

Jonah 1:17-2:10

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[0 : 0 0] pastor here along with Chris. And, you know, this is probably a good opportunity to embarrass Kyron, who I think stepped out. But that little lick that he was doing on Come Now Fount, that's a little thing that he was working on this week. One of our goals as a church is to be an intentionally multi-ethnic and multicultural church. We want to be a church for all kinds of people. And part of, one of the most important parts of that is having music that speaks to different cultural backgrounds and different cultural preferences. And Kyron is a master. Kyron, the arrangement we do for all creatures was Kyron and Josh's creation. A number of times when you hear things that come out that sound a little bit different, that's intentional because we want it to sound different to you so that it might sound familiar to someone else who's not in this room. Isn't that right?

That we want it to sound different to you so it's familiar to somebody else. And that's part of what the gospel does, is it invites us in. It, well, I can, I'm not, I got a sermon to preach in a minute.

I'm not going to go all there. Okay. When we last left Jonah, he was sinking down into the waves and the water. This story is meant to leave you, as Chris kind of talked about, it's meant to leave you with a question. The question's this, what do you do when you're drowning in life?

What do you do when you're drowning in life? How do you handle that? This passage has a lot to say to that. So let's read the end of chapter one and through chapter two.

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 look again upon your holy temple.

[2 : 3 0] The life, the waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me. Weeds were wrapped around 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. Oh, 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.

When I have vowed, what I have vowed, I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord. And the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. Friends, this is God's word.

He gives it to you because he loves you and because he wants you to know him. Amen. I don't know if y'all saw this movie, but it's one of my favorite movies, a little indie film from 2006, Little Miss Sunshine. Y'all remember this? Anybody? It's great. If you haven't seen it, you should.

But one of the reasons that I like it is that it follows this incredibly dysfunctional family as it's kind of descending into more and more chaos. There's Cheryl. Cheryl is Toni Collette, who, Toni Collette's great. She's an overworked mother of two. Cheryl's, her second husband's name is Richard. And he is this, he is this trying but failing to build this career as a motivational speaker and life coach, except nobody really wants to listen to what he's saying. And Cheryl has another brother, Steve Carell, named Frank. And he's an unemployed literature professor who's just been released because he attempted to commit suicide and has been in a mental institution.

Dwayne is Cheryl's teenager from another marriage, but he is a teenager who's all brooding and dark. He's reading Nietzsche as a teenager, and he's taken a vow of silence that he's not going to break, which is hilarious. And then there's Richard, Cheryl's husband, whose father is around. He's kind of this foul-mouthed guy named Edwin. He lives with the family because he's been evicted from his old folks' home for snorting cocaine. Anyway, I thought about editing that part, but you know. And then at the center of it all is seven-year-old Olive. She is Richard and Cheryl's only daughter, and she is this aspiring but very bad beauty queen. Like, she's just not good at it, but she wants to be a beauty queen.

[5 : 21] And so the whole story of Little Miss Sunshine is this family that is descending into chaos, goes on a road trip to help Olive go to a beauty pageant that she really wants to go to. That's the whole story. And through it, there is some measure of redemptive hope that they are hoping to discover along the way. It's great. I think the reason why movies like Little Miss Sunshine resonate with us is because we can all relate to that sense of being overwhelmed and hopeless.

You know, when the waters of life have risen up over our heads and you feel like you're drowning, that's the mood of Jonah chapter 2, isn't it? Jonah 2 is filled with a sense of despair, like that Jonah has hit rock bottom. You know, you have this drama-filled first chapter with, you know, God speaking to Jonah, him running away to Tarshish and getting on a boat, and all this stuff is happening, a storm throwing in the waves, and then everything in chapter 2 slows down. It's like in a James Bond movie or something where you have this action-packed car chase, and then the car rams through the sidewall and off a bridge into the river below, and all of a sudden, the sounds from the street stop. There's no more sirens. There's no more screeches of tires.

Everything gets a little bit blurry. The camera zooms in on James Bond, who's trying desperately to get the seat belt off and try to get out of the car, and he's slowly taking on water and beginning to drown. Things look like there's a panic. That's kind of the feeling of chapter 2. Everything stops and focuses in on Jonah in his tomb in the belly of the fish. Jonah's literally headed towards rock bottom at the bottom of the sea. A friend of mine has been going through a difficult season. He texted me something this week. This is what he said. He said, I feel so confused and tired and alone.

