

5

No Escape

Believers who run from God are unable to escape His discipline.

JONAH 1:15–2:10

Heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis is attributed with the statement, “He can run, but he can’t hide.” The boxer who tried to outmaneuver Louis by staying away from him in the ring was eventually “found” and knocked out. Believers may try to use the same strategy with God, trying to run away from Him when we don’t want to obey. However, in the end we will learn what Jonah learned: we can never hide from God.

For what reasons might a person try to hide from God?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

JONAH 1:1-2:10

The book of Jonah begins with a mandate from God to the prophet Jonah. God told him to get up and go preach to the people of Nineveh. Nineveh was one of three Assyrian administrative cities, and it was the place where their wicked king resided. The Assyrians were renowned for their brutality. For over fifty years, they had been bitterly oppressive in their dealings with Israel. Therefore, when God told Jonah to get up and go to Nineveh (Jonah 1:2), Jonah instead went down to Joppa, boarded a ship, and fled to Tarshish in the opposite direction (1:3).

God then caused a tumultuous storm, threatening the lives of everyone on the vessel. At first, Jonah was oblivious to the storm and how his sin brought potential harm to others. While the sailors were fighting for their lives and calling out to their gods to save them, their captain woke up Jonah and urged him to call out to his god. The sailors were convinced someone on the vessel had angered his god and caused the storm, so they cast lots to find out who it was. The lot fell on Jonah (1:4-7).

Jonah identified himself as a Hebrew who worshiped (literally “feared”) the Lord but admitted he was fleeing from Him. Jonah’s introduction of himself was odd given that the person who truly fears the Lord obeys the Lord. The sailors were seized by a great fear and asked Jonah what they should do. The prophet told them that if they threw him into the sea, it would calm down (1:8-12). As God’s prophet, Jonah knew God would forgive him if he repented (4:2). Yet Jonah preferred perishing in the sea over obeying God and going to Nineveh. What’s more, hesitant to take Jonah’s life, the heathen sailors demonstrated more of a concern for Jonah’s life and the Lord’s response to their actions than Jonah did (1:14).

As you read Jonah 1:15-2:10, think about how God shows his grace to His servant Jonah. How does God demonstrate this kind of grace to believers today?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GOD CALMS (JONAH 1:15-17)

¹⁵ Then they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. ¹⁶ The men were seized by great fear of the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

¹⁷ The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

VERSES 15-16

Jonah was looking for an escape from his responsibility to preach to Nineveh. The sailors were looking for an escape other than throwing a stranger overboard in the middle of a raging storm. Jonah could not escape God's discipline, and the sailors could not escape the storm by disobeying the prophet. Therefore, they *picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea*. This is exactly what the prophet had told them to do (Jonah 1:12). As soon as Jonah hit the water, *the sea stopped its raging*. The word used to describe the raging sea also could be used both of human anger and God's anger. Here it described the angry waves that browbeat the boat. The angry sea became calm at the instant the sailors obeyed the prophet.

It is a sad situation when unbelievers behave better than believers.

The sailors were *seized by a great fear of the LORD* when the waves stopped churning. In Jonah, the word *fear* is used of the panic caused by the storm (v. 5) and of worship of the Lord (v. 9). The fear of the Lord is a deep-seated reverence and awe for God that causes humans to want to honor Him at all costs and to avoid His loving discipline. It involves wonder, submission, obedience, worship, consideration, admiration, and love inspired by His eternal attributes and authority. These sailors stood in contrast to Jonah's rebellion. They demonstrated a true fear of the Lord while the prophet of the Lord who claimed to fear the Lord failed to show it. The sailors demonstrated more concern for Jonah than the prophet showed for the people of Nineveh. It is a sad situation when unbelievers behave better than believers.

VERSE 17

Just as the Lord had appointed the great wind (v. 4), He also **appointed a great fish** for Jonah. (See the article, “God ‘Appointed’ in Jonah,” p. 127.) Everything was happening under the control of God’s sovereignty. The fish swallowed Jonah, and there he stayed in the **belly of the fish three days and three nights**. Sometimes the discipline of God is both grace-filled and difficult at the same time. Where would Jonah have been without the fish? God calmed the sea, provided a way of escape for Jonah, and returned Him to the place where He could obey the Lord.

What factors might determine how a person responds to God’s discipline?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God’s Purpose of Grace*

Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, and bring reproach on the cause of Christ and temporal judgments on themselves; yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation. (See 1 Kings 8:33-34; 1 John 1:7-9.)

GOD HEARS (JONAH 2:1-4)

¹ Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish: ² I called to the LORD in my distress, and he answered me. I cried out for help from deep inside Sheol; you heard my voice. ³ When you threw me into the depths, into the heart of the seas, the current overcame me. All your breakers and your billows swept over me. ⁴ And I said, “I have been banished from your sight, yet I will look once more toward your holy temple.”

VERSES 1-2

Jonah did what all people should do who find themselves in a difficult situation—he **prayed to the LORD his God**. His prayer was from the

belly of the fish. Jonah's willingness to pray even when under the disciplinary hand of God reveals his faith. Though the text doesn't indicate at what point in his three-day journey he began to pray, one might imagine that it was immediately after he realized he was not going to die in the water. Though the captain of the ship had asked Jonah to pray (1:6), this is the first record of the prophet praying. Like Jonah, we sometimes are more motivated to pray as our circumstances grow more difficult. Though chapter 2 records Jonah's eloquently-worded prayer, he likely prayed off and on throughout the three days, and this represents the sum of his prayers.

