is not something he had done** since we first met him exiting from **Samaria near Nazareth** on his way to Joppa. Throughout the whole storm sequence of chapter 1, everybody is praying except Jonah. **In chapter 2, every single word of Jonah's is a prayer.** Jonah knew God heard him before the answer came. This shows that Jonah had faith and that God can give us a total peace and assurance that our prayers are answered, even before the actual answer comes.⁹

DIFFICULTY LEADS US TO SURRENDER

God heard Jonah's prayer. In the prophet's distress, he had a confidence in God's mercy and compassion, that God had heard his prayer.

Jonah 2:2a | I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me.

It takes a near death experience for Jonah to surrender. **He's tumbling down, down, down, to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea.** Tangled in seaweed, light is dissipating, and darkness is growing. He's going to die, but suddenly, a fish called grace engulfs him.

Not sure where he is, **he feels the cavity of his new home.** Slime and muscle are all around. He can hear the sound of a faint drum that has the rhythm of a heartbeat. He is able to breathe. How is he breathing under the sea?

"I'm alive!" he must've thought. Hope rises in a heart that was despairing. Though **so close to death, Jonah suddenly feels more alive** spiritually than perhaps ever in his life. In this grave of the fish's belly, it seems his faith has been renewed. As it is with God's true children, like a baby cries, the child of God prays. **Jonah cannot help but to pray.** It is often when everything is stripped away that we surrender.

As Jonah prays, we hear what is already in his heart. We hear someone well acquainted with the Bible and with the Psalms in particular. Jonah is convinced that this fish is actually not a punishment, but a deliverance. He could have been swallowed up by the sea and dead on the bottom of the Mediterranean. But instead, we are introduced to a fish called grace. This awful place inside the fish is actually a salvation and deliverance for Jonah. With one foot already in the grave, he calls out to the Lord in surrender, and the Lord listens.

This wasn't just some "hail Mary" prayer. This was a true plea of surrender to the God of mercy and grace. We know that "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (Jas 4:6). God doesn't listen to the proud, but only to those who come in childlike humility. Jonah was crushed. He surrendered in broken humility. And that's a good thing for every child of God.

DIFFICULTY LEADS US TO SINGING

Jonah 2:2b | Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

Jonah is peering into Sheol, to what he really deserves: the grave, and even worse, eternal punishment. We find out later he begins quoting the Psalms. He's likely singing the Psalms! Suddenly he realizes that this fish surrounding him is not a prison, but a salvation. God is with him, and this is God's way of teaching Jonah, as verse 9 says: that **"salvation comes from the Lord."**

For Jonah, this **unusual salvation is something to sing about.** It's clear that he's singing not only because of his constant reference to the **Psalms**, but also because his prayer is structured like **the Hebrew hymnody in the Psalter.** A study of Jonah's prayer will show allusions or references to Psalms 3, 5, 16, 18, 31, 40, 42, 50, 65, 73, 88, and 120.¹⁰ The whole **perspective of the psalms**—on God and man, life and

⁹ David Guzik, *Jonah*, David Guzik's Commentaries on the Bible (Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik, 2000), Jon 2:1–2.

¹⁰ Richard D. Phillips, *Jonah & Micah*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 76.

death, despair and hope, fear, and faith—is **with God there is always hope**. No matter where you are, God can bring beauty from ashes. He can redeem anyone from any hopeless circumstance.

As a prophet he is well acquainted with the Psalms, and as he is crushed inside the blubber of the whale, he prays and sings to God with a Psalm. What he is going to say is that this trial results in his salvation, a deliverance from the loving heart of the Lord. This fish crushes Jonah's self-dependance to pieces, and Jonah surrenders in an outburst of prayer with singing. Listen to his prayer.

Jonah 2:2 | 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.

This is the introduction to Jonah's Psalm or hymn. "I'm crushed, I'm calling, and **God is answering**." In other words, "God is with me. He heard my voice. He hasn't abandoned me." There is a confidence that God is with Jonah and that he hears him. Jonah not only understands the omnipresence of the Lord, he experiences it. "I'm in the belly of the fish, distressed, but God is with me, and he hears me." That's something to sing about.