I don't doubt that God exists or that He's good, but I wonder about His tenderness. Does He care? You see, the message of this passage is a resounding yes. God does care, and not only does He care, but God is actually at work bringing redemptive hope in ways that Jonah can't quite figure out and appreciate. Now, here's the thing. A lot of biblical scholars, when they come to this passage, and perhaps this is the way you've always come to this passage, they come to this passage very positively. You know, they look at this passage as, boy, this is a very simple thing. Jonah's floating down to the bottom of the sea. God rescues him. This is Jonah's prayer to make things right. Jonah has learned his lesson. Yay, Jonah. But I think what you're going to find is as you dig into his prayer, there's actually a lot of things that don't make sense. It's actually not as simple of a story as that.

Yeah, Jonah prayed, and that's good that he prayed, but as we dig into it, something different is going on. I think what you're going to see is that Jonah really isn't a hero at all, but Jonah is a lot like me. He's a lot like you. He's a lot like the people that I know. There are significant aspects that show real misunderstandings of his own situation, of his own understanding of who God is, of his own understanding of what grace is all about. Now, it's good that he's praying, and Jonah's got a lot to figure out, but you can also see lots of gaps. So here's the thing that I want you to see this morning is that Jonah is no hero, but there's a glorious salvation from God that is at work even in the midst of this. So let's jump in. Jonah's new hero. Jonah's a lot like me. Verse 1, Then Jonah prayed. Then Jonah prayed. Isn't that great? Good job, Jonah. You have had three days in the belly of a fish to kind of figure out that maybe it's time for you to pray. There's an irony here that there's a contrast between Jonah and the sailors in chapter 1. The sailors are the ones who consistently respond to what they're observing that is obviously from God, but Jonah isn't.

[9 : 49] They've already prayed. The sailors have already prayed to Yahweh, the covenant God, twice, but now Jonah prays. It's a little surprising, to put it lightly, that he waited until now to pray.

You know, Jonah is praying after the storm, after the waves, after he's saved by the fish, and there's a little bit of foreshadowing, even in that little phrase that now Jonah prays, that there's something amiss in Jonah's soul, and his prayer is going to kind of reveal it. There's an epiphany going on. We're in the season of epiphany, a revealing. His prayer reveals something. So what does he pray? Well, when he prays, he prayed the Psalms. I don't know if you noticed that. It might have sounded familiar to you.

In fact, in Jonah's prayer, there are probably a dozen direct or indirect allusions or quotes from the Psalms. Jonah was praying what he knew. Let me just say something really good about this.

This is great. You know, the Psalms have long been called the prayer book of God's people. Most Christian traditions have prioritized reading and knowing the Psalms. In fact, reading the Psalms at least monthly, all 150 Psalms at least monthly. Let me just say, if you want to learn to pray, you need to get to know the Psalms intimately. In fact, one of the reasons we have a Psalm every week that we highlight, one of the reasons we sing Psalms, that we talk about Psalms a lot, is because unfortunately in our kind of evangelical world, we have de-emphasized the Psalms. The Psalms have become just poems that might feel nice to us, and we forget about the rest of them. We have divorced the Psalms from discipleship.

Okay, I'm going to get off my soapbox about Psalms now. We'll move on. Here's the surprising thing. Even though he was praying words from the Psalms, there's something that's kind of incongruent about his prayer. Did you notice this? There's three things I think you can see that are incongruent, just really quickly. The first one is this. Most of the language from the Psalms come from Psalms of thanksgiving, Psalms of praise, and not Psalms of lament or Psalms of confession.

[12 : 11] Look at verse 2. I called to you, and you answered out of Sheol, or out of the grave, or out of the depths of the earth, some translation like that, and you heard. Look at verses 4 and 6. Both have, they start in, I am driven away from your sight, yet, yet shall I look. Verse 6. I went down to the land whose bars closed over me forever, yet you brought me up. You brought my life up. And that's the theme.

I was in trouble, but God. That's the theme that Jonah is praying here. It's throughout here. That's this theme of thanksgiving. And that is true, and it is beautiful. It is wonderful. God rescues us out of our trouble. But that doesn't seem to be the kind of prayer I would think that Jonah should be praying.

Turns out that Jonah is in a mess of his own making. Wouldn't you imagine if Jonah was in the belly of a fish at the bottom of the ocean, that Jonah might start by confessing some sins?

