

JONAH

Part 2: “A God Who Saves”

Jonah 1:17–2:9

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Sunday, February 5, 2023 (Family Sunday and Epiphany Season)

Scripture Reading

“And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, ‘I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the 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. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!” (Jonah 1:17–2:9, ESV).

Introduction

Jonah is the story of a prophet who has gone to great lengths to refuse God's command to share God's grace with his enemies. Last week, we saw that God called Jonah to speak his word to the great city of Nineveh, the capital city of the brutal Assyrian Empire.

But Jonah rejects God's call and seeks to flee from God's presence. When God tells Jonah to go east, he gets in a boat to sail to the westernmost edge of the world.

Jonah is a man in willful, unrepentant sin.

But the will of God is stronger than the will of his prophet. So God hurls a storm at Jonah's boat. The winds and waves rise until the vessel is on the verge of destruction. Jonah knows that he is the cause of the storm and tells the pagan sailors to cast him to the depths of the sea. Initially, they refuse, but God makes his will unignorable.

They cast Jonah to the sea, and—at that exact moment—the storm falls silent, and the sun shines through the clouds. To witness the sudden stillness of the waters would have been eerie and surreal. But then, as Jonah sinks into the depths, a new drama begins to unfold.

Out of nowhere, a massive fish swallows the Israelite prophet whole.

Now, to most people who are familiar with the Bible (and/or Veggie Tales!), the arrival of this “great fish” (גָּדָּגְדָּ לִי) might seem odd, but it is not surprising. We’ve heard the story before. Many of us have heard it from the days of our childhood. But to the original readers or hearers of this tale, this moment would have been *completely* unanticipated.

Even more, the most surprised of all, would have been Jonah himself.

As he sinks deeper and deeper into darkness and closer and closer to certain death, he is powerfully overwhelmed and taken away. A beast of the sea—who just happens to be at this place and at this depth—consumes him.

But the presence of the great fish is not mere happenstance. God, in his sovereign power and might, has “appointed” (וַיִּמְנָן) this fish for the exact moment to rescue his wayward prophet. As our text states: “*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*” (Jonah 1:17).

For three days and nights, Jonah lay within in the living coffin of the great fish. He is utterly alone. He is stripped of every vestige of self-sufficiency and pride. He has nothing but time to ponder his defiance and disobedience. He is brought face-to-face before his God and the haunting truth of his frail mortality. Yet, in these very depths, he composes a prayer that reveals the wonder of “*A God Who Saves.*”

Jonah chapter 2 is a reminder that there are times in life when we need to be confronted with the gravity of our sin before we can truly understand the glory of the salvation that has been wrought for us.

So, for the rest of our time, I want to examine what this passage teaches us about the nature of sin so that we might rightly glorify the God who saves us.

Exposition

1.) Sin Isolates

Jonah did not just disobey God. He wanted to *flee* from God. So, in order to do this, he leaves the land of Israel, he leaves his people, and he even abandons his personal call and identity as a prophet of God, as he sails to the edge of the earth. Now, because of his sin, he cast into the sea where he sinks into complete and utter isolation.

Put a different way, Jonah’s sin brings him to a place of utter estrangement and separation from every meaningful relationship in his life. He is estranged from God, estranged from the people of God, and, in a way, he has become estranged from his sense of self as he rejects his identity as a prophet of God.

Now, we can certainly run from God, but we can never truly escape God. God is omnipresent. He is in all places, for in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

Nevertheless, sin does disrupt our fellowship with God. Sin fractures the spiritual union with God for which all our souls have yearned since the beginning of time.

The Old Testament book of Genesis shows us that humankind was designed to live in a garden paradise called Eden. It was a place of perfect peace—unstained by the foreign presence of pain, sickness, and death that define our world today.

Eden is our natural habitat. It is the long-lost home we long for. And within all of our hearts, there still is an echo of Eden that beckons us to search for the peace, the joy, and the abiding rest that only Eden can give. But truthfully, the perfection of paradise did not come from *where* we were but *from who* we were with.

Before sin entered creation, man and woman walked in unbroken union with God. Humankind was designed to know God and be known by him.

But sin has ruptured our relationship with our Creator. God is holy and glorious. No evil may dwell before him and with him (cf. Ps 5:4). So when our first parents, Adam and Eve, sinned against God, the human family was placed in exile. We were driven away from Eden and into a spiritual wilderness of estrangement.

