

MBC - 2/3/2019 - Pastor Doug Thompson
 Jonah: A Story of God's Relentless Grace
 #3 - "*Broken in the Belly of the Beast*"
 Jonah 2

Turn with me to the end of Jonah ch.1.

When we last left Jonah, he had defied the direct order of God to go and preach to the Assyrian city of Nineveh. He said *no*. He caught a ship that was going 2,000 miles in the opposite direction to run from God. You *can* run from God - you just can't get away from God.

So God sent the perfect storm, and the crew was terrified. Jonah told them to throw him in the sea and the storm would stop. It wasn't because he cared about their lives, it was because he would rather die than to preach to Assyrians and possibly see them receive mercy.

Last week saw that the unbelievers in this story behave much better than Jonah, the prophet of God. As chapter one ends, the sailors are rejoicing and worshiping the true God! Jonah is sinking down into the Mediterranean Sea - pouting, with his arms crossed - and right before He drowns, God saves him. Let's read it together—

- Jon 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.
- Jon1:1 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! (or 'salvation comes from the Lord')" And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

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In Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, there are two brothers: the younger one represents all of the rejected prostitutes, tax-collectors and outcasts who were coming to Jesus. The older brother represented the legalistic Jews who thought that they didn't need Jesus. They were tight with God. They were His covenant people. And they despised these "sinners" who were receiving compassion from this Jesus.

In this parable, when the younger son received forgiveness and mercy from his father, the older brother crossed his arms and pouted - just like Jonah.

- Jonah is the original brother. Jonah *prided* himself on being a son of Abraham, a good Hebrew, and he hated the thought of God's covenant mercies being squandered on pagan Gentiles. The pagans in Nineveh would represent the younger son - godless sinners - but before this story is over, they also receive salvation from God, 10's of 1000's of them! And just like the story of the prodigal son, Jonah was resentful and angry that God is merciful even to far-off people who come to Him broken and needy.

*I hope you remember the question we asked in the first lesson: is there any person or group of people that really don't want to be saved because they are so godless, so undeserving of mercy? Oh, search your heart for that sin! No one *deserves* mercy! Whenever God saves a person - including you and me - that is undeserved mercy.

- But the real twist in the story of Jonah is that God also pursues and rescues racist, self-righteous, unmerciful, judgmental *Jonah* too!

Isn't that just like God? He saved that immoral woman at the well - and He also saved a self-righteous Pharisee like Saul of Tarsus. And whether you are like the rebellious younger brother, or the self-righteous religious older brother, God can save you this morning, and He will do that by bringing you to brokenness to see your need for Him. So first let's look at—

I. Jonah's predicament.

- Jon 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 subtitle for this section should be: "Really bad day, but could have been much worse." I mean, the man was swallowed by a whale - but he didn't drown.

You've heard that saying: When a dog bites a man, that's not news, but when a man bites a dog, that's news. At MBC, when a man catches a big fish, that's not news - it's also not necessarily true! - but when a big *fish* catches a *man*, that's news! We're finally at the part of the story that most people are familiar with: Jonah is swallowed by a great fish - and lives to tell.

Let's clear up something here: the Heb. word for "great fish" doesn't differentiate between a fish or a mammal, so yes, it could actually have been a whale that swallowed Jonah.

- And some of you have heard the story of James Bartley, the sailor who was on a whaling ship called the Star of the East in 1891. They were whaling off the Falkland Islands when the whale attacked their ship, he fell overboard, was swallowed by a whale - And when they cut the whale open, Bartley was still alive but unconscious. His skin had been bleached white, his hair had fallen out, but he lived to a ripe old age. So there is scientific proof that the story of Jonah could be true. Except for the fact that **it never happened.** It's been quoted in sermons, commentaries, and books for over 100 years, and it was a hoax. No evidence that it ever happened. (You can read about it on truthorfiction.com.)

But we don't need a whale-swallows-man story to *prove* that Jonah could have been swallowed by some big sea creature. All we need is God's Word on it, right? This was a miracle of God - OK, so maybe Jonah was really small, I mean he was a *minor* prophet, right? But my friends, God can make a fish big enough to swallow a *major* prophet like Isaiah, amen? Amen.

God appointed this creature to be in the right place at exactly the right time and it swallowed Jonah, whole. He was in that awful place for 3 days and 3 nights. Can a man really survive for 3 days and nights in the stomach of a whale? Probably no more than a person can stay in a grave dead for 3 days and nights and come out alive! This is why Jesus called this a sign:

- Mat 12:39-40 "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but 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.