That he might start by saying, you know what, I think I've gotten myself into a bad place. Maybe there should be something about contrition here. Maybe this would be the prayer of a chastened man who is recognizing his foolishness and turning away from his rebelliousness, but that's nowhere to be found. Compare David's Psalms. Here's David in Psalm 32. I acknowledged my sin to you. I did not cover my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Seems an odd way for Jonah to pray. Here's the second thing that feels incongruent to me. Take a look at how, the best way I can express it is how passive Jonah seems, how he pictures himself. Look at verse 3. You cast me out. Your waves and billows passed over me. Verse 4. I am driven away from your sight. Verse 5. The waters closed in to take my life. Now, I just want to say this carefully, but it kind of sounds like Jonah's prayer is dominated by a sense of self-pity and victimhood, as though all the events that Jonah is experiencing are things that have happened to him, not as the result of any of his own actions. You know, it's like a teenager who gets their first speeding ticket, and they come home, and they show you the speeding ticket, and they say, I can't believe that that cop was hiding where he was. I wasn't going as fast as the other people who were passing me. This is so unfair. All of this stuff has happened to me. You see, Jonah seems to be only focused on the effects of his sins, not on his actions or the things that caused his situation. Now, that may seem a little bit harsh to you. That may seem like, whoa, Benji, super judgmental there, guy. And that may be a little bit true, but then you look at verses 8 and 9. Look at this. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. Yeah, idolatry is bad. Well, look at verse 9. But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will pay to the Lord, or what I have vowed I will pay. It almost sounds like when Jonah talks about idolaters, people who are not following God, that he's not talking about himself. It almost sounds like he slipped back into this kind of way of talking that is, well, you know, I'm Jewish. I'm a follower of

Yahweh. And you know what? Those Gentiles, like those sailors, they're a bunch of idolaters. They're the bad guys. You know, I might be in a bad way down here at the bottom of the ocean, but those guys are terrible. I'm going to fulfill my vows. I'm going to come to you with thanksgiving, but they're idolaters. They're away from your presence forever. You know, let me say it this way.

[16 : 34] It almost sounds like Jonah is sitting in the belly of a fish throwing shade at Gentiles. It's almost as though that sense of elitism and racism that was a part of his whole desire to run in the first place, his hatred at God's command to go preach to the enemies of Israel, that that's popping back up. He's supposed to be at the place of rock bottom, and yet he still sees himself standing in judgment over other people. Here's the thing. This sounds a lot like me.

Sounds a lot like people that I know. Jonah had hit rock bottom, and he doesn't even seem to fully grasp it. He had some scripture in his brain. He was praying. He was saying some true things. He was able to know that God is true and God is good, but there was still this gap there in his understanding.

He didn't really get it. Now, if that sounds a little judgmental of me, just wait. Wait till we get to chapter 4, and what you'll see is that by the end of the book, you can see that Jonah really doesn't get it. He gets angry at God. His racism comes out. There are things that Jonah has not seen that he needs to see. Jonah has not arrived yet. He is not the hero of this story, but here's the thing. Neither am I. This reminds me a lot of the way that I deal with God. There have been times where I think that I've hit rock bottom, where I think that my heart has fully been revealed for the ugly realities that are there, and yet I keep coming back. I come back to those bad old ways, those bad old ways of thinking and acting and living. There's this show. You may have seen this. I think it's on HBO.

It follows big wave surfers. It's called a 100-foot wave. It's crazy, but I was watching some of this, and in a recent episode, they were surfing these waves off the coast of Nazar, Portugal, which is renowned as having the biggest waves ever. It'll pop up on everyone's Facebook feed later this afternoon because I mentioned it. And when one man fell under these waves, here's how he described the experience. It took him, he was under the water for minutes before he came up, and it shot him hundreds of yards down the beach from where he had fallen. He said that he was tumbling, crashing, doing flips and cartwheels. It was complete chaos under the water. Another woman was being interviewed, and after she was rescued from her fall, her name's Justine. Here's what she said. She was standing on the beach looking out hours after her fall with her boyfriend, and she said, you know, I just keep getting this feeling like the ocean. It's too much. It's beautiful, and at the same time, it's evil.

As she talked, she looked to her boyfriend, and she said, you know, I think we ought to get married. We should calm down. We should have children. We should have a normal life. And the interviewer looks at her, and he says, well, how long did that last?

