

## Salvation Through Judgment

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The Book of Jonah / Jonah 1:17-3:2

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### Introduction:

As we continue in our study of the book of Jonah, let me start with a couple questions. Have you ever, like Jonah, tried to flee from the Lord's call on your life? Or are you running from His call now? This could be a call to go and do something, or a call to change and grow in some way. See, the book of Jonah has a unique way of inviting reflection on our own lives as we look into the life of a rebellious prophet, and I believe we will get the most out of it when we ask God to expose the reality of our own rebellion through it. If you missed last week, we looked at Jonah 1:1-16 to see the foundation and focus of this narrative, centered on Jonah, as a prophet who attempts to flee the calling of God, and God, as a sovereign and merciful God who has compassion on all peoples. We saw how Jonah's attempts to flee God's call to go to Nineveh points our hearts to a rightful fear of the Lord, as his rebellion opened the door for pagan mariners to see God's pursuit of Jonah, and move from fearing the sea and their unnamed gods, to fearing the Lord, Yahweh, and worshipping Him through sacrifice and vows. We ended with Jonah being hurled into the sea, and the sea immediately ceasing its raging, wondering what would come of Jonah. But, before we dive into our text today, consider one more thing from chapter 1. One detail is glaringly lacking in these first 16 verses. We never see any mention of Jonah turning back to God, repenting, or even praying. In fact, look back at Jonah 1:3. Twice in verse 3, we are told that Jonah "went down," first to Joppa, and then into the boat. Then, in verse 5 we see that, "Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship." This repetition is drawing our attention to the lengths Jonah is going to rebel against God's call. Jonah continues to go down, and even Jonah's counsel to throw him overboard is a continued path downward, as it is essentially a death wish. Jonah would rather die than be sent to Nineveh to cry out against it. Recognizing this leads us well into the next part of this beautifully crafted narrative. Let's examine this part of the narrative in 3 scenes. The first scene is in verse 17, where,

### God Appoints a Fish to Save Jonah

This verse holds a scene that may be familiar to some of us, and careful observation helps us to see its importance. Look at what happens to Jonah after he has been thrown overboard in verse 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." Note the intentional language of the first half, "The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah." First, pay attention to that word appointed. It appears 3 more times in chapter 4, and each use shows God's sovereign control over creation, using it to accomplish His will. Here that control is over a great fish, revealing Jonah's confession of Yahweh as creator of the heavens and seas, from verse 9, means God has sovereign control over even the creatures of the seas. Now, notice the period in the middle of our English translations. This is there because of something called a "pausal accent" in the Hebrew. Its placement causes us to pause after seeing God's sovereignty on display and prepares us to slow down and see the details in the second half. Notice what comes next, "And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." When we read this, we are tempted to gloss over it and think it is simply describing how long Jonah was alive inside of the fish. However, there is likely more to this. Many scholars note how this is mostly likely connected to an ancient concept of the journey to death, or the underworld in ancient near eastern mythology, being a three-day journey. This makes sense when we recognize this stint in the belly of the fish is the time between Jonah being swallowed up here and later vomited up on dry land at the end of chapter 2, and in between is poetry that speaks about being close to death. This time in the belly of the fish, ending in Jonah ending up on dry land is God's means of rescuing Jonah from death. We will consider this more in a moment. Before we get there, we should address the debates that surround this event. Many have gone to great lengths to try to confirm or deny the plausibility of this miracle.

Some have tried to use science to prove that people could survive in the intestines of a great fish, others have tried to use science to disprove the possibility of this. Here are a few things that I think are worth noting. First, note how little details we are given in the narrative. This isn't vividly described but spoken of as a matter of fact. Second, if Jonah is right, and Yahweh is the maker of the sea and dry land, then God could appoint any kind of creature to swallow up Jonah and either keep him alive, or resurrection him once he is vomited up. Third, we cannot escape that this is presented as a miracle completely in God's hands. I think author and pastor David Platt concludes this well saying, "The author of Jonah doesn't seem to focus on answering our questions. The Lord is clearly in control of this scene, including this fish that he's appointed. The author accepts that this is clearly a miracle and is not trying to give us any further explanation... It was a divine act beyond human replication or explanation" ([radical.net/?session=session-2-jonahs-prayer](http://radical.net/?session=session-2-jonahs-prayer)). The main goal shouldn't be to prove or disprove this event, but see what God has for us through it, and our answer comes through Jonah's prayer in chapter 2. Move to the next scene with me, in Jonah 2:1-9, showing,

