

Underbelly

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[0 : 0 0] artist David Blaine was pulled from an aquarium by Divers Monday, nearly two minutes short of his goal of setting a world record for holding his breath underwater. Blaine was trying to free himself from chains and handcuffs while bidding to break the record of eight minutes, 58 seconds for holding one's breath underwater. The stunt followed a week-long endurance challenge underwater and was televised live by ABC America. That was in the Washington Post two years ago and David Blaine repeated that stunt which he calls Drowned Alive this year on the Oprah Winfrey show. If you watch that show, I don't recommend it. They've worked out, you see, the daredevils of this world, the stuntmen of this world, have worked out that about ten minutes is the maximum for holding your breath underwater. Though they sort of cheat in their preparation in that they spend about an hour or thirty minutes just breathing pure oxygen to increase it in their bloodstream and they lower their heart rate and all these kind of things that Jonah didn't have when he was chucked into the chaos of the ocean. But ten minutes is about all you'll get and then you'll die. In my mind, drowning would have to be one of the most horrific and terrifying experiences to ever undergo or to sort of have a loved one undergo. Drowning's a reality in our Aussie lifestyle, isn't it? In the 2006-2007 financial year, according to the Royal Life Saving Society 2007 National Drowning Report, there were 277 people drowned in Australia. Two-thirds of them were men, males, and the majority of those were in the ocean or on beaches.

What we have in Jonah chapter 2, friends, is not, despite popular belief, it's not a fish swallows man story.

It's not about that. It's actually about the story of a near drowning and an incredible divine rescue. Jonah records for us in his psalm or song what it meant to his relationship with God to be put through that drowning experience. Jonah comes out of this experience, his ten minutes of suffering, praising God, coming out saying, deliverance is of Yahweh, deliverance is of the Lord my God. He will come out of this suffering closer to God. He'll come out of it more obedient and more focused on God's prerogative to save, God's authority to rescue. Jonah will not come out of it completely mature. He'll still have some issues that we'll find out in the coming weeks. But God uses this horrible experience for Jonah's good to increase and give him a new sense of dependence on his God. So it's a significant experience that I think we can learn from.

[3 : 2 1] Now the stuntmen are idiots because they're risking brain damage, as it were, to break a record. But it's worth just thinking about, what would you say if I said to you, I could promise you a guaranteed way to increase your love and trust in God and it only took ten minutes?

Everybody wants to increase their love and trust of God. What if I promise to show you a vision of God and ground his salvation in your heart in a deeper way than it's ever been before?

In just ten minutes, would you take it? Well, you'd want to be asking, what does the ten minutes involve, I think? And I don't have that power. But this whole song of Jonah 2 is exactly about that ten minutes between boat and fish when he was drowning in the chaos of the ocean.

Ten minutes that brought God back into focus for Jonah. Ten minutes of discipline and encouragement from the hand of God. Let's see what Jonah learned and what he says about it. He says, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me, out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

So the time of distress isn't in the fish. That's the time of rescue. The time of pain was the time between boat and fish, was the time of drowning. That's when he cried out to his God. He cried out, Yahweh my God, rescue me. And God heard his voice. Jonah is saved, as it were, he says, from the belly of Sheol, that is, from the underworld, from the land of the dead. Jonah considered himself as good as dead. He was in the belly of Sheol, and God rescued him, transferred him to the belly of a fish, an agent of salvation. Miraculously, it's a supernatural provision from God.

[5 : 28] Here is the principle, I think, and I hope this is true for you. I'm guessing that you have experienced more suffering than I yet have in my life. Pain has a power to open eyes to God, doesn't it?

Pain has a power to open eyes to God. The painful discipline of God is given to his children so that we would fight to trust in God in those times, so that we would fight the good fight of faith, so that we would, with determination, grab hold of God and not let go. That is what pain and suffering can do in our lives. That is what God intends for it to do, that it would make us focused on the hope we have in Jesus, that it will make us focused on the resurrection of Jesus, so that we would be hoping for our own resurrection in him, in the face of pain and suffering and of death. Now, when you are in pain, you probably don't feel like praying, but actually it's that decision of faith that you make when you are suffering, when you say, I will pray,

I will put my hope in God. And it's those times where God does refocus us on his rescue and on his goodness and on his hope that only he can give.

So in short, friends, the lesson from Jonah 2 is God uses pain for our good. God uses suffering for our good. God uses pain thoughtfully, carefully, powerfully and gently to achieve our kind of spiritual blessing in our lives.

Now, many Christians today have given up on this view of God entirely. They will say very wrongly, they'll say, God has no hand in your pain. He has no power behind it. He has no power to stop it.

[7 : 34] All God does is journey with you in your pain. Have you ever heard someone say that? I've heard people say that to me or my friends who are in pain. Friends, that is so wrong.

Let's listen to what Jonah says. Where is God in his pain? Jonah says, verse 3 to God, You cast me into the deep. God, you did it into the heart of the seas and the floods surrounded me.

All your waves, God, and your billows passed over me. Jonah knows where he's at with God. He knows. He has disobeyed God.

