

The Book of Jonah

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Date: 22 January 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, running from God is not a race that I don't think any of us want to be involved in. Because for those who wager on the underdog, it's not a safe bet because God's going to win every single time.

So far in the account of Jonah, where we've been on Sunday mornings, we've seen a prophet with a call, and we've seen a prophet with a commission, and we've seen a decision to disobey and an attempt to run from God.

Last week, we witnessed compassion and commitment to God by the sailors, and then we also saw the consequences of Jonah's disobedience.

This week, we're going to explore God's mercy and the second chances that he gives to his people who fail.

Who fall, and even sometimes overtly disobey him. And this gives us hope. Because no matter how far we fall, no matter what we do, no matter how egregious it is, God gives us a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth.

[1 : 17] How many times the disciples ask Jesus, should they forgive? Well, as many times as it takes, in effect, is what Jesus said. And that's as many times as God will forgive us.

Fishermen, fisherwomen love to tell fish stories. Do they not? I mean, they tell you about the one that got away, or they'll tell you about the fish that they caught.

And when fishermen catch a big fish, it grows every time they tell it. They love to tell the story about the big one that they caught.

Well, it was a little different with Jonah. Because Jonah was not telling the story about the big fish that he caught. He was telling a story about the big fish that caught him.

And so that is where we see God using this fish to discipline Jonah.

[2 : 20] See, Jonah was in the midst of God's discipline in his life. He ran from God. He had a call. He had a commission. He disobeyed. God said, go. Jonah said, no.

God said, what, Sheila? Oh, no. Is that what your BSF group said? Oh. Oh. God said, go. Jonah said, no.

And God said, oh. God had other plans. And so he disciplines Jonah. And that's where we find him. So he disobeys. He goes the opposite direction.

So he wouldn't have to worry about going to Nineveh. Well, those who follow Jesus, who are out of the will of God, and find themselves running from God, will very often see, will often be overcome by storms in their life.

See, Jonah was in bad shape as he was heading down to the depths of the sea. And he's going to explain what was going on as he's doing, as this is happening to him.

[3 : 24] Well, think about ourselves. How do we respond to God's discipline? How do we respond when God chastens us? Do we accept it?

Or do we harden our hearts, and do we stubbornly refuse to do the will of God?

So when we run from God, we need to know that God is in control of our circumstances, even when we're not running from God.

Even when things are going well, as we're serving him, God is in control of our circumstances.

Sometimes we're afraid. Sometimes we want to try to control things so things don't go bad or things don't go wrong.

Well, the thing is, we're not in control. God is ultimately in control. See, we try to control out of fear. We try to control others, typically out of fear.

[4 : 26] Fear of what might happen. Fear of what might go wrong. But know this, when God wants something done, God will take care of it. And God can even use when we fail and when we mess

up, and use it for his honor and use it for his glory.

So God is in control of our circumstances. We've got to remember that. Look at verse 17. Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

God was in control of the winds, of the waves, of the weather, of the water, and the fish. I bet you thought I was going to say whale, right?

Well, we don't know that it was a whale. Some say, well, it might have been a, it was probably for sure a mammal. It might have been a sperm whale. It might have been a whale shark.

But whatever it is, it was a whale of a story. And the crowd groaned. Sorry, corny joke opportunity. So Jonah is being disciplined by God, and he says, the Lord prepared, God prepared this fish, especially for Jonah.

[5 : 44] The word translated prepared literally means appointed or assigned. Isn't it funny that the prophet of God chose to disobey God and run the opposite direction?

But God appointed a fish, and the fish said, okay. Probably knowing that he was going to swallow this hairy prophet, was going to get some indigestion, they were probably going to vomit him anyway.

But the fish said, okay. God appointed a fish. The fish obeyed God. Nature obeys him. The winds, the waves, the seas, they all obey God.

Jonah chose not to. So God prepared this great fish for this specific time and this specific place so he could discipline his prophet.

God had who knows when, how long, where, this great fish. He came to the right place and was exactly where Jonah would be.

[6 : 51] And as has been well said, Jonah was captured for correction. God was at work in his life. Now I want you to understand, I believe a literal fish literally swallowed a literal man.

A lot of people have trouble with that, and it's primarily because they don't believe the Bible. They don't believe God's word. God's word said it, and as the bumper sticker says, that settles it.

It doesn't matter whether I believe it or not. As a matter of fact, even Jesus believed it. Look at Matthew chapter 12, verses 38 to 40.

Matthew 12, 38 to 40. Verse 38 says, But some of the scribes and the Pharisees answered Jesus, saying, Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.