Jonah's in the belly of the fish, and he is able to have something all the green pastures of Galilee couldn't give him. His heart and mind are now less consumed with his comfort on earth and now consumed with his destiny for eternity. Jonah says that he calls to God from the belly of "**Sheol**" which is a reference to **the grave**. **He's saying he's as good as dead!** And yet he is **not abandoned there**. God has not cut him off but graciously hears his cry. That's something to sing about.

Are you in a place of difficulty? **One good exercise is to write a hymn or psalm of lament to God**. Take Jonah's prayer and place yourself in it. Make it personal. Write it out to God. God will hear you. You may also want to make sure you have a good diet of Christian music. Secular music can be beautiful, but it is often very self-focuses and even depressing. Find some **good worship music** and give your burdens to the Lord. Sing! Pray! God hears you.

2. THE GRACE OF DETACHMENT (2:3-7)

Jonah is cast into the deep. He's detached from normal life and completely alone. It's just him and the great fish, and fish don't like to make a great amount of conversation! We should be careful about solitude if it keeps us from the body of Christ, but often during times when God wants to bring great change to us, God will put you in a time of solitude with large segments of time when you are alone. God uses this time for you to get to know him. For Jonah, he was sinking to the bottom of the sea, and God sent a fish to remake Jonah into a tender, humble, attentive prophet.

God did this for me in November 2018 when a Ford F-350 hit my vehicle from behind and pushed me into oncoming traffic. I had a major concussion that required that I be alone in the dark most of the time to give my brain time to heal. It was a time of deep wrestling with God for me.

GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN OUR SOLITUDE

God's presence meets us in our mess, wherever we are. He begins to quote **Psalm 88:6**. "You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep."

Jonah 2:3a | For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me.

God is sovereign over our mess. The **fish** that swallowed Jonah was not arbitrary but **sent by God himself**. The first thing Jonah says is, "You cast me in to the deep." God appointed the fish to swallow Jonah (1:17). Jonah realizes that it was not the sailors that cast him into the sea, it was God himself. Jonah sees that he has never been out of God's hands, though he tried to run from him.

When we think of God's promise to sanctify us, it means that **God will go to whatever lengths are necessary to do it**. He who began the work in you is committed to completing it in you (Phil 1:6). We are predestined to be conformed to Christ's likeness (Rom 8:29). Whatever it takes! That means, first, that God meets us in our mess.

That is why he comes to the young prodigal in the **pigsty**, and he meets him there (Lk 15:11–24). That is why he comes to Jonah in the **stomach** of the fish, and he meets him there. Both are in stinking situations, literally. The prodigal is surrounded by pigs, and Jonah is engulfed in the very gut of this large fish. And both in the pigsty and in the fish's stomach, God was coming to meet them, to clean them up, and to restore them to his glorious purposes.

GOD'S WORD IN OUR SOLITUDE

God's word steadies us in our solitude. Don't miss this. Jonah begins to quote the Psalms. Sometimes we are laid up and don't even have access to a Bible, but we've treasured God's word in our heart. **As the waves washed over Jonah, so the word also washed over him.**

Jonah 2:3b | All your waves and your billows passed over me.

As Jonah realizes God's presence, he throws himself on the foundation of God's word as he quotes **Psalms 42:7**, "all your waves and your billows passed over me" (cf 2:3a). He knows other saints have been where he is. When we are in a mess, God's Spirit reminds us of the treasure of God's word we have stored up.

It's ironic that Jonah's prayer shows that he is well-acquainted with the beautiful truths from the psalms, yet he appears not to have grasped their applications.¹¹ Like so many of us as believers, it is far easier to memorize the Bible and its truths than to live them out. It's usually in our mess that we begin to really hold strongly to the word of God and see its steadying effect on our lives.

