

Lessons from the belly of the Fish (Matt Farrington)

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Jonah 1:17-2:10

Jonah's Prayer

1 ¹⁷ Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

2 ¹ From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. ² He said:

"In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.

From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.

³ You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;

all your waves and breakers
swept over me.

⁴ I said, 'I have been banished
from your sight;

yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.'

⁵ The engulfing waters threatened me,
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.

⁶ To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in forever.

But you, LORD my God,
brought my life up from the pit.

⁷ "When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, LORD,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.
⁸ "Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God's love for them.
⁹ But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
I will say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.'"
¹⁰ And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah
onto dry land.

Matthew 12:38-42

The Sign of Jonah

³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

Lessons from the belly of the fish Jonah 1:17-2:10 and Matthew 12:38-42
(Slide 1)

Introduction (slide 2)

You may be able to recall a band called 'The Beatles.' They released a song called 'Yesterday' which first appeared on their album aptly titled 'Help' in 1965 (slide 2.1). The first verse of this song is as follows:

Yesterday. All my troubles seemed so far away. Now I need a place to hide away.

Haven't we all had times in our lives when all we wanted to do was to rewind time and fix up a mistake that we made? Maybe we said the wrong thing and now a relationship that was going well is now strained or maybe you did something that upset someone else and all you want to do is hideaway somewhere until the disaster is over. Whatever the case may be, we all mess up and we all have regrets. Unfortunately, we cannot turn back time or go back to yesterday, as much as we want to. I'm sure Jonah might have echoed these exact same sentiments. So what should we do during these times in our lives, when things seem so bad that we just want to curl up in bed and cry? Luckily, Jonah experienced one of these times in his life. There are four lessons we can learn from Jonah's experience:

1. God always hears our prayers
2. We need to recognise and accept God's discipline
3. God's mercy brings hope
4. God alone is the One who saves.

Before we get there, let's remind ourselves of what has happened to Jonah so far.

Context (Slide 3)

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to the people there (Slide 3.1). However, because he hates the Assyrians, Jonah ran away from God and headed to Tarshish on a boat (Slide 3.2). God then caused a storm to come along and, after casting lots (Slide 3.3), the sailors discovered that Jonah was to blame for their predicament so Jonah told them to throw him overboard and the storm would stop (slide 3.4). The sailors tried to row to shore and, when they realised that this was futile, they threw Jonah overboard (slide 3.5). This is where we pick up the story.

God always hears our prayers (1:17-2:2) (slide 4)

As Jonah is sinking to the bottom of the sea, God sends a fish to swallow Jonah and Jonah stayed there for three days and three nights (side 4.1). This sets the scene for Jonah's prayer. Jonah realises that he is in a very bad predicament and could possibly die so he prays from within the fish (slide 4.2). Even though Jonah is in

the belly of the fish at the bottom of the Mediterranean, he prays. In his prayer, he recounts his ordeal in the water. Look with me at verse 2, *“He said: In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.”* As he was facing what he thought was going to be his death, he prayed to God and God listened to Jonah and answered his prayer (slide 4.3). Jonah sees the fish as the answer to his prayer. Yes, it is an unlikely answer and not what Jonah was expecting.

God will always hear our prayers (slide 4.4). It doesn't matter where we are or what is going on in our lives. If we turn to God in prayer, he will hear us and answer us. He won't always answer us in the way we expect. Jonah would have preferred God to send a cruise ship heading to Joppa but instead, God's answer to Jonah was a fish. In the same way, God will answer us when we pray. It might not be what we expect or when we expect it, but the answer will come because God always hears us when we pray.

We need to recognise and accept God's discipline (vs 3-4) (slide 5)

In the next part of his prayer, Jonah recognises that it was God who threw him overboard into the sea. God used the sailors on the boat to discipline Jonah by having them throw Jonah overboard (slide 5.1). The sailors were reluctant to do this because they were pretty certain that they would have been throwing Jonah to his death but their efforts to avoid this were in vain. They ended up having no

choice and Jonah knew this was because of God. He knew that God was punishing him for being disobedient and running away.

Jonah's punishment was more than just being hurled into the sea and swallowed by a fish. Jonah says in verse 4 that he has been banished from God's sight (slide 5.2). Jonah feels he is no longer in God's presence. Like Adam and Eve who got sent out of the garden for disobeying God and Israel who were sent into exile in Babylon for their disobedience so, too, is Jonah sent out of God's presence but God is also a merciful God and Jonah knows this. Look again at the second half of verse 4. It reads, *"yet I will look again toward your holy temple."* Jonah has the hope of forgiveness and now that he has recognised and accepted God's discipline, he is ready to come back to God and, once again, dwell with God (slide 5.3). The central point of Israel's worship was the temple. This is where the people would go to be in the presence of God. Even in exile, the people would face the temple when they prayed. This is Jonah's way of repenting and turning back to God. This is always the desired outcome of discipline (slide 5.4).

As a child, whenever I did the wrong thing, I got disciplined by my parents. This took different forms. Sometimes I would get a smack, sometimes I would get sent to my room, sometimes I would have my mouth washed out with soap. None of these were particularly pleasant but this is what I needed in order to learn to do the right thing and not the wrong thing. It was like my parents were telling me

I was going the wrong way and needed to turn back. They disciplined me because they love me. In the same way, God disciplines us because he loves us (slide 5.5), as Hebrews 12:10-11 states:

Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

We might not like it or may think we don't deserve it but we if we are to repent of our sins, then we need to recognise and accept his discipline of us. By doing this, we will be able to see that we have sinned and that we need to repent of our sins.