Jesus knew that this was no ordinary event, it was a sign of God's direct, supernatural intervention, just like His own resurrection would be. God had just saved Jonah's life, and Jonah got it—

- Jon 2:1 *Then* Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,

The way this reads, it was *at the end* of those 3 days and nights that Jonah prayed from the belly of the fish. I want you to think about what Jonah had been through:

When the sailors tossed Jonah into the raging sea, he was defiant and angry at God. He went into that cold water having no comfort from God, no peace, no assurance. He went *alone* down, down into that cold water. It sounds as though he didn't even take a breath of air because he sank like a rock:

- Jon 2:5-6 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 . . .

He thought these were his last moments of life. He was drowning, sinking deeper, tangled in the weeds. He felt like his lungs were going to explode. If you've ever had that experience, you know the panic and the terror he must have felt.

But imagine Jonah, sinking down into cold, dark water, with only seconds left to live, knowing that he is completely cut off from mankind, and he had cut himself off from God. He couldn't have been more alone, helpless, hopeless, and farther from God.

And this is when God came to Jonah! As he was blacking out, God brought Jonah to his senses. Look with me—

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

Doesn't this remind you of the thief on the cross? As his life is draining out of his body, God saved him. So get this: Jonah's first prayer was while he was still in the water, before he was swallowed up. God came to Jonah and granted him a repentant heart to cry out to Him to save Him. And the next thing Jonah experienced was complete darkness, and a smothering constriction all around his body. He didn't know if he was up or down, he just felt a tightness.

And boy, did it smell like fish.

He had just been swallowed whole by some giant sea creature. We don't know if he was in and out of consciousness - but we do know that after three days, he revived enough to pray his *second* prayer describing those moments he spent in the water.

Realize as we look at his prayer that Jonah is still in this creature's belly, but he sees it as his deliverance from God—even though he isn't out yet! It saved him from drowning in the water, he knows that. And he believes that if God would come to him while he was still in his rebellion and guilt - at the end of his rope - that God would deliver him.

II. Jonah's prayer.

This is a stripped down, no frills prayer. It's short and honest because it's the prayer of a desperate man. That's the way we should always pray, right?

- It reminds me of the shortest prayer in the Bible -when another man was sinking in the water - Peter! 3 words, “Lord, save me!” And Jesus did. Prayer should be getting down to business with God - creature crying out to Creator.

But this prayer shows us that *God* opened Jonah’s eyes in that dark place to see the truth about his condition, and the truth about God. Some scholars find as many as 10 allusions to Old Testament Scriptures in this prayer. God had to give Jonah the grace to remember His Word. God did this. And what did Jonah see?

A.) Jonah saw his brokenness before God.

- Jon 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.”

Distress - means emotional anguish, like a panic attack. He feels like he is in Sheol, the place of the dead. He couldn’t be any lower. His faith is stripped to the bone, He is *empty-handed* before God. He is completely at the mercy of God. He is *broken*.

And my friends, this is when we have God’s ear! In Isaiah 62:2, God said, “*this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit* - that word means ‘*crushed like dust*’ - *and who trembles at My word.*” Like that poor tax-collector in Jesus’ parable who couldn’t even lift up his head but just beat his chest and cried out, “*Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner!*” And Jesus said he went away justified - he had peace with God.

Broken is a good place to be before God, because He resists the proud who just want some help, but He hears the cries of those who see their utter brokenness and come to Him as the only One who can save them.

- When I first came to Middletown, there was a prominent man in the community who would come in to see me about once a week. He would saunter in with his chin up and say, “Yeah Doug, I just need to charge up my spiritual batteries, I need a quick zap, so charge me up man so I can get back to work!”
- I contrast that man, who still doesn’t know Christ, to the young man in our youth group I heard giving his testimony. He talked about kneeling beside his bed and crying out to God in tears, “God I’m going to hell unless You save me!” That young man went away justified - he had peace with God.

Brokenness is good when it sucks the last bit of self- sufficiency out of you so that you cry out to out to all-sufficient God for mercy. But so often we cling on to just enough self-confidence that it keeps us from going to God - isn’t that true? “No, it’s OK God, I can handle this one.”

- J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books, gave the Harvard commencement speech in 2008. She described a point she had reached in her life: “I had failed on an epic scale. An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain without being homeless. So I began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. (Listen to this:) *Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena, [writing, in which] I believed I truly belonged.*” I.e., Her success was built on her failures.

She turned to her own strength. But this is where Paul turned when he was at the bottom—

- 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 But he (God) said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

B.) Jonah saw God’s omniscience.

- Jon 2:2 “out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.”

When Jonah was disobeying God he acted like God couldn’t see him running down to Joppa and getting on a boat! Like he was too fast for God. Sin makes us stupid!

