

Repentance in the Belly of the Fish

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[0:00] 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. In the name of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen. So when we last left Jonah, he had just been thrown into the sea by the sailors he was with, because the Lord sent a terrible storm due to Jonah's disobedience. His unwillingness to obey the Lord and go to Nineveh and cry out against Nineveh.

So we're picking up today at the part of the Jonah story that everybody knows. He's swallowed by a giant fish, is in the belly of the fish for three days, and then is vomited up on the shore.

As I once heard a bishop put it, there are no two ways about it. Jonah got barked, and so he did. Now it's interesting. You'll see this when we look at the text. The fish really kind of just gets a passing mention.

Now we're prone to thinking of it as one of the central characters in the story, but the truth is, the fish is not a focal point. So maybe our Sunday school teachers misled us a little bit on that.

[1:37] Now before we jump into the text, though, I do want to say something about the fish, because we might encounter some unhelpful tendencies that we can find ourselves focusing on as we think about it.

Some modernist thinkers have used the fish as an excuse to dismiss the historicity of Jonah, saying that it couldn't really have happened. No one can get swallowed by a fish, camp out in its belly for three days, and live, so the argument goes.

Others, who were no doubt well-intentioned, have tried to find a scientific explanation for how someone could live in the belly of a fish for three days. I actually didn't know anyone made that argument until my brother Mark Steele enlightened me on that.

Never heard that before. But, all I can say is that miracles are considered miracles for a reason. They defy rational explanation that can be made by appeals to the way things usually work. They don't happen according to the way that things usually work. That's what makes them miracles. We good on that? All right. Now, with that dealt with, let's start to think about what's going on in our text.

[2:56] What is God up to? What is Jonah up to? What does this have to do with us, with our lives? And how does this point us to Jesus Christ? Now, these questions, and you've heard them before, I talked about them last week, are things that I want us to focus on throughout our series.

So, that being said, let's first jump into the text, see what Jonah has to teach us. We're in chapter 17, or chapter 1, rather, starting in verse 17. The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

So, the stage is set for what's about to follow, Jonah's prayer to the Lord from the belly of the fish. Now, as I pointed out already, the fish kind of gets a passing mention here.

We're not told what kind of fish it was, where it came from, or how long Jonah was in the water before the fish swallowed him. But here's what we do see. The fish swallowing Jonah wasn't just some unfortunate mishap.

The Lord appointed the fish to swallow Jonah. The fish swallowing Jonah was the sovereign act of a sovereign God. It was not a mistake. It didn't happen by chance.

[4:12] And we see, indeed, that Jonah is in the belly of that fish for three days and three nights, as I'm sure all of you remember from Sunday school. It's also apparent that the Lord sent the fish to keep Jonah from drowning.

Now, as we prepare to move on into chapter 2, we notice a shift in our text. Up to this point, it's been a narrative. It's telling the story of what happened. But the focus in chapter 2 is going to be Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish.

And scholars have noted rightly, I think, that Jonah's prayer is essentially a psalm in its structure and its intent. So we go from the story to a psalm.

That psalm has a lot to tell us. Let's take a look at it. Chapter 2, verses 1 and 2. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, Jonah sure is changing his tune, isn't he? He called out the Lord in his distress. Think for a second about what an about face that is. Up to this point, Jonah has been trying to run from the very presence of the Lord.

[5:39] Now he's calling out to him for help. He is crying out for the saving presence and mighty hand of the Lord to come to his rescue. That's pretty amazing, but there's something more amazing going on here.

God didn't say to him, sorry guy, you brought this on yourself. Too bad. No. The Lord heard this rebellious, reluctant prophet, and he answered him.

Jonah says that he was called out of the belly of Sheol, the very heart of the abode of the dead. Jonah is basically a goner, and it's through his own fault.

He's away from the presence of the Lord, but he cries out, and even from there, God hears his cries and shows mercy. That is amazing.

Jonah goes on to elaborate on his predicament. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me.

[6:43] All your waves and your billows passed over me. Two things I want us to notice here. One, Jonah was really, truly in trouble. We can see that through his description.

In the deep, in the heart of the seas, buffeted by waves and billows. The other thing I want us to notice. Jonah realizes that all of this was God's doing.

It was God who brought the storm. God who cast him into the deep. He saw the sovereign power of God up close and personal. And what was Jonah's response?

Then I said, I am driven away from your sight. Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple. Now there's a sharp contrast.

Jonah acknowledges he was driven away from the sight of the Lord. I can't help but think at this point that he's very happy.

[7:44] He's that he's not very happy about getting what he had wanted all along. Turned out not to be so great. But we see something turn and something change in Jonah. I shall look again upon your holy temple.

Now, we're not really sure if Jonah is talking about literally looking upon the temple. Or if he's speaking metaphorically. But either way, I think that the meaning is clear.