God's mercy brings hope (vs 5-7) (slide 6)

Jonah once again recounts his ordeal in the water before being swallowed by the fish. We are given four pieces of imagery used by Jonah to explain what he experienced. In verse 5, Jonah tells us that the water engulfed him and seaweed was wrapped around his head. In verse 6, Jonah says that he sank to the roots of the mountain and that he was barred in by the earth. All this means that Jonah felt hopeless and absolutely trapped (slide 6.1). He could not save himself and was, at this time, thinking that his life was over. His fortunes were changed however when Jonah states that it was God who saved him (slide 6.2).

Jonah knows he did not deserve to be saved and, yet, God rescued him. Jonah was at God's mercy. He could do nothing to save himself. His life was in God's hands and Jonah says in the second part of verse 6, "*but you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.*" It was God acting out of his loving kindness and mercy that saved Jonah (slide 6.3) from drowning and because of this, Jonah has hope. Let's read verse 7 again. *When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to your holy temple.* With his life starting to drain away, Jonah turned to God and appealed to the mercy of God and God saved Jonah. God's mercy extended to Jonah who was at the bottom of the sea. If God's mercy goes that deep, then surely his mercy will extend to us, too (slide 6.4). Despite the fact that we are all sinners and have fallen short of God's glory, because of God's mercy, we have the hope of eternal life (slide 6.5). God's mercy extends to all of us. Even though we rightly deserve to be punished for our sins, God's mercy means that we will not be punished. Instead of this, we have the hope of salvation and eternal life. Let us be thankful and praise God for his mercy in our lives. Let us rest in the hope that we have because of his mercy and never let go of it.

God alone is the One who saves (vs 8-10 & Matt. 12:38-42) (slide 7)

In verse 8, Jonah states that idols will not save anyone. Jonah says that any who cling to idols will actually forsake the grace that could be theirs (slide 7.1). Jonah knows the folly of clinging to idols. Jonah himself in the first chapter had tried to cling to his idols. His pride and his hatred of the Assyrians were more important to him than doing what God wanted and so he ran away from God. In the middle of the storm, the sailors turned to their own gods to no avail. Jonah, after experiencing God's mercy in the sea is able to proclaim that idols are worthless and by clinging onto them and worshipping them, we will miss out on the grace of God which brings salvation. Upon realising this, Jonah turns to God and proclaims that he will once again praise God and worship him. Why? Jonah says at the end of verse 9 that, "Salvation comes from the LORD." God then commands the fish to vomit Jonah out onto dry land. Jonah is now truly saved (slide 7.2). It was God who commanded the fish to swallow Jonah and spit Jonah out. God could have left Jonah in the belly of the fish to die or let Jonah drown in the sea but God saved Jonah. Nothing and no one else saved him. It was God alone who saved Jonah. Just like Jonah, we too, are saved by God's gracious act. God sent the fish to save Jonah and God sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. In our New Testament reading, we see that the Pharisees are blind to Jesus. They ask for a sign from heaven but the sign they are given is that of Jonah (slide 7.3). Jesus says that he is the sign they are

seeking but they are too spiritually blind to see it. They are clinging onto their idols and thus, have missed out on the grace that would have been theirs if only they recognised Jesus for who he really is. It is so easy for us to get trapped into thinking like the Pharisees (slide 7.4). We think that coming to church each week is enough to save us or if our good deeds outweigh the bad ones then we will be saved. Thinking like this is foolishness. If we think like this, we will miss out on the grace and the salvation that God offers us through Christ (slide 7.5). Jonah was under God's wrath for his own sin. Jesus suffered God's wrath for our sake. He died and was buried for us. Just as the fish spat Jonah up onto dry land so Jesus was raised to life again because death could not hold him. It is because of Jesus death and resurrection that we are saved and are given eternal life. For as Acts 4:12 says, *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*

Our response (slide 8)

How then should we respond to this? Firstly, we need to humbly submit to God by way of genuine repentance for our sin (slide 8.1). We need to acknowledge that we have sinned and turn back to God. Genuine repentance also looks like devoting ourselves to God and giving him all that we have. Romans 12:1 says, *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of*

worship.” Jesus gave us everything and so we owe him all we have, including ourselves. We must surrender to him and give ourselves over to him, just as Jesus did when he gave his life for ours.

Secondly, we must give thanks and praise to God for his mercy and grace (slide 8.3). We must always remember that he is the one who has saved us through Jesus’ death and resurrection so he is the only one worthy of our praise. God has shown us mercy and grace, even though we did not deserve it. He has saved us, not because we deserve it or earned it but because of his love, grace and mercy.

Hebrews 13:15 says, *“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name.”* We, therefore, need to continually praise God for his grace and mercy and come to Him with thanksgiving in our hearts for all that he has done for us.

Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father,

We are in awe of you and of how much you love us. Thank you so much for sending Jesus to die in our place on the cross. Thank you so much for your grace and mercy. We admit that we do not deserve it but you have given it to us anyway. You saved us from death and we thank you and praise you so much for this. Please help us to submit to you and to also have an attitude of thanksgiving for what you have done for us. Help us to cling to the hope of eternal life we have in and through your son, Jesus.

*In your name, we pray,
Amen.*