God's word is the only meaningful cure for sin. God's word alone can transform you into the image of Christ, from one level of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18). Psychology cannot help us. At times psychology can indicate something is wrong, but so superficially. Listen to the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The most experienced psychologist or observer of human nature knows infinitely less of the human heart than the simplest Christian who lives beneath the Cross of Jesus. The greatest psychological insight, ability, and experience cannot grasp this one thing: what sin is. Worldly wisdom knows what distress and weakness and failure are, but it does not know the godlessness of man. And so, it also does not know that man is destroyed only by his sin and can be healed only by forgiveness. Only the Christian knows this. In the presence of a psychiatrist, I can only be a sick man; in the presence of a Christian brother I can dare to be a forgiven, growing sinner.¹² —Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The word of God alone is sufficient to not only get you loving God but hating sin because you "taste and see" and experience that God alone is good. God alone is like **a filet mignon steak compared to the roadkill of sin**. When Jonah is stripped of everything, he's able to see and savor the Lord through his word.

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN OUR SOLITUDE

God's faithful reputation calms us in our mess. If you could hear Jonah in chapter 2, you would hear melody and rhyme and rhythm. This is **a glorious poem, packed solid with God's word in the Psalms** with **promises of God's faithfulness**.

¹¹ Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah*, ed. Daniel I. Block, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 105.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 95.

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

Jonah's prayer is filled with Scripture, this time quoting **Psalm 31:22**, "I am cut off from your sight." There is a place in the Christian life, when we feel "driven away from God's presence." We sinned again. A tragedy or trauma has happened. A child has gone astray. A part of your life is cut off. A relationship is in turmoil. You are suffering. This is where we need to have hope that God will show up. God is faithful. Yes, hear it again. God is faithful! He began a good work in you, and he will complete it (Phil 1:6).

Jonah knows God's faithfulness through his word. We cannot get hope outside of the word of God. It is through **God's word, his exceeding great and glorious promises!**

2 Peter 1:4 | He has granted to us his precious and precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

Change does not occur apart from resting in the faithfulness of God through his word. He feels "driven away from God's sight," yet he has hope that comes from God himself.

Jonah's greatest fear, to be driven away and exiled from God's nurture and care, is met with faith. Though he is in the belly of the great fish, and it feels like he is truly "cut off" from God's sight and care, yet, he has faith that he shall yet look again upon God in his temple.

Joni Eareckson Tada said, "God permits what he hates to bring to pass what he loves."¹³

God hates the paralysis of your child or of you. He hates that divorce you had to endure. There is the diagnosis of a birth disorder, or the distinct loss of a burn victim, or a life given for decades to addiction or immorality. **Dreams are shattered** for us, our children, our future. God's heart is broken over these things. Yet God permits these sufferings and sins so that people, in their weakness, in their suffering, and yes, in their sin can find the hope of Christ! God is in the redeeming business. God's power is displayed in our weakness (cf 2 Cor 4:7).

God can make it where there is a distinct beauty that would not happen without that brokenness. Some of you have a distinct glory over your life because God, in your life, brought beauty out of ashes. We think those ashes are unredeemable. God wants to bring beauty from ashes.

When our feelings tell us one thing (we are cut off from God), Jonah teaches us that **we must preach to ourselves.** He had a sure expectation that he would see the Lord's glory at his temple in Jerusalem. He refers to **Psalm 73:17** about his hope of seeing God again in his sanctuary, his **holy temple.** He chose not to "lean to his own understanding" but to acknowledge the Lord through the hope of his word (Pro 3:5-6). God promises that neither our sin nor our circumstances will ever cut us off from his grace. Indeed, nothing can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39). God's faithfulness is something that can calm us as we realize he commands our steps and our destiny.

GOD'S MERCY IN OUR SOLITUDE

Jonah's choices were disastrous. **He describes how he was headed straight for death.** The bars of death were closing in on him. The fish does not show up as soon as Jonah hits the water. In cartoon versions of this scene a huge fish opens its mouth and Jonah jumps right in with an Olympic diver's precision. That is not true to what happens here. Instead, Jonah hits the water, and the Lord allows him to sink awhile so that he might grasp the seriousness of the consequences of his choices.¹⁴ Listen to Jonah's recollection.