- We’ve got a picture on our refrigerator of our grandson Peter playing hide and seek with his brothers. He thinks he is hiding, but actually, his eyes are just shut - he’s convinced if he can’t see his brothers, they can’t see him!

In Ps. 10:11, the wicked man thinks the same thing: “*God has forgotten, He has hidden His face, He will never see it.*” And any time you and I choose to sin, we are acting like God can’t see us and doesn’t know what we are doing.

But when God came to Jonah in that dark, isolated place, immediately Jonah knew that God was there, God hadn’t forgotten him at all, and his cries had reached his God - even there!

- Psalm 139:11-12 ¹¹If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” ¹²even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

Do you believe that? And don’t you love God for that? In the darkest, loneliest, painful place you’re your sin has taken you - *nothing* can separate you from the love of God in Christ. How did Matthew’s Gospel end? Jesus promised every one of His disciples, “*I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*”

C.) Jonah saw God’s sovereignty.

- Jon 2:3 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.

Who threw Jonah into the sea? It was the sailors’ arms, but it was God’s hand. Now he gets it: This was *all* God. Have you had those moments when that hits you? “Whoa! None of this is accidental! God is behind it all!” It takes your breath away. That storm was from God, the fish was from God. He needed to pray to that God!

Some Christians fuss and fume when you talk about God being sovereign, but when they are on their knees, they sure *pray* like He is sovereign over all things, or they wouldn’t pray to Him at all, right?

D.) Jonah saw God’s mercy.

As disobedient and guilty as Jonah was, the eyes of faith saw a God who could forgive:

- Jon 2:4-7 Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ [I am going to worship you again in the land of the living, Lord.] 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.

Jonah wasn't on his way to Nineveh to preach at a church family camp, he was running away from obeying God! But he still knew that God "*is a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*" And God gave him faith to believe that He would answer him in spite of his great guilt. Some of you are in a storm right now, because of your own sin. And now you wonder if He can hear you in the dark place you are in. He can and He will!

- Psalm 32:5-7 (NIV84) ⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"— and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. ⁷You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

Cry out to Him wherever you are! He's a merciful God. And there's more mercy in Him than there is sin in you!

E.) Jonah saw the folly of idolatry.

- Jon 2:8 Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

Oh, this is a profound passage: Whatever you live for, you serve, and whatever you serve, unless it is Christ, is an idol. And idols make promises: More money and success will make you happy. Partying will make you happy. Having that other person will make you happy—even if it's an immoral relationship. They are all lies, but this is the promise of Jesus Christ: "*Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest! The one who comes to Me, I will not cast out!*" And Jesus *always* keeps His promises.

But if you believe your lying idols, you give up your only hope of "*steadfast love.*" It's the Heb. word *hesed*, and it means the saving, covenant love of God that will never let you go.

Jonah is preaching to us in this prayer: Don't trade eternal life and the love of God for some phony, lying idol! Don't forfeit God's grace for temporal pleasure. That's tragic.

*But I want to point out something that doesn't jump right out of the text. Who is Jonah referring to in v.8? Who are those who trade God's grace for idols? Jonah's talking about pagans who worship literal statues and idols. What he says is right, but do you hear a spirit of superiority and self-righteousness? "*Those people Lord - I'm so glad I'm not like those people!*" And we know this is true because he explodes in anger in ch.4 when pagans find mercy from God.

So even though Jonah is broken - *partially* - he still has lessons to learn, doesn't he? Jonah has his own idols that he doesn't recognize yet. He needs God's grace as much as any heathen.

*Don't assume that just because you are sad and suffering that you are learning all the lessons God has for you! Pain is not necessarily a sign of your virtue or holiness.

But the final thing Jonah learned sums it all up:

F.) Jonah saw that salvation belongs to the Lord.

- Jon 2:9 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 in the possessive, you could say, “Salvation is the Lord’s - it belongs *to* Him, and comes *from* Him alone.)

I’m not exaggerating when I say that this is the theme of the whole Bible: “Salvation is from the Lord.” It means that salvation belongs to God alone, to no one else. If someone is saved, it’s God’s doing. It is not a matter of God partly saving you and you partly saving yourself. No. Salvation belongs to the Lord - He saves us. We can’t save ourselves. And He saves a multitude from every nation, tribe, and tongue! That’s the gospel.

- But God had to strip Jonah down to nothing for him to see this. There’s no place like a whale’s belly to learn that only God can save you.

I’ll tell you, I pray to God to provide a whale for some unsaved folks I know, if that’s what it takes. But God can save them with or without a whale because salvation belongs to the Lord.