He's run away from God. He's been selfish with the grace of God and he hasn't wanted to share it. And God has disciplined him painfully.

So it's not the sailors who cast Jonah out. It's not Jonah who asked to be cast out. It's God who cast him out and put him in this painful predicament. Then I said, then Jonah said, I am driven away from your sight.

[8 : 39] How shall I look again upon your holy temple? The waters closed in over me. The deep surrounded me. These are the horrors of drowning. Weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains.

He had this experience of, he had his head or hair caught at the bottom of the ocean. He's trapped. He's as good as dead. And this is a little bit of a mirror of the cross of Christ because when you look at the cross of Christ, you can focus on the pain and nails and blood filling your lungs.

You can look at the physical pain, but the pain of the cross is the separation from God that the son went through. And it's the same here. Jonah's pain is not just the drowning, but his experience of near separation from God.

The sense that he's driven away from God's sight. That God has turned his face away from his prophet. You see, what God is doing for Jonah is in 10 minutes giving Jonah what he wanted. Do you remember what Jonah wanted in chapter 1? God said, go to Nineveh. Jonah went the other way to flee from the presence of Yahweh. Jonah was trying to escape God.

[10 : 04] And so what God has given Jonah in a very small amount is an experience of separation from God. An experience of the horrors that you undergo when God turns his face away from you.

It's really a foretaste of what hell would be like to have God have his back turned to you and only have punishment for you, only have separation for you.

The agonies and horrors of punishment and death. Weeds and the waters closing in on him. Jonah deserted, left to die apart from God. God. I think God does this today as a warning to his children. When we as God's children start to ignore God and be tempted by this world's treasures and pleasures, God's discipline, God's painful discipline I think is sometimes to show us the consequences of what life without him would be like and to taste something of what it would be like to have God's goodness and grace taken away.

And God warns us through that kind of suffering so that we will come back to him wholeheartedly. When we suffer pain, it forces us to clarify that our hope really is in God.

[11 : 28] That's where our hope really is. Now for Jonah, his hope is also attended with a special sign and symbol of the temple in Jerusalem.

And so he cries out, will I ever look again upon your holy temple? For Jonah, the temple is the place of God's presence and it's the place where sacrifice was made for sin, where in the atonement sacrifices God's wrath was propitiated, was turned aside.

And Jonah with a final dying hope, just hopes that in God's temple, God will be made propitious to him, that God's anger will turn away and he will save him.

Is there anything that will make God's anger turn away from us? The answer is yes, it's the cross of Christ. When we are suffering, we do not start making a tally of our good works, but we actually think of the cross and think, God be propitious to me, show mercy to me because your son has taken my punishment.

Have mercy on me, I'm a sinner. Jonah goes on to talk about his near-death experience. In fact, if we took him literally, we would see that he's effectively saying he did die.

[12 : 52] I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever, yet you brought up my life from the pit. Jonah thought he was dead.

He thought he was in the land of the dead, whose bars closed on him, what he calls the valley of Sheol, the underworld, the abode of the dead, the place where it's a one-way street.

There are bars that hold people in. He thought he was in effect in that place, where he would never get out. He would be locked into Sheol, into the bars of Sheol.

Jonah uses a phrase similar to what Jesus uses when he speaks about building his church. Jesus says, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Now what's Jesus saying? He's saying the gates of hell or the gates of Hades, which is a word that corresponds to what Jonah calls Sheol, the abode of the dead.

[14 : 04] The idea is that people are trapped. When they die, they cannot get out of Sheol of their own strength. Apart from God, you cannot get out of Sheol.

And Jesus says, Hades, Sheol, hell will not stop the church because they preach a gospel that is of resurrection. They preach a gospel of God who has defeated death.

And so the gates of hell will not prevail against that gospel, that church preaching that gospel. Now, Jonas had a sort of similar experience. He's saying, I was pretty much there.

I was trapped and God got me out. He sort of had a resurrection experience or a near resurrection experience. He was as good as gone, but he remembered his God and his God lifted him up from the pit.

just as his life was ebbing away, he remembered Yahweh, his God, and his prayer reached God. One final prayer reached through to God and he was rescued.

[15 : 09] This is the true near death experience. Don't listen to people who have these kind of dodgy near death experiences where they say they saw a light and I mean I don't want to be disrespectful because we know people have had that and it's very real to them, but Jonah shows us how to respond if you have a near death experience.

He experienced what it would be like to be separate from God and then he had this great sense that he had been rescued, that God's salvation was the most important thing in the world because you do not want to face death with God's back turned on you.

In fact, Jonah himself will tell us the lessons learnt in verses 8, 9 and 10. What did he learn when he nearly died? He learnt this, those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty, but I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will pay, deliverance belongs to the Lord. Then the Lord spoke to the fish and it spewed Jonah out to the dry ground. What did Jonah learn?

Well, he learnt how futile idols are. That is, the kind of things that you hope in when you don't have God. The kind of things that you live for when you're not living for God.