¹³ Joni Eareckson Tada, "God Permits What He Hates," *International Disability Center* (Joni and Friends, January 31, 2014), <http://registration.joniandfriends.org/radio/4-minute/god-permits-what-he-hates2/>.

¹⁴ Eric Redmond, William Curtis, and Ken Fentress, *Exalting Jesus in Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 30.

Jonah 2:5-6 | The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head⁶ 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.

The **waters** close in on Jonah. He remembers how he hit the water and headed straight for death. It is **the mercy of God that pretty much resurrects him**. Before the fish swallowed Jonah, the Lord allowed him **to sink awhile** so that he might grasp the seriousness of the consequences of his choices.¹⁵ **Has the Lord allowed you to sink?** Are you grasping his mercy in this time? The descent and humiliation of the child of God are never a result of God's wrath, but his mercy. He's the surgeon cutting out the cancer. He's the trainer putting the weights on you to make you stronger. He's the eagle pushing you out of the nest and into the air so you can fly.

The **weeds** close in on Jonah and wrap around his head. Look at Jonah's horrifying description of his descent to the bottom of the Mediterranean. He personifies the waters like a wrestler who was strangling the life out of him. The **seaweed** has him in a headlock (2:5). Surrounded on every side, Jonah is a prisoner of the sea.¹⁶

The **grave** closes in on Jonah. Jonah goes as deep as you can go, "to the roots of the mountains" (2:6a) to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. Jonah looks at the **bottom of the sea as a prison** "whose bars closed upon [him] forever" (2:6b). **Death has him and will not let him go**. But then something wonderful happens. Jonah testifies that even **in his most desperate time, God in grace was pursuing him**.

The **grace** of God closes in on Jonah. God in mercy pursues him (Psa 23:6). Listen to Jonah's testimony, "Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God" (2:6c). The fish acted as Jonah's rescue boat! He's again singing—this time Psalm 40.

Psalm 40:2 | He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock.

Though he is in the slimy belly of the whale, Jonah praises God that he is not dead, but that he's very much alive. **The fish rescued him** from being **buried at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea**. Jonah, in a sense, was brought back to life from the pit. It reminds me of what Paul says in Ephesians.

Ephesians 2:4-5 | 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—by grace you have been saved.

In salvation, God makes us alive when he regenerates us by the Holy Spirit. He also does this throughout our walk of sanctification. Whenever we stray from the Lord, we die a death, and God brings us to repentance and to experience the Holy Spirit's resurrection power anew and afresh. **No Christian can live comfortably in a life dominated by sin**. "Sin will have no dominion over you" (Rom 6:14a). **God will send his great fish for his children as they are sinking down**. God brings his children closer during their times of suffering and trial. He recovers his children from a life of sin and selfishness. He draws us near, even if the trials and suffering are painful.

GOD'S PRESENCE IN OUR SOLITUDE

Jonah 2:7 | When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Donald J. Wiseman, T. Desmond Alexander, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 26, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 127.

How ironic that Jonah is able to sense the overwhelming presence of God, **not in Israel**, not with his people, not in his ministry, but on **the bottom of the floor of the Mediterranean Sea**. Remember this is Jonah praying before the fish came. In response to Jonah's prayer, God sends the fish! Be careful how you pray. Deliverance for us is often the belly of a fish. Are you ready to pray like Jonah? "Lord, deliver me whatever it takes." That's a wonderful way to pray. God will deliver you. It is **in this darkest, most detached of places that Jonah communes with God**. He has no strength, and God's power rests upon him in his weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

Jonah was all alone at the bottom of the sea, and that became his prayer closet. That place where we are utterly broken and alone before God is a holy, sacred place. When we come to the end of ourselves, and we are utterly powerless, that's the time we learn to pray. **God's power reinvigorates our prayer life**. The school of prayer is taught to us when we are in the place of greatest peril. It is then we truly grasp our own powerlessness and the absolute need for God's power. That's how we are to live the Christian life, constantly dependent on God's power. This is what Jesus told Paul when he was so weak.