[20 : 04] And she said, well, just a few days. And she was back at it. See, for most of us, there really is no rock bottom. You know, as soon as we feel like we're safe, our sin deceives us into thinking that everything is now okay, but we aren't, and Jonah wasn't, and his prayer shows it. You know, it is possible for you to do all the right things in response to your failures and still not be all right.

It is possible for you to pray the right words, and yet it still reveal a heart that has not yet grasped what God wants you to see. What do you do when you feel like you're drowning in life?

You feel like you're doing all the right things, and yet you're still drowning. This is the second part. But salvation belongs to the Lord.

Thankfully, thankfully, Jonah says the most true thing. And this most true thing is the big reason why this prayer is recorded for us. It's recorded in verse 9, the end of verse 9.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. See, the picture of this passage is actually clear. While Jonah's motivations and what's going on with him is murky, the big picture of this passage is crystal clear, and that is, while Jonah is a mess, God is still at work saving him. While Jonah doesn't understand, God is still saving him. Did you notice the very beginning of the passage? God appointed a fish.

[21 : 56] The Lord appointed. This word appointed, it's going to come back a couple of times in chapter 4. And what it always means is that it's a description of God being ahead of the action.

God is doing something before the people realize what it is he's doing. We could say it this way. God sent the fish, and it was waiting there to gobble up Jonah as soon as he got thrown off.

As soon as he landed in the water, he got gobbled up by this fish because God had sent him. Now, I haven't said anything to this point, and let me just address really briefly the miraculous nature of this story. Sure, it's fantastical. Is that even a word? Fantastical? Yeah, it's fantastic, but it's more than that. It's fantastical.

You know, but when you read this, it's written without even a hint of literary flourish or allegory or fable. It's told to us as history. In fact, Jesus talks about this that we read earlier, and it's meant to leave the reader with a question, and that question is this.

Can you believe that there is a God who commands the winds and the waves and even the fish? It's not surprising that God was not only directing the fish, but he was directing the timing of the whole thing as well, that three days and three nights, and then he directs the fish to take Jonah and vomit him back on the shore. I'm sure that was pleasant.

[23 : 31] Yeah, but think about this fish. Let's just ask it really directly. Was this fish a means of God's judgment on Jonah, or was this a means of God's salvation for Jonah? Was it God's judgment? Was God angry at Jonah and just trying to teach him a lesson? Is that why God gives us bad things in life, is to just make sure that we really get it? Or was this an act of grace and salvation?

I think it's an act of salvation. It's a severe mercy, but it's this mercy nonetheless. This is God appointing a fish to grab a hold of Jonah as he is falling down to the depths of the earth in certain death and to rescue him, to give him life, and to then show him what he wants him to see and renew him and consecrate him for a new obedience. This is an act of salvation.

See, God was saving Jonah before Jonah does anything to deserve it, before he obeys, before he even really understands what's happening. God is at work saving him. Truly, salvation is from the Lord, not from us. See, salvation, this is fundamental for the Christian, that salvation is a completely undeserved act of God before we fully understand what is happening.

The work of salvation did not begin for you when you became aware of it, is another way to say it. God's work of saving you, he has been there long before you realized it, long before you knew you needed it, long before you even thought of this reality. God was at work bringing his redemptive power to bear in your life and in mine. See, Jonah, just like you and me, he was a man in process.

You know, I haven't arrived yet, and neither have you. I am constantly failing to see who God really is, failing to appreciate his goodness and grace, failing to live in the way that I am called to live, and yet God has not left me alone in that. God has not given me up to the waters that would overwhelm me.

[26 : 07] God has not just let me go to the circumstances, but God has, because of his covenant and his promise for his people, he has come and he has consistently pursued his people even to the ends of the effects of their sins. No matter the depth of the consequences for your failures in life and the difficulties which you have, God has not left you to them. God has come to be with you in them and save you in it.

See, this is the message. If you feel like you are drowning, you know, you feel like the waters are just coming over your head, you feel like you can't get air, you've just been pounded by a hundred foot wave, you can have the hope of Jonah that salvation is from the Lord. Our salvation is from the Lord.