But he, Jesus, answered and said to them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

[7 : 57] For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man himself be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

God was in control of this wayward prophet's life, and God is still in control of our circumstances. Jonah thought that if the mariners would just throw him out of the ship, he would drown, and he wouldn't have to go to Nineveh.

His life would be over, but his troubles would be over as well. Sometimes people might find themselves in that situation. They're saying, you know what? I just don't want to go on living because I'm tired.

I don't know if I can go on anymore. There's a good possibility that you work alongside someone who may be almost to that point. Have you thought about that?

That they've despaired even of their own life because they had a dilemma. Do I continue in the pain that I'm in, or do I choose to end my life?

[9 : 07] Which is literally what Jonah chose to do. He said, God will save you if you just throw me overboard and kill me. And to Jonah, it may have been the better option in his mind.

I'd rather be dead than go preach the gospel to these pagans. And that's apparently what was going through Jonah's mind. I mean, can you look back at your circumstances and maybe find some times where God was disciplining you?

God was using circumstances to discipline you in your waywardness? Not a pretty place to be. Where does Jonah find himself?

Look at verse 17. Now the Lord had prepared, of chapter 1. The Lord had prepared, as we said, a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

It took a season of discipline to turn Jonah's heart toward God, where he would cry, uncle, and he would say, Okay, I'm willing to go. It took being in the belly of a fish to get Jonah's attention.

[10:22] Jonah faced either change or he faced death. Proverbs 15.10 says, Harsh discipline is for him who forsakes the way, and he who hates correction will die.

That's not a great place to be, is it? So Jonah spends three days, three nights in the belly of the fish, and Jonah's new abode, Jonah's new housing arrangements, was because of Jonah's attitude, and it was because of Jonah's actions.

Now, how far do we have to go to get God's attention? Or how far does God have to go to get our attention? John Phillips wrote, For a little while, Jonah was allowed to reap what he sowed.

He had rejoiced at the thought of God's judgment being poured out on Nineveh. Now he found out what it was like to be under God's judgment. And here's the great Bible fact.

When God calls us, he commissions us, and when we refuse, he corrects us. He can use whatever circumstances he needs to use.

[11:34] Jonah was in a great dilemma. Now the word dilemma is when we're in any situation requiring a decision between two equally disagreeable options.

I mean, if you've got one good option and one bad option, you don't have a dilemma. But if you've got two equally disagreeable options or two equally painful options, people are in a dilemma. They go, Well, what do I do?

Because either way I go, something is not going to be comfortable. Something will not feel very good. So to Jonah, dying in the depths of the sea or dying in the belly of the fish was not good. But going to Nineveh for Jonah was unpleasant as well. So Jonah ends up with physical problems. He ends up with spiritual problems because of his disobedience.

So in chapter 1, verse 17, we see God in control of the circumstances. And in the first nine verses of chapter number 2, we notice the despair of the disobedient.

[12:44] Jonah was in despair. Jonah was at the end of himself. And we see that in the way that he prays. We see that in what he says that he is in a really bad, bad way.

We probably will only have time to get the first two of chapter 2 this morning, but we're going to begin chapter 2. And we'll read Jonah's entire prayer, beginning with chapter 2, verse number 1. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord. But verse 17, end of chapter 1 says, Jonah found himself in the belly of the great fish. And so Jonah prays to the Lord his God from the fish's belly.

This is what he said. Obviously, he didn't have a tablet in the stomach of the fish and was writing. He wrote this sometime after. But this was his autobiography.

This is what he was writing about what happened. He said, I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction. And he answered me, out of the belly of Sheol, I cried. And you heard my voice.

[13:48] For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas. And the floods surrounded me. And all your billows and your waves passed over me.

Then I said, I have been cast out of your sight. Yet I will look again toward your holy temple. The water surrounded me.

Even to my soul. The deep closed around me. Weeds were wrapped around my head as he was descending to the very depths of the ocean.

He says, I went down to the moorings of the mountains. He said, I went down to the bottom. I went down to the seabed. To the earth. The earth with its bars closed around me forever.

He feels like he was going to. He's feeling like he's in a watery grave. And he's in a prison because he knows he has no way out.

[14:48] The bars closed behind me forever. His life is flashing before his eyes. Yet you have brought up my life from the pit.

Oh, Lord, my God. Verse 7. When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord. And my prayer went up to you into your holy temple.

We're not sure if he's talking about the literal temple in Jerusalem or if he's talking about the great throne room of God. Regardless, he says, those who regard worthless idols forsake their own mercy.

But I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving. I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord. Now, where does Jonah pray?

Tell me. Where is Jonah praying this prayer? Where? Inside the fish. How comfortable was it inside the fish? Probably not very comfortable.