### **Jonah's Thankfulness for God's Salvation**

A quick glance at these verses shows something is definitely different, as the narrative switches from prose to poetry, meaning out interpretive principles need to change. Notice the start of verse 1, "Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish." The author starts with a clear indication of what we are about to read, it is a prayer of Jonah from the belly of the fish. This gives an expectation of what we might expect to read that is immediately thrown off. I would expect Jonah to be praying for help, asking to be delivered from the belly of the fish, or seeking forgiveness. Yet, look at the start of verse 2, "Then Jonah prayed... saying, 'I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me.'" Jonah's prayer is in the past tense. He isn't crying out to God for help, but speaking of how he called out and God answered. This is a prayer of thanksgiving, recounting something God has already done. Let's move through this prayer focusing on the main ideas. Look at the rest of verse 2, "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice." Jonah is summarizing his plea to the Lord and the Lord's answer. He speaks of his plea as calling out to the Lord and crying to him from his distress, and "out of the belly of Sheol." Sheol was a common designation for the place of death. Bryan Estelle, an Old Testament scholar, also comments, "Sheol refers to a place of divine punishment, a curse often wished on the ungodly" (Bryan Estelle, *Salvation through Judgment and Mercy*, 82). The point is to show how Jonah sought help from the Lord at the lowest point, in the pangs of death's grip and feeling the weight of divine judgement. Church, this is where the Lord heard him and answered him. Have you ever felt like you were in a place like this when you called out to the Lord? Common to Hebrew poetry, verse 2 summarizes the situation of Jonah, and verses 3-7 detail what has taken place. Follow the flow of verse 3-7. Start in verse 3, "For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me." Notice what verse 3 is speaking about. It is not referring to his time in the fish, but in the sea. We also see that he speaks of his situation in poetic language with phrases influenced by the psalms, including the ending being identical with Psalm 42:7. We would expect this from a prophet as the psalms were seen as expressions for the people of Israel to use. Note two things in this verse. First, he points to God's action in him ending up in the sea, saying "you cast me into the deep." While the mariners tossed Jonah overboard, Jonah recognizes God's hand behind it. Second, there is a sense of desperation in the poetry. He says he was engulfed by the sea and speaks of it overwhelming him. Continue in verses 4-7, "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." Verse 4 shows Jonah's initial turn to the Lord. He speaks of sensing his removal from the eye of God.

This doesn't mean God couldn't see him, but that he became aware of the lack of joy in the presence of God. In this moment, he turns to God with a confidence that He would look on God again. He then describes the depth of his situation. He speaks of weeds wrapping around his head, making it to the foundation of the mountains at the bottom of the sea, and feeling the bars closed over him. The imagery pictures Jonah descending all the way to the bottom of the sea but, as poetry, this isn't necessarily meant to be taken literally. The point is that he sensed he was deep into the sea and nearing death's door. Note the phrase "I went down," in verse 6 pointing back to the action of Jonah that started in verse 3 of chapter 1. This is the final stage of his descent away from God's presence. And he describes it as reaching the bottom of the sea in the pangs of death. Then, notice the second "yet," in verse 6, "yet you brought up my life from the pit." This is the reversal of Jonah's downward descent to escape his call from God. At the lowest point, where Jonah describes his life as fainting away, he remembers Yahweh and His God, his prayers reach God in His holy place, and God intervened, bringing him up from death's door. Church, see the compassion and mercy of God as he provides salvation for Jonah. Finally, notice the ending of Jonah's in verses 8-9, "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!" This is the crux of this whole narrative, found at the center of this book. Jonah describes a pursuit of idols as an empty pursuit that actually forsakes the steadfast love of God. An idol is not simply a false crafted image that we believe to be god, as Tim Keller says well, "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'" (Keller, Counterfeit Gods, xviii). Church, anything we turn to other than God for satisfaction and security will always be an empty pursuit and never lead to the satisfaction we think. Jonah has seemingly discovered this, so he uses an emphatic contrast in verse 9 to describe his commitment to do what we saw the mariners do in verse 16 of chapter one, to give thanksgiving, sacrifices, and make vows. The final line of this prayer may be the point of the entire book. Look there with me, Jonah proclaims "Salvation belongs to the Lord!" Just as the mariners found salvation from Yahweh, Jonah proclaims salvation belongs only to the Lord. This theme continues in the next two chapters as well. Let this echo in your soul, "Salvation belongs to the Lord!" It is following this proclamation that we are brought to the end of that three day and three-night journey in the belly of the fish mentioned at the end of chapter 1. Consider the final scene with me in Jonah 2:10-3:2, where,