2 Corinthians 12:9 | My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

How weak Jonah felt as his "life was fainting away." As a prophet and believer in the Lord, he merely needed to remember the Lord the glory and greatness of his God, which he did, and God answered his prayer... **with a great fish. Gulp! There goes Jonah!**

3. THE GRACE OF DELIVERANCE (2:8-10)

The **fish seemed more like a coffin of incarceration** than a **vehicle for deliverance**. Jonah testifies that the confinement of the fish brought freedom, because this near-death experience woke him up spiritually and rescued him from himself and all his idols.

DELIVERED FROM IDOLS

Jonah 2:8a | Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

Now Jonah quotes Psalm 31:6, "I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols." It **wasn't just the Ninevites** and the **pagan sailors** that were idol worshippers. **Those amongst his own people in Israel** were known to cling to these worthless idols. They worshipped the **Baals**. He had to preach against his own people with fellow prophets. Jonah came right after the ministries of **Elijah** and **Elisha**. He preaches **alongside Amos and Hosea**. **Isaiah** comes just after Jonah.

The Personal Nature of Idols. It wasn't just the **sailors, and the wayward Israelites** that had idols. Many idols had snuck into Jonah's heart. We all have idols. The word translated '**idols**' means literally a snare or a trap.¹⁷ Idolatry is a worship issue when our heart longs for **comfort or pleasure or power or possessions or worldly peace** more than God.

An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure."¹⁸

Idols are identified when we don't get what we want. Take this illustration from Robert Jones¹⁹ for example. **Jesus alone must have the throne**. Idols vie for position in our hearts to displace God. **It could be**

¹⁷ Ibid., 129.

¹⁸ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (Riverhead Books, 2011), xviii.

¹⁹ Robert D. Jones. *Pursuing Peace* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 65.

a really good thing. You start out well. Desiring to please God in your marriage, but now you're trying to control you marriage. You love ministry, but ministry can displace God in your heart. You try to have a godly marriage, but now you want people to love you, and you are angry if your reputation is sullied because of marriage struggles. Anything can become an idol.



The throne with cross represents the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives. We must keep Jesus first!



We cannot serve two masters. So when something takes the place of Jesus' throne and kicks the Lord off the throne, we start to protect that idol in our life. We love it, and we get anxious or angry or despairing if the idol is threatened. We don't want to lose it. It could be your finances. It could be **a life-dominating sin**. It could be a good thing or a bad thing, but it's taken the place of Christ. Get rid of any staircases that

lead you to trust and rest in idols. Keep the good gifts of God under the lordship of Christ. Don't love sin and cherish it. We as Christians see sin as roadkill. It should turn our stomach.

Can I get a witness that it's better to go hungry than to eat roadkill. Therefore, we need to get used to living with **unmet desires** in this life. Don't feed the flesh. **Real satisfaction comes from submitting all our desires to Jesus.**

A large part of the art of living for Jesus is learning to live contentedly with ongoing unmet desires. When my desires remain submitted to Christ, my soul finds rest. Inner peace reigns. —Robert Jones, Southern Seminary, "Pursuing Peace"²⁰

The Powerful Nature of Idols. Jonah's idolatry of himself, of his politics, of his own comfort zone is radical and powerful. Idolatry cannot be played with. It's life dominating. It had launched his heart and his feet in the wrong direction. He had to forsake his idols before directed rightly again. We are going to see that even when Jonah gets back to doing God's will, **he relapses** in chapter 4. But it seems he writes this book as a testimony to his own waywardness, and God's grace to rescue his wayward children.