The temple represents the glorious presence of the Lord. Jonah, who was on the run from God, who tried to escape God's presence, has a change of heart.

He now looks to God's presence. And that shift is huge. Jonah goes on in even more detail about his predicament. In verses 5 and 6.

The waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me. At the root of the mountains, I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.

[8:45] Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. There's a dire situation. The waters closed over him. He's snagged in seaweed. He goes so far down that he's at the very roots of the mountains.

And he's to the point of being in the abode of the dead. But, God saves him. God brought his life up from the pit.

God, the one who sent the storm, saves Jonah from the storm. There's a turn of events. Because Jonah remembers the Lord and he prays to him for help.

It's what we see in verse 7. My life was fainting away. I remembered the Lord. My prayer came to you and to your holy temple.

The man who's trying his best to forget the Lord remembers the Lord. The man fleeing from God's presence prays to the one he was fleeing from.

[9:50] And his prayer goes into the Lord's presence. Jonah knew, of course, that the one he was running from was the only one who could save him. Jonah. We see that in verse 8.

Jonah mentions the futility of worshiping false gods. Jonah says, Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

Only the living God loves and saves. And if Jonah had any doubt about that before, he certainly doesn't anymore. He goes on, But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord. Jonah acknowledges that he will worship and obey the Lord.

That really is pretty incredible about face. Jonah knows now, in his life, experientially, that the Lord saves and that there is salvation in no one else.

[10:58] His life, having been spared, and having learned a valuable lesson, Jonah finds himself back on dry land. The Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

There's a mental image for you. Now, there is a lot going on in these verses, a lot for us to unpack. Let's ask ourselves, What is Jonah up to here?

What is he thinking? What is he doing? Well, first of all, I think that we see him facing the terrible consequences of his disobedience. It's a fearful thing, isn't it?

He's tossed into the sea. He comes very near to drowning. Disobedience to the will of God, as Jonah's experience shows us, is not a safe thing at all.

But notice how the experience impacts Jonah. We start to see a measure of repentance in Jonah that we didn't see before. Reminded of J.I. Packer's vivid explanation of repentance, Dr. Packer tells us that we, by nature, walk away from God because of our sin.

[12:15] That's what we saw Jonah doing, basically. Except he wasn't walking, he was running. But God calls us to turn around and start walking towards him.

And that is what repentance is. Isn't that what we see starting to happen in Jonah? Jonah? The man is running, he's fleeing from the Lord, he ends up in the belly of a fish.

What happened in all of that? He turns around, doesn't he? He turns toward God. He calls out the very one he was trying to escape. The change happened through a great cause to Jonah.

But I have to admit that it often happens that way. So Jonah is then reminded and then celebrates the fact that only the true and living God can save.

Now what do we see God up to here? Well, we see a really full picture of God's character. God, who is just and merciful, who is holy and loving.

[13:26] These things aren't in conflict and we see them all at work in God's actions in our passage. God raises up a storm. He causes Jonah to be thrown into the sea.

He closed the waters over his head. But God also saved Jonah from death. A death that he frankly had earned for himself through his disobedience.

God allows Jonah to some extent to reap the consequences of what he has sown. But, he demonstrates that he is always ready to show mercy to those who cry out to him.

He shows that he is sovereign. That he can send the storm and he can save from the storm. And that salvation belongs to him and him alone. So that is what God is up to here.

What does all of this have to say to us? Well, on one level, I have to admit that what it has to say to us is kind of frightening. God is sovereign.

[14:37] We have seen that. And we've seen also the lengths to which he will go to draw us nearer to him. Brothers and sisters, I have to admit, it is often a painful process, as it was for Jonah.

Because God isn't some genie who promises to grant us health, wealth, and prosperity when we ask him for it, right then and there. No. God's determination is to save us and to shape us into a holy people for himself.

And sometimes that hurts. I've been there. Think about the way that God worked in my life when I was in seminary.

Now, I was still in many ways a kid, 22 years old, when Elaine and I married and I went off to seminary. Now, as some of you may know, and if you didn't know, you can probably guess by my last name, I am of Welsh heritage.

And in C.S. Lewis' book, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes the Welsh side of his family, which at that time, just to give you an image of what I was like then, Elaine said, pretty well fit me to a T.

[15:55] Here's what Lewis says about the Welsh side of his family. They were sentimental, passionate, and rhetorical, easily moved both to anger and to tenderness, and not having much of a talent for happiness.

And to be honest, I think she was right. It probably fit me pretty well. And of course, like a lot of young men, I also had a bit of an arrogant streak.

I thought a lot. I thought pretty highly of myself and my abilities. Then, my body stopped working the way it was supposed to when I developed rheumatoid arthritis.

I went from being an athletic, young military officer to barely being able to get off the couch and needing assistance to go down the stairs. I was confronted with my own weakness and my own inability.