### **God Restores Jonah & Calls Him Again**

We won't unpack verses 1-2 of chapter 3, saving that for next week, but I think they are worth connecting to the end of our observations. Look at the focus of the narrative in Jonah 2:10-3:2, "And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.'" Again, we see God's sovereignty over creation as He merely speaks to the fish and the fish obeys. Jonah denied God's call, but the fish obeys immediately. We also see a connection with the mariners failed attempt to get Jonah to dry land, as the fish brings to the dry land. The vomited Jonah is a vivid description of a man back where he started, preserved from death, or possibly resurrected from death, with the remaining evidence of his judgment and salvation. And this is immediately followed by the Lord's calling a second time. I love the beginning of verse 1 because it points to our gracious God of second chances. The first five words of verse 2 are identical to Jonah's original call. God call his servant again, and though we may know how he responds this time, let's wait until next week to dive into that. At this point, I want to consider what this event points our hearts to. First,

#### **1) This Event Points to God's Astounding Mercy**

Jonah was in full rebellion against God's call, even to the point of choosing death over heeding the call of God. Yet, when he hits the water, and begins to drown, it becomes evident that he was not ready to truly be away from the presence of God.

So, he cries out to God, and God, in His astounding mercy, saves His rebellious prophet. Oh church, see yourself in Jonah. Romans 5:8-10 says, “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” It was while we were still sinners and enemies of God that God reconciled us through the death of Jesus. We weren’t just casually going about our business. We were in rebellion against our creator. Our sin caused us to be in the cross hairs of God’s wrath against it. We denied His goodness and turned our back on Him. Yet, He showed astounding mercy towards us, placing the wrath we deserved for our rebellion on His perfect Son. Are you thankful to God for His astounding mercy? Do you long to give the sacrifice of your life in thankfulness? Does your heart proclaim that salvation belongs to the Lord? This event calls for us to evaluate our response to God’s salvation as we look on His mercy towards Jonah. Second,

## **2) This Event Points to Jesus Christ’s Death & Resurrection**

Jesus looks back on this event and points to the sign of the prophet Jonah, as a sign for those who long to see the truth. Look at Matthew 12:39-40. Jesus says, “no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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.” The imagery of Jonah being saved from death’s grip through the salvation of God provided by the fish is meant to point forward to our salvation coming through Jesus’ defeat of death. Here is what is amazing though, Jonah experienced God’s judgment for his sin, yet Jesus experienced God’s judgment for our sin. On the cross, Jesus bore the wrath of God, not for His sin, but for ours. Jonah was alive after three days in the belly of the fish, and now Jesus is alive after three days in the grave. God takes what looks like death and the end and makes it a place of hope and true life. And as we see the resurrection of Jesus, we know that His claims to provide the forgiveness we need were true. So we turn to trust in Him and discover the truth Jonah proclaimed, “Salvation belongs to the Lord,” and the truth Jonah will discover, that God’s compassion and mercy extends to even the greatest of rebellious sinners.

### **Conclusion:**

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of response, let me ask the original questions I asked to open. Have you ever, like Jonah, tried to flee from the Lord’s call on your life? Or, are you running from His call now? Maybe you have yet to respond to the call of the gospel, because you think it can’t possibly be true. How could God the Son come to dwell with us? How could Jesus rise from the dead? How could His death cover so much sin? “Salvation belongs to the Lord!” God sent His Son to live the life we could not live and die the death we deserved. Respond today by trusting in Jesus and find mercy. Maybe you are running from a call of God on your life, to do something or change in some way. See the foolishness of those efforts and know that, even at the bottom of your descent, it isn’t too late to cry out to God for His deliverance. Turn back and find the Lord’s mercy. Or perhaps you are being brought back up from the depths of your rebellion, and God is calling you to worship His holy name so others around you will see His mercy and grace through your response. Whatever it may be, this is an extended time to seek God’s grace and ask for His help to respond properly. You are welcome to come and kneel before Him as you cry out to Him. You can also remain seated and reflect on His goodness the whole time or stand and sing as He leads. We also have a team of people ready to pray with you and for you that you will see worshipping on the front rows or at the bottom of the stairs in the back. Let’s press into what the Lord has for us in this time.

Pray with me.