Now in the belly of the death, Jonah feels the pangs of his estrangement personally. He cries out to God, “...*I am driven away from your sight...*” (Jonah 2:4a). As sin drove Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden (Gen 3:24), so sin has “driven” (גָּרַשׁ) Jonah away from experiencing the nearness of God.¹

Sin often deceives us into thinking that it will give us pleasure and peace. But in reality, it drives us away and exiles us from the truest source of pleasure and peace.

I think there are moments in life when God, in his mercy, allows us to acutely feel the pain of isolation and estrangement flow from our sin and selfishness. I doubt you’ve ever been isolated to the point of being in the belly of a fish. But perhaps, you’ve experienced the way that sin has broken your relationships or made you forget who you were called to be. Perhaps, you’ve experienced times when patterns of sin have made God seem far away.

God can use moments like this to wake us up to the reality of our need so that we realize that God is the source of our spiritual life. We need God like we need oxygen. For it is in knowing him that we know ourselves and our place in this world. It is in knowing him that we find meaning, purpose, and rest for our restless hearts (cf. Ps 42:1–2).

¹ In fact, the Hebrew verb גָּרַשׁ (*garash*; to drive out) is used in both Genesis 3:24 (when Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden) and in Jonah 2:4 (as Jonah describes his condition of spiritual exile).

But even in the midst of his isolation and darkness—even in the midst of his sin—Jonah cries out to God, and God hears his prayer. As our text reads, *“Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, ‘I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice’”* (Jonah 2:1–2).

Jonah is acutely aware of what it feels like to be opposed by an Almighty God. Indeed, God opposes the proud. But he gives grace to the humble. Jonah has felt far away from God. But now he draws near to God, and God draws near to Jonah (cf. James 4:6–8).

So too, if you are suffering the consequences of your sin, if you have felt driven far from God by your sin, you can humble yourself before the Lord, and he will lift you up. You can draw near to him, and he will draw near to you.

How do we do this? How do we humble ourselves before the Lord? How do we draw near to God when he feels far away? We do what Jonah does in the depths—*we pray*.

Prayer is one of the central spiritual disciplines. It is what some have called "a means of grace." It is one of the consistent means (or avenues) through which we relate with God, and God relates with us.

But prayer can be very difficult at times. We live in a distracted age, and it is easy to lose focus when we try to spend time in prayer. Sometimes it can even seem like a foreign language that we want to speak, but we don't know where to start.

If that is you, I want to encourage you to pray the words of Scripture. We learn to pray in the same way that we learn to speak as a baby. We mimic and imitate the words that have been spoken to us. God has spoken to us through his word, and we learn the language of prayer by speaking God's word back to him.

You can pray the words that Jesus taught his people to pray in Matthew 6, in what is the Lord's prayer: *“Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’”* (Matthew 6:9–13).

Likewise, if your heart is overwhelmed with emotion, look to the book of Psalms in the Old Testament, which has been the prayer book of God's people for centuries. I often read through the Psalms when I feel like I need to pray, but my words escape me. I look for a prayer that matches the condition of my heart.

So if you, like Jonah, feel like you are overwhelmed and sinking, I would encourage you to pray the words of Psalm 130, *“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!”* (Psalm 130:1–2).

In fact, one of the reasons we practice praying the Psalms together in our services is that we hope to teach you and equip you to pray to the Lord. And like any healthy practice, you will find that prayer changes you and forms you the more you do it.

Americans are an independently minded people. And West Texas is the America of America. We value toughness, self-sufficiency, and pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. For this reason, prayer may even seem even more foreign to us.

Prayer, after all, is the opposite of independence, self-sufficiency, and pride. Prayer is a declaration of dependence upon the God who saves us and sustains us. When we pray, we remind our souls there is one who is above us upon whom we depend. There is one above us who deserves our praise, gratitude, and loyalty.

But the good news is no matter how far we have sunk down into the depths, our God is able to hear our cries. No matter how far we have run, his hand is able to reach us. No matter how great our sin is, he is able to save us.

2.) Sin Enslaves

The Bible presents sin not only as the breaking of God's rules and commands. Sin is also a spiritual power that enslaves us and ensnares us. Sin is a cosmic tyrant that seeks to rule over us and dominate us.

As Jonah sinks to the very depths of the earth, he realizes that his sin is no longer something he can control. In fact, Jonah has lost all control. He is trapped, bound, and imprisoned. He states: *"The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever"* (Jonah 2:5–6a).

