

JONAH---EXPERIENCING GOD'S SALVATION

Series: As God's Messenger, Should I Not Be Concerned?

by Doug Goins

A number of years ago when I was flying from Los Angeles to Vancouver, Canada, I was seated on the plane next to a young woman traveling with her daughter. I was reading my Bible, which caught the woman's attention, and she engaged me in conversation. After a bit she said that she attended a church in Seattle, but she didn't really care much for the Bible. I asked her why she didn't like a book that I thought was pretty terrific, and she said it was because it was full of mistakes; there were things in the Bible that she just couldn't believe. So I asked her to tell me one thing in the Bible that was impossible for her to believe. I still remember her exact words. She said, "Well, I don't believe that Jonah swallowed a whale." And she wasn't joking. I told her I didn't believe that either, and then I told her the real story about Jonah and some of its spiritual significance.

It struck me again this week as I prepared for this sermon how strange it is---considering all the amazing miraculous events in the Bible and the fact that superintending this holy record is the God of the miraculous---that many people choose the story of Jonah and the whale as the penultimate reason that they cannot believe the Bible to be trustworthy. This book that we're studying is not about a whale; the whale gets only three verses out of the entire narrative. What the book really details is a battle of wills between God and the rebellious prophet Jonah, who prophesied for the Lord in the northern kingdom of Israel during the eighth century BC.

In this book Jonah recounts his struggle against God's love for the Assyrians in Nineveh, a pagan city that has no allegiance to God and is an avowed enemy of the Jewish people. Jonah disagrees with God's calling him to go to this world-class city to preach judgment against its wickedness. Its people are in imminent danger of destruction because of God's judgment, but Jonah refuses to take God's message of repentance to them, even though he has seen God's grace and mercy poured out on his own nation.

To review for a moment, in chapter 1 Jonah tells us that he fled in the opposite direction from Nineveh in defiance of God's clear command to him, and headed for Spain. He tells the Lord at the end of the book that he really did understand God's desire for the world including Nineveh. He says, "I know you are a God of love and patience and mercy. I know you want to forgive the sins of those people." But his hatred of Ninevites was more powerful than his understanding of who God was and what his will was. We found out that his hatred was rooted in racial prejudice, religious bigotry, and cultural exclusivity of the worst possible kind.

Chapter 1 showed us that God loved Jonah too much to let him get away with his sinful rebellion. God could have chosen another prophet and said, "Good riddance!" to this rebel. But instead God in his sovereignty hurled a lethal storm at Jonah's ship because he wanted to stop his escape. As the fury of the storm intensified through the chapter, we also saw Jonah's defiance and self-absorption intensify. And as God made Jonah's circumstances more difficult, Jonah became more stubbornly manipulative of the pagan sailors. At the end of chapter 1 Jonah would rather have died than repent of his own sin or be part of the salvation of the Assyrians. Finally he made those pagan sailors responsible for his own sacrificial execution. Jonah was thrown overboard, and God instantly calmed the Mediterranean Sea.

Last week Jonah was spiraling downward into the ocean in verse 16 as the pagan sailors were expressing their heartfelt gratitude for their deliverance from the storm by Jonah's God. They left all the other gods that they had cried out to and prayed to the Lord, the one Jonah had halfheartedly confessed as the God who made the sea and the dry land (verse 9). These Phoenician sailors began to come into a relationship of faith with God.

The servant of salvation

God was using Jonah in spite of himself to bring about salvation. Salvation is the central theme of this entire book. In chapter 1 salvation came to the Phoenician sailors. In chapter 3 next week we'll see salvation come to the Assyrians in the city of Nineveh. But this week the story focuses on one man, Jonah, and how salvation comes to him. It is salvation that Jonah does not deserve because he is so angry, resistant, and disobedient, and yet God is lovingly gracious. Jonah is going to drown, and he can't save himself. But God in mercy reaches out to rescue him from death.

This week we're going to see Jonah barely begin to agree with God's heart of salvation. Remember, in chapter 4 verse 2 Jonah says to God, "...I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil." Now in chapter 1 verse 17 and chapter 2 verse 1 and then verse 10 (passing over the prayer in verses 2-9), we see the amazing surprise of salvation in the life of Jonah as God expresses his majesty, power, and absolute sovereignty through this miraculous event.