Look at what it took to bring Jonah to his knees. The main point is that God used Jonah's time in the great fish to bring him to his senses and renew his commitment as a prophet of the Lord.

The prophet described his situation inside the fish in two ways. First, he was under *distress*. Being thrown from a ship in the middle of a storm is among the most stressful situations one can imagine. Yet God heard Jonah's prayer. Jonah also described his situation as *deep inside Sheol*. Sheol was the realm of the dead. The Hebrews lacked a complete understanding of the afterlife prior to Jesus. They called the place where all the dead gathered *Sheol*. The psalmist had said, "Where can I go to escape your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (Ps. 139:7-8). God was not only present in Sheol but was able to hear Jonah's prayer as he was sinking down to death. Who would have believed that God's answer would be a fish?

*Jonah recognized that these
were God's waves.*

VERSES 3-4

God actively answered Jonah's prayer as He directed the entire situation. The Lord sent the storm. The Lord sent the fish. Thus Jonah was able to say to God, *you threw me into the depths*. The sailors may have physically thrown him into the sea, but this was the action of God disciplining and preparing Jonah for a second commission to go to Nineveh. As the prophet encountered the waves, he said, *all your breakers and your billows swept over me*. Jonah recognized that these were God's waves.

How do trials tend to bring focus to a person's prayers?

BIBLE SKILL: Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.

Compare and contrast David's prayer in Psalm 32 with Jonah's prayer in Jonah 2:1-10. What are the similarities between these two prayers? What are the significant differences between them? What can we conclude about the heart of Jonah in comparison to the heart of David in these two prayers?

GOD SAVES (JONAH 2:5-10)

⁵ The water engulfed me up to the neck; the watery depths overcame me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. ⁶ I sank to the foundations of the mountains, the earth's gates shut behind me forever! Then you raised my life from the Pit, LORD my God! ⁷ As my life was fading away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, to your holy temple. ⁸ Those who cherish worthless idols abandon their faithful love, ⁹ but as for me, I will sacrifice to you with a voice of thanksgiving. I will fulfill what I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the LORD. ¹⁰ Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

VERSES 5-9

In verses 5-6, Jonah described his downward descent into the ocean. First, the water *engulfed* him to his neck. Then the *watery depths overcame* him. *Seaweed* wrapped itself around his head, seemingly dragging him down toward Sheol. He *sank to the*

foundations of the mountains, which expresses the belief that the mountains were rooted in the ocean. *The earth's gates shut* around him. The common belief was that Sheol was at the lower portions of the earth, and when people died and went there, the gates shut so they could never return. Jonah saw himself sinking downward to death.

God intervened in a merciful and miraculous way for Jonah. The prophet gave God credit for raising his life *from the Pit*. God appointed the fish, heard Jonah's prayers, and spared him from the descent into Sheol. Even though Jonah had much room for growth as the rest of the book of Jonah demonstrates, in his most desperate moment, he remembered the only One who could save his life. He turned back to the God from whom he had previously chosen to flee. He turned back to the Creator who sovereignly controls all His creation. The prophet of God *remembered* that only God could lift him up from the gates of death. In the Old Testament, the word *remember* often carries the idea of acting on the basis of knowledge. When Jonah remembered God, he prayed and cried out in his despair to the God whom he knew to be compassionate. When Jonah did this, the Lord heard his prayer and was ready and able to save His wayward prophet.

How are faith and repentance expressed by Jonah? Could a person express one without the other? Explain.

Jonah's tone turned from desperate to thankful. He remembered the sailors on the ship who were calling out to a god who could not hear, could not answer, and could not save. He recognized that *those who cherish worthless idols abandon their faithful love*. They forfeited the grace that could have been theirs because they did not turn to God in prayer but instead trusted their idols. The heart is indeed an idol factory. Jonah was not trusting in worthless idols. He confessed he would offer God a *voice of thanksgiving*. He would fulfill any vow he had made because he believed *salvation belongs to the LORD*. God's deliverance was miraculous then and is no less miraculous today. His God, the God of the Hebrews, was the only God who had the power to save, so Jonah's prayer turned from petition to thanksgiving and praise.

God saw Jonah's plight, heard His prayer, and answered in a miraculous way.

VERSE 10

After three days in the fish, *the LORD commanded the fish* to spit out Jonah on *dry land*. Ironically, everything in the story obeys God except Jonah—the storm, the fish, the wind, the people of Nineveh when confronted with the sin, the plant, and the worm. The word *vomited* is an especially distasteful word and is usually associated with disgust. Perhaps the disgust of the fish to have Jonah in his belly mirrored the disgust God felt as Jonah disobeyed and ran from Him, as if he could really escape God!

Jonah's prayer, while a beautiful description of how a person who is trying to escape God should respond, contains an irony that focuses the entire book. Jonah was ready to receive God's grace in the face of his own disobedience. But he later would be unhappy that God was willing to extend that same grace to the people of Nineveh who are willing to turn from their sin and seek after the Lord.

What does the delivering of Jonah reveal to us about God?

DID YOU KNOW?

The Assyrian city of Nineveh was located on the bank of the Tigris River. Its ruins are in the northern part of modern-day Iran, near Mosul. The city was approximately five hundred miles northeast of Jonah's hometown, Gath-hepher in Galilee (2 Kings 14:25). Ninevites were known in the ancient world for their cruelty and brutality. Tiglath-pileser, an Assyrian king (2 Kings 16:7; 1 Chron. 5:6; 2 Chron. 28:20), flayed victims alive and made great piles of their skulls.