[15:51] And here's the thing. Sometimes God uses, he teaches us in an uncomfortable classroom. God can have us in some pretty difficult tights.

And he uses that as his classroom to teach us. Look at chapter 2. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God, from the fish's belly.

So he's in an uncomfortable classroom. And he says, I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction. And he answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried.

And you heard my voice. So Jonah's despair in the belly of the fish brought him to the point where he calls out to God in prayer.

Now, there are several aspects about the prayer that we look at first. One commentator about the place of the prayer. One commentator said this. We don't use our sanctuaries for the sacred purpose for which they were intended.

[16:58] They are designed to be houses of prayer, but we seldom pray. Isn't that so true? That's why I'm trying to bring prayer back as a main component in our worship.

Think about that. We come, we sing, we hear, we go home. Where was the interaction between us and our Heavenly Father?

And this commentator said, but we seldom pray. Maybe they're too pretty. Or maybe we haven't had enough trouble yet. Jonah prayed in a strange place, but he was in need.

That is enough reason to pray. So Jonah's prayer came from the belly of the fish. Another said, the belly of the fish is not a happy place to live, but it's a healthy place to learn.

It wasn't a healthy place to live or a happy place to live, but it was a healthy place to learn. You know, God's discipline is never pleasant when we go through it. It's never exciting.

[18:06] It's never fun. Otherwise, it wouldn't be discipline. But it will make us more like the Lord Jesus Christ if we surrender to him and say, God, forgive me.

I was wrong. I turn back to you. Just like the prodigal son. Do you remember? How far did the prodigal son have to go before he was ready to come back to his father?

He had to come to the end of his rope where he was poor, destitute, and as a young Jewish man, found himself feeding pigs. That's how far he had to go down before he was ready to say, finally came to my senses.

I'm ready to go home. See, Jonah, too, had to go down to the depths of the sea before he was ready to say, okay, God, I'm ready.

So it was an uncomfortable classroom. It's estimated that in Jonah's classroom, it was between 108 to 115 degrees. It was totally dark.

[19:11] It was burning with digestive acids, slimy, and filled with decomposed marine life. It was constantly in motion.

It was a smelly belly in a dirty classroom. If you think about it. So his classroom didn't have state-of-the-art computers, didn't have nice, comfortable chairs, didn't have air-conditioned comfort, and didn't have good lighting.

But it was the place where he learned the most. And sometimes God uses those classrooms in our life. They're not extremely comfortable. But Jonah came to his senses in the belly of that great fish. See, Jonah's despair could have driven him further away from God, but we learn in verse 1 that his despair instead drove him to God.

He decides to pray. And after three days of discipline in the fish's belly, Jonah had enough. And we don't know at what stage during these three days that Jonah prays, but possibly day 2, maybe the morning of day 3.

[20:26] We're not really, really sure. But he prays. And this prayer teaches us that Jonah really was a child of God because he knew about God. He knew about the temple.

And he turned to him. And he said, The Lord is our salvation. Think about it. This is a great reminder of the destructive power of sin. Sin can destroy a life.

It will take you farther than you want to go. It can destroy lives. From Jonah's perspective, where was he?

He said, Out of the belly of what? The belly of Sheol. That term is very often referred to as the place of the dead.

Sometimes it's referred to as the grave. And so he considers himself in the place of the dead. When we're under the hand of God, it might feel like we might as well be like Sheol is our home, the grave or the place of the dead.

[21:38] So Jonah cries out from this place of despair. Some of you may remember a few years ago, five men were trapped in a deserted zinc mine in Salem, Kentucky by falling rocks.

They had nothing to eat. They were in total darkness. One of the men could have saved himself, but he went back in to try to warn the others. When the entuned men discovered that they couldn't escape, it says that they prayed and they sang.

And later, when they were rescued, one of the men testified. This is what he said. He said, We lay there from Friday morning till Sunday morning.

We prayed without ceasing. When the rescuers reached us, we were still praying. When the men were brought out of the mine, they said on the caps of each one, they had written, If we are dead when you find us, we're all saved.

Think about that prayer meeting. Think about that song service they had in that mine. In that dark tomb they were in, they were praising God.

[22 : 57] And he said, If you find us dead, we're all saved. Amen. So the great news is God heard the voice of the prophet from the belly of the fish. So a child of God can pray anywhere, anytime, anyplace, and God hears our prayers.

God in his infinite mercy won't leave you, won't forsake you. No matter how far we run, no matter how far we fall, God is always there in his infinite mercy and will always have hope.