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

The subject of these three verses is certainly not the fish, and not even Jonah, but God. The point that Jonah wants to make throughout this entire book and especially here is that God intervenes miraculously and powerfully to save him (and we'll see next week that God reconstitutes him to go back to Nineveh to fulfill the original call). He chooses a specific "great fish," to be his servant and appoints it officially to serve his purpose. We cannot overestimate God's sovereignty in finding the great fish and sending it off on this particular errand of rescue. You have perhaps heard stories about sperm whales that could swallow a sailor and keep him alive for a few hours before he was rescued. But for Jonah to survive going clear to the bottom of the ocean, to be swallowed whole by the fish, to survive with consciousness for three days in the belly of the fish and create the beautiful prayer that we're going to read, and finally for God to command the fish to vomit Jonah out on the shore, is a truly miraculous event.

God is at work to rescue his prophet with a purpose---not just to save his life or to make him thankful to God, but ultimately because he wants to save both Jonah and the city of Nineveh for eternity. There is a saving purpose in all of these miraculous events. In Jonah's experience in the four chapters of this book God has already used a storm and a fish, and we're going to see in the chapters ahead of us that he will use a plant, a worm, and a scorching east wind all to accomplish his saving purpose in Jonah's life. As the omnipotent God of the universe, he breaks into his ordered creation and literally moves heaven and earth to save Jonah. Through Jonah's preaching he is going to save Nineveh; and then through Jonah's writing this account he wants to save the Jewish people from their narrowness, self-righteousness, and sense of religious superiority. He wants them to understand the Savior God of the world. Finally, God performs all these miracles even for our benefit so that we can understand him and our relationship with him more fully.

Chapter 2 verse 1 says, "Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish...." In chapter 1 Jonah ran away from God. Now in chapter 2 he is running back to God through prayer. The prayer is a beautiful song of salvation, a great expression of worship and praise. I suggested last week that in quoting from Exodus 34 of the Pentateuch (in Jonah 4:2), Jonah knew his Bible. This prayer confirms the depth of his Bible knowledge, because in the three dark days inside the fish he constructs this beautiful song of salvation out of psalms that he has memorized. Every line of this psalm echoes the hymn book of the Jewish people. He either quotes directly phrase by phrase or paraphrases the psalms. Let's read the introductory summary of his song of salvation in verses 2-3:

I called to the LORD, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and thou didst hear my voice.

Inherent in this introductory verse and the details that follow is a much greater emphasis on God's activity than

on Jonah's circumstances. Jonah is dying and God mercifully rescues him from death. Jonah knows he is as good as dead when is thrown over the side of the ship. He describes the experience of death by drowning and all that goes with that as distress, a word that means excruciating agony. He knows that he is headed for the belly of Sheol, the place of death, the underworld---hell itself.

Splashing into the the icy cold ocean water shocks him, and he is confronted physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. When we are confronted by God's exposure of some problem in our lives that we have brought on ourselves, one of the things this song teaches us is to thank him for loving us enough to do whatever is necessary to make us face what we have been doing. There is a measure of relief when things are brought to a crisis point, when we can no longer avoid what we know in our heart of hearts to be true. I find it is like those times in my relationship with my wife Candy when conflict is finally flushed out in the open. Then I can see things as they really are and do something about my responsibility for the circumstances. Over and over again God causes circumstances in our lives that expose us to what we are doing in our rebellion against his will for us.

For Jonah that does not mean an immediate release from the pain and pressure. He describes vividly the terror of drowning, not just the physical sensations but also what is going on spiritually in this process of spirally downward to the bottom of the sea. He says in verses 3-6a:

For thou didst cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood was round about me;
all thy waves and thy billows
passed over me.

Then I said, 'I am cast out
from thy presence;
how shall I again look
upon thy holy temple?'

The waters closed in over me,
the deep was round about me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever...