Jonah had just seen that with those sailors: they weren’t searching for God, they were just pagans perishing in a storm - but God *saved* them, physically and spiritually. And he was about to see it again when he finally reached Nineveh: Those were hell-deserving people who knew next to nothing about the God of Israel. If salvation depended upon them, it wouldn’t have happened, but salvation belongs to the Lord.

- Remember when God created Adam, he was a lifeless body until God breathed the spirit of life into him. That’s a picture of salvation: we are spiritually lifeless, unresponsive to God - like a corpse - until *He* breathes new, eternal life into us. Then we show the signs of this new life when we believe the Gospel, and have a new love for Jesus Christ, and a desire to worship Him, and be with His people, and be done with sin. But all of those are the *effects*, God is the *cause* because salvation belongs to the Lord.

So many Christians think that God finished His part in salvation when Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Then He says, “Now it’s up to you to believe!” But dead men *can’t* believe and be saved. And even if they could, they *won’t*—

- Rom.3: 11: no one understands, no one seeks for God. - not one.

So God not only provides Christ on the cross for our sins, but then He drags us to the cross to believe by granting us a new heart and the gift of faith. And He *can* do that and He *must* do that because salvation belongs to the Lord.

in Genesis 19, God said that fire and brimstone were about to rain down on Sodom. Lot had to flee with his family *RIGHT NOW*, or they would all be destroyed. But listen to v.16. This is how God saves every sinner—

- Genesis 19:16 ¹⁶But Lot *lingered*. (What? He lingered? Let me tell you, we would all linger unless God intervened.) So the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, *the LORD being merciful to him*, and they *brought him* out and set him outside the city.

Aren’t you glad that salvation belongs to the Lord? Jonah was sure glad.

Thank God for your whale.

When Jonah was sinking down, running out of oxygen, he didn't see that whale's open mouth as his lifesaver, but it was! It was smelly, slimy, dark, and horrible, it was *bad*, but it saved his life.

God saved me when I was 17. The Jesus movement was sweeping across the country and it had come to my little town, and I wanted nothing to do with it. I had heard the Gospel, I knew where salvation was, and I *knew* that I was running from God. So God sent a whale in the form of everything falling apart in my 17-year old life. That's what it took to bring me to Jesus, and save me from hardening my heart forever. About 2 years later, I read the story of Jonah, and I said to myself: that's me! What I thought was the worst that could happen, saved me from hell. Thank you Lord for my whale!

- I've seen many people in the belly of the beast. They hit the bottom: They finally lost their health, their marriages, their families. They ended up on the streets, in rehab, in prison. But that was their whale. It was the mercy of God. He crushed all their earthly hopes and smashed all their idols, so that they might cry out to Him, and find salvation in Him.

The same God who cared enough for Jonah to bring him a whale to save his life, is the same God who cares about you this morning.

And some of you are in the whale right now, and some of you are going to be there one day, and I pray you will remember these words: it's the kindness of God that put you there! And God can save you, but only God. Salvation is from the Lord.

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Back in 1983 I was working for the Grace to You Radio ministry, and I began corresponding with a woman in N. Carolina who was on death row for poisoning 5 people. The press called her the "death-row granny." Her name was Velma Barfield, and she was due to be the first woman executed in this country in almost 30 years, and I didn't know it at the time, but Ruth and Billy Graham were also writing to her, and people all over the country were trying to get her death sentence commuted.

She wrote to the radio ministry because she had begun listening to John MacArthur on the radio, and wanted materials to help her in her Bible study. She wrote her story in a book called "Woman on Death Row," and described how she had been brought up in an abusive home, got hooked on prescription drugs at an early age, and lived a wretched life, even though she had heard the Gospel when she was a child.

- She had been drowning in the sea, but didn't realize it, until she got caught for her crimes and was sentenced to die by lethal injection. God brought her a whale in the form of a death-row jail cell! And one night in that cell, God came to her, and broke her - just like he did with Jonah - and she began sobbing, wondering if Jesus could ever love her and forgive her for all she had done.

She said that it was like Jesus came to her in that cell and seemed to say to her, "I died on the cross for your sins too. Won't you let Me come and give you a brand new life?" And she said, "Right then and there I confessed my sins to Him and I asked Him to forgive me. He came into my life that night."

- By the time I started corresponding with her, she had her own jail ministry, she was witnessing, counseling, and almost every page of her Bible had something written on it. She said "This Bible is where I get my strength. I couldn't get up in the morning, much less go through the day, without His Word."

The night before she was executed, Nov. 2nd, 1984, she told the chaplain, "When I enter that chamber at 2:00 am it will be my gateway to heaven!"

And it was. *Joh 5:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*