We see that in the life of Jonah. See, Jonah's place of prayer wasn't the most comfortable place. It wasn't the most comfortable classroom. It wasn't the most common place, but it was a place where he was in communication with God.

So verse 1 and the last part of verse 2, we've seen the place of prayer. In the first part of verse 2, we see Jonah's self-centered prayer. And you say, Well, what do you mean?

What makes you say that Jonah's prayer was self-centered? Well, listen to his prayer. He said, I cried out to the Lord because I love my God so much.

[24 : 06] I cried out to the Lord because my Lord is such a dear God and I love Him. No, he said, I cried out because of my affliction. I cried out because it was uncomfortable.

I cried out to God because I couldn't think of anything else to do. So he says, I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction. Even in the belly of the fish, Jonah didn't get it.

He was still self-centered as he prayed. Jonah's prayer was born out of desperation and was born out of his circumstances. Warren Wiersbe writes, His prayer was born out of affliction, not affection. He cried out to God because he was in danger, not because he was delighted in the Lord. We find ourselves that way sometimes. We cry because we're in a constricted place.

We're in trouble or we are in despair. He says, Out of the belly of Sheol I cried. But he says, You heard my voice. Another commentator wrote, Trouble is not designed to lead God's people to cry against the Lord, but unto the Lord.

[25 : 19] Many people seem to live selfish, live for self. And when everything's all right, we don't need God.

But when do we pray? Sometimes. It's when we get in trouble. It's when things around us are not like they're supposed to be. See, the purpose of prayer was for him to get immediate relief from the circumstances.

Jonah realized, Oh, wait a minute. I don't want to die. And he realized God could rescue him from his dilemma in the fish, the dilemma that he was in.

So Jonah had become fish food, but Jonah didn't want to be fish food. So Jonah was afflicted both physically and spiritually.

He says, I cried out because of my affliction. That word there he used for affliction means tightness, adversity, anguish, distress, trouble, tribulation.

[26 : 28] It was a really bad place for him to be. Psalm 119, 67 says, It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes.

Jonah wasn't a really happy camper. He wasn't happy with his circumstances. But what drove him to God? Remember we said God is in control of our what?

Of our circumstances. God used Jonah's circumstances to drive him back to God. Proverbs 3, 11 and 12. My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor detest his correction.

For whom the Lord loves, he corrects just as a father, the son in whom he delights. So Jonah desired to be saved out of the fish for personal reasons, but God had better reasons for Jonah to be taken out.

See, when we go to God in prayer, we need to search our hearts. Why are we praying? What's our motives? In verses 1 and 2, we've examined the place of prayer, and the purpose, purpose of his

prayer was just, get me out of this, God.

[27 : 37] So we have to ask ourselves, are we in that place today? I trust not. If so, cry out to God. Hopefully not out of despair, but rather out of devotion, because you want to come back to him.

That is where God wants us to be, praying to him out of devotion, rather than out of a state of despair.

So the question is this morning, would we totally, completely surrender our lives to him, that whatever he calls us to do, when God says go, we won't say no, but we'll say, let's go.

So where's God calling you? It could be to teach a class. It could be to, to start a brand new ministry. It could be working with children, working with youth. It could be doing physical things, out in our community, whatever it is.

It could be to start a support group, whatever it is. And there's something in the back of your mind, that says, you know what? I know I got to do, I need to do this, but I don't think I can.

[28 : 56] But God, you just, you just, you're not leaving me alone about this. Well, you know what I say? Just as Isaiah prayed, Lord, here am I. What?

Send me. Don't be like Jonah, here am I. Send somebody else. No, let's be Lord. Here am I. Send me. Call out to him. Surrender your lives to do his will and rejoice today because God will call us. God will give you a commission and God will give you everything that it takes to carry out his plan. And we're going to find eventually Jonah does go reluctantly, but he goes, he shares the word of God.

And what happens? The whole city gets saved. I mean, can you imagine? Jonah never imagined what God is able to accomplish.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you. Thank you for teaching us through the life of this prophet Jonah, this wayward prophet, but who became an example for us thousands of years later.

[30 : 11] Lord, we pray that we may pray to you out of devotion. But even if we come to the point of desperation, Lord, I pray that we would turn to you, surrender to you, allow your will, your way in our lives.

And father, if there's anyone here this morning or anyone listening to this message, that's finding themselves in an uncomfortable classroom, I pray that they would learn the lessons you would have them to learn.

And just simply turn to you completely. We thank you, father. We pray that you would be able to use us, that we would be useful and in turn be, that we'd be usable and in turn be useful.

So thank you father for what you're going to accomplish. Help us dear Lord to make a kingdom impact. We pray in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.