Yet, as Jonah describes his predicament, he uses some very interesting language in this chapter that calls to mind another time when God delivered his people from certain death. He uses the language of the *Exodus*.

Now, the Exodus was the central story of God's saving power in the Old Testament. The Exodus recounts the story of how the Lord led his people out of slavery to Egypt and into the freedom of the Promise Land. And the climactic moment of God's delivering power was the parting of the Red Sea when God broke the power of Egypt and saved his people.

And the language that is often used in Exodus to describe the moment Israel was delivered from slavery is now used to describe the moment Jonah is delivered from death. As Israel was "brought up" (עלה) out of the land of Egypt (Ex 3:8), so too Jonah's life is "brought up" (עלה) from the pit (Jonah 2:7). As Israel miraculously passed through the "sea" (ים) and the "waters" (מַיִם), Jonah will miraculously pass through the "sea" (ים) and the "waters" (מַיִם). As Israel was brought to the safety of "dry land" (יבֶשֶׁת), so too Jonah will come to the safety of "dry land" (יבֶשֶׁת) at the end of chapter 2. Even the way that the Lord "appointed" (מנה) and provided the great fish to rescue Jonah can be read

as a pun that calls to remembrance the way the Lord provided the bread of manna (מַן) in the wilderness for his people.

In other words, the Exodus is no longer just a story for Jonah. The prayer of chapter 2 is Jonah's internalization and personalization of the Exodus. The way God delivered the people of Israel from their slavery to Egypt is the way that God has delivered Jonah from slavery to his own sin.

But there is even another dimension to this text that calls us back to the Exodus story. In verse 8, Jonah states, *"Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love"* (Jonah 2:8).

Jonah recognizes that at the root of the spiritual slavery of sin is idolatry. Idolatry is simply worshipping something in creation the way that we should only worship God. And it has taken a watery prison to wake up to the fact that he has fallen prey to the power of idolatry.

As we talked about last week, the reason that Jonah ran from God is that he did not want to speak the word of God to the people of Nineveh.

After all, Jonah was a proud Hebrew; being an Israelite was the first and foremost aspect of his identity (cf. Jonah 1:9). He wanted to prophesy victory and greatness for the kingdom of Israel, not speak the word of God to Israel's greatest threat. He loved his nation and his people, but that love had twisted into an idol.

And Jonah was willing to serve that idol, even if it put him in direct defiance of the Lord.

But Jonah's idols have not brought him peace or power. They have brought him to the brink of destruction and death. And in his mercy, God has exposed the truth about Jonah's idols and the enslaving power of sin so that Jonah might be set free. This, too, is a subtle reference to the Exodus.

The reason that the people of Israel were set free from bondage is because God unleashed his power upon the nation of Egypt in the form of various plagues. He turned the Nile River into blood, cast a shadow of darkness over the land, and even sent sickness upon the Egyptians.

But these were not random displays of God's might and authority. Each of the plagues was designed to demonstrate God's sovereignty and power over the false gods of Egypt. In other words, the plagues were not an attack on Egypt. They were an assault of spiritual warfare on the idols of Egypt.

In the same way, God loved Jonah enough, and God loves us enough, to expose our idols for what they are. He shows that our idols do not satisfy; they ensnare. They do not bring life; they lead us to death.

Idols are powerful and tyrannical. And maybe you have experienced that tyranny. There may be many of you that feel like you have placed your hope in something that is not God and now that thing *controls* you.

An idol can be anything. It can be money, achievement, romance, or beauty. These are not bad things, but when they become ultimate things, they enslave us.

But as powerful as idols can be our God is mightier. He puts our false gods to open shame, and he triumphs over them in Christ (cf. Col 2:15).

Today, if you feel enslaved by the power of sin, know that God is the God of the Exodus. He is not just the God who once delivered Israel. He is not just the God who once delivered Jonah, the wayward prophet. He is the God who continues to deliver and save those who call upon him today! He is the one who can set you free!

3.) Sin Condemns

It is in the belly of the fish that Jonah finally comes to understand the reason for his suffering. He is where he is as the consequence of his own sin. Jonah's sin is worthy of condemnation and punishment. He recognizes that he is deserving of judgment for his sin by a God who is just.

He admits, *“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).

Jonah has not only broken a few rules or done a few bad things. He has rebelled against a God who is righteous and holy. God has told him to go up; Jonah has willfully gone down. God has told Jonah to go east; Jonah has gone west.