Jews were never seafarers and as a people were afraid of the ocean. For them death by drowning was the worst way to die. Their enemies often would execute them by drowning just to add that final touch of terror to the experience of death. Jonah's prayer describes the physical agony of being helpless against the currents swirling around him and the waves crashing upon him. Then he describes that downward descent as he realizes the depths of the oceans are closing in on him and there is no way to get back to the surface. In verse 5 the first phrase literally speaks of the terror of having water enter his throat and seaweed tangle itself around his head. He finally says he hits the bottom. We don't know how deep the ocean was there, but just imagine the terror of feeling your feet hit the bottom and knowing there is no way back up!

At that point, through the sensations of the icy waters closing over Jonah as he fights like crazy against them, God physically breaks through Jonah's stubborn resolve to die. All of a sudden he realizes that he doesn't want to die, even though in a sense he drove those sailors to execute him. That is part of his spiritual agony.

In the opening phrase of verse 3 Jonah says to the Lord:

"...thou didst cast me into the deep,

into the heart of the sea."

Jonah realizes that God is responsible for all of these consequences; God sent the storm and even resisted the well-intentioned efforts of the pagan sailors to save his life. He is sovereignly at work. As Jonah is sinking under the ocean he realizes that God has been saying, "All right, Jonah, you can have exactly what you want." In verse 4 Jonah says:

"I have been cast out from thy presence;
how shall I again look
upon thy holy temple?"

Finally he despairs. He will never again know his Savior God. His life is slipping away. Twice in his prayer it flashes through his mind that the temple represents his place in the family of God, and he will never see it again. He is a man who is running away from God, and so God says, "Okay, if you want escape, this will be the ultimate escape." In the middle phrase of verse 6 Jonah talks about going down to the underworld where the bars are shut behind him forever. Jonah knows that when he dies he is going to hell, which is eternal separation from his Father God, and he is scared. That is his last memory. There is no way of escape from that consequence. Physically and spiritually it is getting darker and darker for Jonah; life is starting to ebb away.

Before we move on to the good news of Jonah's salvation in verse 6, we need to stop and identify a bit with the prophet's despair in the depth of the sea, so we do not miss what his psalm has to teach us about the treasures of those depths. In our own experience God tracks us down, stops us in our escape from obedience, and then confronts us with what we are doing. He allows us to go through a time of death to our own willfulness. As we pray in that situation, we are aware of the hopelessness of changing either ourselves or the circumstances that we have brought on ourselves. This moment of hopelessness puts us through a death to self-effort, and in a good sense we give up. There is nothing we can do; we hit rock bottom. When that happens, our surrender to the Lord, to his mercy and his grace, becomes more than words. That is when resurrection can take place.

When Jonah gives up any hope of surviving, when he can't sink any lower, God intervenes and saves him. Verses 6b-7:

...yet thou didst bring up my life from the Pit,
O LORD my God.
When my soul fainted within me,
I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to thee,
into thy holy temple.

At the last minute Jonah calls out for help, and in that instant he receives the mercy from the Lord that he had been unwilling to take to the residents of Nineveh. Up to this point Jonah has desired death more than obedience to God. But now, even as he begins to lose consciousness, he realizes that fellowship with God is more important than physical life, and that is the moment that God sends the fish.

I remember the story from a comparative religion class I took in college about a young man who went to Buddha to ask how to find God. Buddha took him down to a river, and the young man thought Buddha was going to perform some sort of ritual cleansing. But instead Buddha held his head under water until he began to thrash around and fight to get back up. When Buddha finally let him up, he asked the young man, "What were you thinking about when I held your head under the water?" He responded, as you can imagine, "Air!" Buddha said, "When you want God as much as you wanted air, then you will find him."

That is a compelling story, but it is not about the God of the Bible and the God of Jonah's experience. The truth is that God finds us, whether we are aware of it or not. Because he confronts us, we then turn to him.

God brings us to a place where we have to admit that we have no other hope but him; there is no possibility of making it through the crisis that has resulted from our own sin unless he intervenes. That is because before God resurrects us from the grave that we have carefully dug for ourselves he wants us to deal with the death that comes from sin. ("The wages of sin is death," says Paul in Romans 6:23.) He wants us to understand our sin-sickness before he will heal us and provide the gift of eternal life.

The song ends in verses 8 and 9 with Jonah's expression of praise and worship:

Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to thee;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!