[16 : 34] When you put your hope in idols, that is a waste of time and you forsake your true loyalty. Verse 8 is very important because literally what he says is they forsake their hesed, which is God's hesed, covenant love, God's steadfast love.

Those who worship idols forsake the covenant steadfast love of their God that should belong to them. They should be loyal to God's constant steadfast merciful love graciously shown through the scriptures.

And if you forsake that, then you're just worshipping a vain idol. It's the same word *hesed* that Jonah will use to speak of God later in chapter 4. He'll say, you know, God, I knew that you are, you show 4 chapter 2, I'll read it to you, he said, I knew that you were a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, abounding in *hesed* love, is the Hebrew, and ready to relent from punishing.

Jonah's saying, don't turn your back on the steadfast love of God. It has been shown to us and promised to us in Jesus Christ.

Don't turn your back on that and live for idols, because the consequences when you come to death are eternal.

[18:02] But Jonah is positive now, he's got thanksgiving. With a voice of thanksgiving, he will now worship God. He will say, deliverance belongs to the Lord.

rescue belongs to the Lord. Salvation belongs to the Lord. It is his business. God is in the business of rescue. God's prophet now has a message to take.

Jonah can now align his mission with God's mission, which is deliverance. Jonah is now ready to be an evangelist. He's by no means mature, which we'll see, but he's now ready to take the message of deliverance to Nineveh.

Friends, are you thankful for what God has done for you in Jesus? What power does thanksgiving have in your life? Are you thankful that you've been snatched from the fire through the death of Jesus, that you've been rescued from Sheol, from being apart from God forever?

The good news of the gospel is, not only have we been snatched from a fire, but we have been given a seat in the kingdom of God, even a throne in the kingdom of God to rule with him by the grace of Jesus.

[19:28] And if you think that is a great thing, out of thankfulness, you will want that to be shared. You will want others to hear of that great gospel rescue that you have.

You will want to share it with others. Last week we saw how nothing could stop God, that he was intent on mission, that he was intent on people fearing his name outside Israel.

And here we see God is so committed to that mission that he recycles his own profit. He actually has got Jonah to a point where he can use him again.

Jonah wanted to run away. God disciplines his profit and recycles him so now he is ready to take God's message to Nineveh. God is sticking with his profit.

God sticks with his people. He disciplines his people for their good and works with us. God does not turn his back on us when we fail him.

[20:32] God will God have to do in your life to make you fear him more appropriately. What must he do to snatch your attention away from your selfish idols and make you cling to him with two full hands?

What would he have to do in your life? What discipline would he have to bring to bear? C.S. Lewis said in his book called *The Problem of Pain*, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.

Pain is God's megaphone to arouse a deaf world. God uses suffering. God uses suffering to draw his people closer to him.

Your suffering probably won't be as intense as Jonah's ten minutes of drowning. Sometimes I think God uses the pain of decades to keep a servant of him, of his close.

Or sometimes God does use bringing people to the very brink of death to bring them close to him or even loved ones who do pass away and die in order to bring us to a full dependent trust in him.

[22:06] God is a master surgeon friends. He's a master surgeon. He is a loving father. He will not discipline us beyond what we can bear, but nor will he hold back what we need in order to grow mature in Christ.

The love of God the father is seen. Hebrews teaches us that he treats us like children and disciplines us painfully for our good.

So friends, when you suffer, let me give you some encouragements. Three do nots and three do's. When you suffer, do not think that God is not in control of that suffering.

Do not think that your disobedience means that God is now punishing you. And do not think that your disobedience means that God has deserted you.

So do not think that God is not in control. Do not think that you're being punished and do not think that God has deserted you. Now three do's. When you are suffering, do endure it as discipline from

God.

[23 : 22] Not punishment but chastening, loving discipline intended to work good in your heart, intended to increase your focus, your love and trust in God.

And when you do suffer, do focus on the fact that salvation is of the Lord. Deliverance is of the Lord. Rescue is God's business.

It's his main business. Be mindful of the fact that Jesus has died in your place, that you have a spot in heaven and be mindful of that. God can take care of you.

He can get you there. And finally, do keep resisting the idols and temptations that would blind you to Jesus Christ and therefore would induce the discipline of God.

Keep trusting in the loving kindness of God through his son. 1 Peter 4 verse 19 sums this up so well. This is a great memory verse to remember if you suffer.

[24 : 24] Peter says, let those suffering in accordance with God's will and trust themselves to a faithful creator while continuing to do good.

Let me pray for us. Disturb us Lord when we are too pleased with ourselves when our dreams have come true because we dream too little when we arrive safely because we sail too close to the shore disturb us Lord disturb us Lord when with the abundance of the things we possess we lose our thirst for the waters of life having fallen in love with life we have ceased to dream of eternity and in our efforts to build a new earth we have allowed our vision of the new heaven to grow dim disturb us Lord to dare more boldly to venture on wilder seas where storms will show your mastery where losing sight of land we shall find the stars we ask you father to push back the horizons of our hopes and to push back the future in strength courage hope and love this we ask in the name of our captain who is our
Lord Jesus Christ Amen