The Powerless Nature of Idols. Idols promise superhuman results. They are false saviors, but they cannot deliver. Jonah calls them "vain idols" which in Hebrew is literally "empty nothings." Idolatry is dangerous for many reasons, one of the most prominent being that idols **cannot save and will never satisfy.**²¹ You need **peace**? Throw back some **alcohol**. Look at some **porn**. **Microwave your pleasure.** You need **security**? Be manipulative and controlling. Lie to get more money from your employer. Steal. That's the **lying nature of idols**. **Instead of trusting in God's hesed**, his unrelenting love, Jonah had been trusting in his own way of thinking. Jonah says that clinging to idols is the way we forfeit the lasting hope and comfort of God's unrelenting love. We try to turn the gifts God gave to comfort us into our own personal messiahs. It may be the idol of *power* – we want to control the situations in life. We'll even use ministry or church to gain prominence and place and power. We live for **popularity** – we please people and let others control us. We allow **the sin of co-dependence on people**. We desire **prominence** and acceptance from humans instead of God. Listen, the only person we cannot live without is **Jesus Christ**. The idol may be **pleasure** – what do you flee to when you are hurting? That's your messiah. That's your Christ and king. That's your savior. The idol may be *possessions* and material things. Listen cars, homes and gizmos will not fill your cavernous heart. All things get their life and breath and being from God. How can those other things be sufficient saviors?

What's your identity and purpose in life? Is it your job, your family, your hobby, your bank account, your escapism, or is it "to glorify God and love him"? **Jonah's fish was a gift of grace!** The grace of deliverance came when that fish rescued him from himself and all his idols.

DELIVERED FOR STEADFAST LOVE

Jonah 2:8b | Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

Jonah comes to a great realization in the belly of the fish (*cf Psa 31:7*): all the earth who worships idols are **forsaking real hope and joy and peace through God's steadfast, covenant love**. Real contentment is found in God's steadfast love alone. Try to find it anywhere else, and you are asking for major misery. You've got to put your trust in that which cannot be taken away. When we choose idols, we forsake the only thing that can satisfy the human heart (*cf on Hos 6:4–6; Eccl 3:11*).²²

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Douglas Stuart, "Jonah," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 819.

²² James Limburg, *Hosea–Micah*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 149.

DELIVERED FOR SACRIFICE

Jonah, now delivered from the jaws of death wells up with gratitude and worship to God. He wants to sacrifice. He wants to give everything he has to the Lord. His **words echo the response of the sailors** in 1:16.²³ He joyfully quotes **Psalm 50:14**.

Jonah 2:9a | But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.

When all was stripped away, he saw the worthlessness of idols and the wonder of God's presence. Jonah was so overwhelmed he wanted to sacrifice. Being **in the belly of a fish he had no ability** to give a bull or **a lamb to sacrifice to God**, so he gave something much more **precious to God, a sacrifice of thanksgiving**.

After his sacrifice of praise, he gave all that he had: a vow of service to the Lord. He submitted and surrendered to the will of God. His vow meant that he would no longer be on the run. He would go to Nineveh and give the message God had for the Ninevites.

DELIVERED THROUGH SALVATION

The great theme of the book of Jonah is expressed in five simple words, **quoting Psalm 3:8** word for word.

Jonah 2:9b | Salvation belongs to the LORD!

What was the renewed prophet's conclusion? "Salvation belongs to the Lord." The word for deliverance or **salvation is yeshua**. When the angel announced to Mary that she would have a son, he said, "you shall call his name Jesus [Hebrew, *yeshua*], for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21).²⁴ Jesus is our salvation!

From beginning to end, our salvation is completely in the hands of the Lord God. We deserve God's wrath. Without the Lord's mercy, we would all be destined for an eternity without Christ. But praise him with highest praise: salvation belongs to the Lord. Jesus bled and died for our sins. He rose again. He calls, he justifies, he sanctifies, and he glorifies. He is the Lord of salvation. It belongs to him, from beginning to end. **We didn't invent it.** We weren't looking for God. Salvation is not of us, not of works, not based in our ability to follow God. No, He chose us. He justifies. He grants us salvation from beginning to end. Salvation belongs to the Lord! The great prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon said it this way.