In this way, Jonah's rebellion is a picture of our own rebellion. He is a symbol of when we declare ourselves to be our lord and do what is best in our own eyes, even if we lead ourselves headlong into death and destruction.

Jonah says that he has been brought to “the belly of Sheol” (מִבֶּטֶן שְׁאוֹל), which is a poetic way of saying that he has been condemned to death and the grave.

Recognizing the severity of his situation, Jonah looks to God and vows to go to the “holy temple” (הַיְכָל קֹדֶשׁ) of his God. Look at how he repeats this thought throughout his prayer:

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

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

But why does he focus his hope and his prayer to the holy temple of God? God is everywhere, right? What does the temple play such an important role in Jonah's prayer?

The answer is simple. The holy temple is where the debt of sin is paid and where sacrifices are made. This is why Jonah says in verse 9, "*But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay*" (Jonah 2:9a).

The New Testament tells us the wages of sin is death (cf. Rom 6:23). In the Old Testament, the temple was a physical reminder of this truth. The temple was the place where blood of animals was shed so that atonement could be made for the sins of God's people.

Jonah looks to the holy temple of God because he knows that he owes a cosmic debt that should cost him his life. He looks holy temple of God his only hope is that a substitute would die in his place.

In the same way, we, like Jonah, have sinned. We have gone our own way. We have fallen short. We owe a debt we cannot pay. And like Jonah, our only hope is that a substitute would die in our place.

When God sent his only Son to die in our place on the cross, he provided the ultimate substitute and the sacrifice that would end all other sacrifices. Jesus Christ is the one who descended into the depths of death that we might be lifted up. He saved us when we could not save ourselves.

We were dead in and in the depths of our sin. But God has lifted us up and has made us alive together in Christ. And now, we can pray along with Jonah, "*... 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*" (Jonah 2:6).

Jonah's sin had made his situation hopeless. And outside of Christ, sin has made our situation hopeless as well.

Jonah did not contribute anything to his salvation, and neither can we. This why Jonah ends his prayer with a statement that some have called the thesis sentence of the entire Bible: "*... Salvation belongs to the LORD!*" (Jonah 2:9b).

Conclusion

Often when we think of the story of Jonah, we immediately think of this passage. We think of the big fish and the three days Jonah spent in its belly.

In a modern age of science, many have questioned whether or not such an event is possible or if Jonah's story is but a legend or myth. Some Christians have even gone to great extents to provide a naturalist explanation of this passage. They argue that Jonah's great fish was a whale shark, a blue whale, or a sperm whale from the depths of the sea.

The truth is I don't know the biological species of Jonah's great fish—and neither does anyone else. But I don't know if it is all that important to know a scientific explanation of Jonah's fish or how Jonah survived being swallowed alive. Like I said last week, the fish might be the least interesting part of Jonah's story.

I don't know *how* Jonah survived in the belly of a fish—I just know that he *did*. For our God is not bound by the laws of nature—he is the Lord and author of creation. He is free to move in signs, miracles, and wonders!

And the truth is our faith is not dependent upon the miracle of Jonah and the great fish. Our faith rests upon the far greater miracle of Jesus and the empty grave!

Jonah's story reminds us of the depths to which our sin brings us so that we might marvel at the power of the God who saves us and the privilege of the mission we have been given to declare his gospel.

There are in our city—right now—people who have been isolated and enslaved by sin. There are people we know and love who feel the weight of condemnation and shame that comes from sin. But we have been given the good news of a Savior whose power is greater than the power of sin!

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be faithful to share this good news. May we rejoice in gratitude that our God has drawn near to us when we were isolated, he has liberated us when we were enslaved, and he has atoned for us when we were condemned.

May we place our hope in the glorious truth that salvation belongs to our Lord.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

1. *Read Jonah 1:17-2:9. Summarize what has happened up until this point in the story of Jonah, and summarize the main points of Jonah's prayer in chapter 2.*
2. *Note Jonah's sense of isolation. How can moments of feeling far away from God be an opportunity for growth and renewal? What is the significance of prayer in restoring our relationship with God and finding meaning and purpose?*
3. *What role does the "holy temple" play in Jonah's prayer, and why is it significant for us today?*
4. *Some have called Jonah's statement, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" (Jonah 2:9), the thesis sentence of the Bible. What do you think about this statement, and how does it apply to you personally?*