My future became uncertain because I didn't know if I would ever be well enough to finish seminary and serve in ordained ministry. But in all of this, the Lord taught me to trust Him in a deeper way.

[17:07] He taught me that His strength is made perfect in weakness. He taught me to be patient. And that quickness to anger that was part of my Welsh temperament started to fade.

My talent for happiness started to grow even though I was facing difficult circumstances. The Lord worked through that to change me. But in some ways, I'm still the typical Welshman.

God's grace in our lives is not always a safe thing. Sometimes it hurts. But God isn't so much concerned about our temporary comfort as He is about our eternal joy.

So God was willing to allow me to be broken for my sanctification and for His service. And God was willing to let Jonah sink in a stormy sea in order to bring Jonah back to Him.

And praise God that He was willing to work in that way. And if you've ever been in that place, you know what I'm talking about. And if it hasn't happened to you, don't be surprised when it does.

[18:23] Because it probably will. But I can say honestly, from my own experience, that these trials are gifts. Treat them that way. Thank God that He will do what it takes to draw us nearer to Him and to conform us to the image of Christ.

Now what we read this morning also tells us a lot about repentance. That turning around and starting to walk toward God. is when Jonah turned around and called out to the one he had been running from that he was saved from drowning.

Our own Archbishop Oko, primate of all Nigeria, recently had this to say about repentance. It is not true and never will be true that you can be saved without repentance.

Repentance is a non-negotiable. Where there is no repentance, there is no salvation. Jonah's example should prompt each of us to ask ourselves, have I truly repented?

And if we have truly stopped running from God and started walking toward Him. If we have, we should remember that repentance is a lifelong task.

[19:44] We should ask ourselves, is there an area in my life, is there an area in my heart where I'm still running from God and disobedience? And brothers and sisters, if that's the case this morning, let's turn from our disobedience and turn our hearts completely to our God.

because He is a God we can turn to. Notice in our text that God was quick to come to Jonah's rescue when Jonah cried out to Him.

He delights in showing mercy. He will show mercy to everyone who calls on His name. Do you believe that? Salvation belongs to Him.

He alone can save and He is determined to save everyone who calls out to Him for mercy. Call out to Him for mercy today. He always hears.

He always answers. And what God is up to, what Jonah's up to in our passage, it has a lot to say to us.

[20:54] But also, before I close, I want to talk about how our passage points us to Christ, points us to the Gospel, because there is nothing that it says to us that's more important than that.

Now, fortunately for this passage, our Lord Jesus made this one fairly easy for us. Matthew 12, starting in verse 38, then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.

But He answered them, 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.

Now, as we talked about last week, Jonah is a type of Christ. Jonah foreshadows Christ, in other words. Jonah, the imperfect prophet, points us forward to Jesus, the perfect prophet.

And Jesus draws an explicit parallel between Jonah being in the belly of the fish and Jesus being in the tomb. And there certainly is a parallel there.

[22:09] But we don't have to look too long and too hard to see that there are also differences. And the differences are profound. How did Jonah end up in the sea and in the belly of the fish?

Through his own sins, right? He faced God's judgment, he faced God's chastisement because of what he did. Not so with Jesus.

Jesus faced God's justice with his death not because of his own sin. He had none of that. But because of our sins to save us from the condemnation that we deserve.

Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish and his being vomited out on the shore were for the purpose of sparing him from death. But Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection were to save us from death.

Jonah faced God's justice and received God's mercy. Jesus faced God's justice so that we might receive God's mercy. Jonah, so we can see the reluctant prophet for all his faults, points us forward to Jesus, our perfect prophet and perfect Savior.

[23:19] Now Jesus stands at the very center of all of Scripture. So when we find him we shouldn't be surprised. As we think about our passage for this morning, as we apply it to our lives, let's keep that in mind.

So when we think about that amazing reality that salvation belongs to the Lord, we must think about Jesus because as Peter said in Acts 4, there is salvation in no one else.

For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. We must think of Jesus. We must realize that salvation belongs to him because it is his blood that has secured our salvation.

When we think about repentance, we must think about Jesus. Jesus, what he has done, assures us that there is free and full forgiveness to everyone who repents and believes the gospel.

And when we think about the trials and the afflictions that we have to endure in this life, we must think about Jesus who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

[24:39] He has shared in our suffering and he suffered for us. So we're looking to Jesus because everything that happens in our lives as believers, even the hard things, are part of God's plan to conform us to the image of his Son.

Now, in our passage for this morning, we see the gospel, we see our God, and we see ourselves. We don't have to look too hard to see ourselves in Jonah, do we?

Like Jonah, we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we have been disobedient, we have been stubborn. But like Jonah, we have a merciful God who calls sinners to repentance and stands able and willing to rescue everyone who calls out to him for mercy, to bring us up even from the very pit.

So we say this morning, salvation belongs to the Lord. Blessed be the name of the Lord forever. In the name of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Spirit. Amen.