Interpreters disagree on who Jonah is talking about in verse 8 because it is a difficult construction. There are only five words in the sentence in Hebrew. It's hard to tell whether the focus is on the Jewish people, who perhaps are tempted to idolatry; or Jonah himself and his pride, for there is something idolatrous in his running away; or, most likely, the Phoenicians who throw him into the ocean and the Assyrians he is called to minister to. He is saying of those people that they cling to worthless idols, but eventually they will abandon their loyalty to them. The idols will prove themselves untrustworthy and impotent.

Verse 9 says, "But I..." which is a strong note of contrast. His allegiance, loyalty, and love are now focused on the God of the universe. Some people have thought that perhaps Jonah is bargaining with God here: "If I get out of here I'm going to serve you, praise you, thank you---whatever you want." But this is a declarative statement; he is declaring that he has already been saved by God. It is an honest expression both of his understanding of how God delivered him personally and of his worship of God just as the Phoenician sailors worshiped God with their whole hearts out of gratitude.

The tragic irony is that when God extends the same salvation to the Assyrians in Nineveh, Jonah will become very angry. And when we look at verses 8 and 9 together we see a bit of self-righteousness in Jonah: "You saved me, but I don't embrace idolatry as those people do." But it is a gradual process of salvation that is going on. God wants honesty, and he gets it from Jonah. And God understands the ambivalence in Jonah and can deal with that paradox.

Let me suggest several practical and personal truths we can derive from Jonah's surprising salvation by God's intervention through the whale and from this song of salvation that Jonah composed while he was still in the belly of the whale. The first one is that we must learn how to pray in the midst of failure, the times when our distress has been caused by our own disobedience. Usually that is when it is the most difficult to pray because our self-condemnation is at work, and we think that either we have no right to call on God, or he will pay no attention to us. One of the points of this story is that if even an unattractive, unsympathetic, disobedient character like Jonah could pray while he suffered consequences that he brought on himself, then so can we. God meets us even in our self-imposed struggle and difficulty.

The second truth is that we must learn to thank the Lord for confronting us with our disobedience. The storm convinced Jonah that he couldn't escape from God; his rebellion was exposed. It is a great source of hope for us to know that God will not let us continue forever in our own personal brand of rebellion. It would be the worst possible news if we thought that God didn't care enough about us to catch us when we ran away from him.

The third truth has to do with seeing ourselves in Jonah's life. Last week I talked about looking in the mirror of this book. When it comes to relating to God, all of us are, like Jonah, escape artists. Some of us spend our lives trying to escape any encounter with God. We show up at a place like this and listen to interesting things about him; we may appreciate his benefit in other people's lives and how it is directly helpful to us, but we have never really met Jonah's God. Probably others of us have met him, and yet we want to avoid a complete

surrender of our wills to him. We are grateful for the salvation, but we don't want to allow him as the Lord to totally direct and control and guide our lives.

Still others of us have resisted the implications of really knowing him because we are afraid of the cost of being faithful, obedient disciples in our relationships; and we are also afraid of the possible responsibilities we have toward the Ninevites in our lives, those we hate and fear. Finally, there are those of us who have heard a specific call like Jonah's to costly commitment, and we have been running away to Tarshish ever since.

You have heard about love-hate relationships. This passage in Jonah confronts us with something like that, a love-escape complex in our relationship with God. We feel both the longing to know the Lord and at the same time the fear of what his love might require of us. We are as torn as Jonah was.

As I thought about a final encouragement to us out of this passage I was reminded of the words of a spiritual:

"My God is so high that you can't get over him,
So wide that you can't get around him,
So low you can't get under him,
You must come in through the Lamb."

There is no place to hide from our inescapable God, no place to go where he will not be waiting for us. David the psalmist expressed this truth profoundly in Psalm 139:

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit,
or whither shall I flee from thy presence?"

If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!

If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there thy hand shall lead me,
and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, 'Let only darkness cover me,
and the light about me be night,'
even the darkness is not dark to thee,
the night is bright as the day;
for darkness is as light with thee."

God is omnipotent and omnipresent to save us. That is the heart of this story. And we have a chance to echo Jonah's gratitude in our own hearts today.

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