That is exactly what Jesus told us. That's what Angela read for us a minute ago. Jesus was, he was getting, he was getting some flack from religious leaders. They were asking him, they wanted him to do something miraculous, something fantastical. And he was like, you know what? I'm not doing any sort of sign just to, you know, impress you guys. This is not a Las Vegas circus act. Like, I'm going to give you one sign and you know what it is? It's the sign of Jonah. Just like he was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights, I'm going to be in the belly of the earth, in the belly of the grave three days and three nights, and I will come and be raised. See, Jesus saw himself as a, he saw Jonah as a paradigm, as a, as a type. And he was the answer to that type. Jesus's story is the greater Jonah story. Jesus didn't rebel against God's word and flee the other way. And yet Jesus was tossed into the waves of sin and death, not because he was in trouble, but because this was the means of our salvation. Jesus was buried in the, in the depths of the earth, in the tomb, like Jonah, for us, for me, for you. It was my failures, not Jesus's, that sent him to the very depths of the earth. It was my rebellion, not his. And so Jesus's gracious act of salvation is for people just like me who don't get it yet.

It's glorious. So what do you do if you're drowning in life? What do you do? Man, you gaze at this Jesus again. You come back to him. You come back to the one who has promised to be with you no matter the mess you've made of things. The one who you may not even be able to fully see yet. Jonah, just like Chris said a minute ago, Jonah thought he was outside of the presence of the Lord, but he wasn't. In fact, in that very place, he was with God. God's presence was near to him.

You may not see God's presence with you, but oh, if you would gaze to Jesus, you will find something to grab a hold on, to grab onto. Do what Jonah didn't do here. Start by confessing your sins. Start by being honest about how you've gotten to the place that you're at, and then trust that there is a salvation that is fundamentally this. It's outside of you, because salvation is from the Lord.

[29 : 54] It is not from you and your circumstances. It is from the Lord. It is outside of you. Turn your gaze towards that. But there's another question in here for the rest of us. If you don't feel like you're drowning right now, if you feel like, you know, things are going pretty well, but I'll file this away in my bad day folder, break this out. I think there is a question that is for the church of God, for us.

And that's this. Can you be okay with people like Jonah, like me, who come to, who find themselves as recipients of God's grace and yet are still kind of a mess? How do you look upon people who claim Jesus and yet their life is kind of a disaster? There are gaps there, gaps in their understanding of the way things are, gaps in the way that they live, gaps in the decisions that they make?

How do you look on them? Are you judgmental? Do you look on them as people who need to get it all together? After all, you came to Jesus and you got your life together, you know? Your life is going pretty well. So you think. Do you look upon those people and kind of think, well, you know what?

When they figure it out, that'll be great. Or do you have the grace for people who are in process? For the people where there are pretty big gaps? And those gaps can be annoying. It can be problematic.

It can create problems in a room like this. But you know what? That's the normal way of it. Jonah is not a hero. He's like a lot of us. He gets a lot of things right, but he also gets a lot of things wrong. And yet God is at work in the midst of it. Do you believe that God is in the midst, is working in the midst of every person in this room? The fact that you got out of bed and you went through the cold and got yourself here should tell you one fundamental truth. God has already been at work in you before you realized it. This is not an accident that you're sitting here. God's got something he wants to show you. I don't know what that is, but God is present with you. And if you have trouble seeing that in other people and being okay with other people, then you've got the same problem Jonah's got. You might be more like Jonah than you want to be. And that's a place for each of us to repent if that's us. See, we as the church of God's people are called to be a body that recognizes how broken and sinful everyone is. You may hide it better than other people. You may have nice clothes and put on a nice smile, but the reality is that we cannot allow ourselves to believe anything less than salvation comes from the Lord. That is it. That is the level playing field. You may be a person whose life is messy. Let me just tell you, you just haven't figured out yet how messy the rest of us are.

[33 : 18] Welcome to the club. Welcome to the group of people who say, I must hold on to the truth that salvation is from the Lord because it cannot come from me.

Let's leave it there and let's pray together. Lord God, we thank you for Jonah and for the witness he is. Even sometimes the negative witness. But the witness, true witness, nevertheless, that salvation comes from the Lord. Thank you for showing us a figure in the scriptures that, like all the other figures, Moses and Abraham and David, they're not heroes. They're broken, fallen people who have big gaps just like us. And yet, Lord, they hold on to a salvation that is from you. Lord, would you deepen our trust in your grace? Would you let us sit in that grace and find comfort? I particularly pray for all of those who feel like the waves are breaking over their head. That life has just become too much.

I pray, Lord, that by your spirit, you would reveal more and more the glory of your grace to them. That they might be able to sing with conviction that salvation comes from the Lord.

For we pray it in Christ's name. Amen.