The plan of salvation is entirely of God. No human intellect and no created intelligence assisted God in the planning of salvation; he designed the way, even as he himself carried it out. No one instructed him. He himself alone, did it... Without God it could not have been devised. It is a plan too splendid to have been the product of any human mind... On yonder cross I see the man who "trod the winepress alone;" ... I see the solitary conqueror, who came to the fight single-handed, whose own arm brought salvation, and whose omnipotence sustained him. ... The Lord has to apply it, to make the unwilling willing, to make the ungodly godly, and bring the vile rebel to the feet of Jesus, or else salvation will never be accomplished.²⁵ —Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Salvation, indeed, belongs to the Lord, from beginning to end. He chose us before the foundation of the world. He justifies us by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He did it alone! And he will sanctify us and glorify us! And he alone gets all the glory forever and ever and ever! Amen!

²³ Wiseman, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 129.

²⁴ Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, 148.

²⁵ Charles Haddon Spurgeon. "Salvation is of the Lord" *The New Park Street Pulpit*, preached May 10, 1857 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1857), 193.

DELIVERED TO NINEVEH

Jonah 2:10 | And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Jonah didn't know it, but as he was in the fish for three days and three nights, that fish was traveling. He was going somewhere. The text doesn't say, but it must have been in the direction of Nineveh. Wherever it was, Jonah was no longer in the belly of the fish. That sea creature "vomited Jonah out upon the dry land." From that dry land, Jonah obeyed the call of God and headed to Nineveh, the capital of the dreaded Assyrians.

Nineveh is 550 miles inland from the coast of Joppa, perhaps where the fish spit out Jonah. There was **still a great distance** between his starting point and his destination. But Jonah obeyed God. He was delivered by God from the fish's belly to go on a mission.

When our Lord came to the earth, he used the prophet Jonah's deliverance from the fish as an illustration of the gospel. That's where we need to be. Our focus should not be on Jonah or Nineveh, but on the Greater Jonah, Jesus Christ.

Matthew 12:40-41 | 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.

There is, we see, **a greater Jonah**. And this greater Jonah suffered not because he was running from God, but he was a substitute for all those who run from God. Just as God appointed a fish for Jonah, he appointed Christ to be crucified according to his divine plan and purpose (*cf* Acts 2:23).

There is a greater Jonah! Our Lord "descended to the lowest parts of the earth" and conquered death and hell. Like Jonah in the fish, the grave released our Lord. It could not hold him! We have that same resurrection power. Walk in the resurrection power our greater Jonah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Jonah drew near to God in the great fish. Look through your life, and you'll find the hard times were the times God drew you even nearer. When Jonah's deep in the belly of the fish, instead of powering his prayer life down, he powers it up. When we are in trial and tribulation, saints, we need to, more than ever, power up. But we'll see in the life of Jonah later, that he relapses into his idols. He starts arguing with God. He's so angry he wants to die. He was no longer in the belly of the fish, and he gets comfortable again. The comfort zone is a problem for every Christian. In the worst times and in the best times, we need to power up our prayer lives!

During the 1980s there was a real problem with **airplanes crashing on landing at the end of runways**. During a thunderstorm, an updraft of wind would shoot out of the sky and push the plane up off the ground as it was trying to land. The pilot tried to throttle the plane down into the gust but would often end up crashing and destabilizing the plane. The engineer who studied it suggested that instead of throttling the plane down into the updraft, they should use the wind and throttle the plane up and through the updraft. This practice stabilized the planes, and the runway crashes ceased.²⁶

It teaches us that when the easier times of life come, and we have an updraft, we ought not throttle down, but throttle up. It's easy to remember to throttle up in the hard times. But we need to throttle up and keep close to God in the updraft times, when things start getting easier, we need to power up our walk with God and draw close to him!

²⁶ Brian Chappell, "How to Illustrate", *Christ-Centered Preaching: Preparation & Delivery of Sermons*, (Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO, Fall 2006), Lecture 14A, https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/10180057/CCP_T_Lecture_14A.pdf.