

## Fish Guts and Faithful God

Jonah 2:1-10

### Introduction

**Buried and Carried:** As illustrated in the gripping documentary *The Rescue*, in the summer of 2018, twelve young boys from a Thai soccer team, along with their coach, went exploring a nearby mountain cave after practice. Unexpectedly, a sudden monsoon flooded the cave, trapping them 2.5 miles from the entrance with no way out. Initially feared dead, they were discovered after nine harrowing days, huddled on a wet piece of elevated ground. The challenge of rescuing these weak and hungry boys was impossible. None of the boys had diving experience, and most couldn't even swim. The dive was so perilous that a navy seal had already lost his life attempting to reach them. It took the world's best cave divers hours to navigate the high currents, poor visibility, and narrow, muddy paths alone. Eventually, the boys were sedated, their hands tied behind their backs, full-face oxygen masks fitted, and passed through passageways so narrow that divers had to remove their own oxygen tanks to fit. These boys, essentially dead and helpless, were submerged in a watery grave only to emerge alive at the end of the ordeal. Every one of them and their coach survived. This rescue is a powerful picture of salvation: as we die to sin, we are carried to new life and salvation in the faithful arms of Christ. In many ways, it reminds us that God will bring us down to death to give us life. In fact, the Bible tells us to find life in Christ, we must first die to our sin and ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

- “I’ve been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). “You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). Jesus tells his followers, to take up your cross (i.e., die) and follow him. “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Lk 9:24). “When Christ calls [you], he [calls] you [to] come and die” (Bonhoeffer).

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>1</sup> Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ <sup>5</sup> The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head <sup>6</sup> 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, O LORD my God. <sup>7</sup> When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. <sup>8</sup> Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. <sup>9</sup> But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!” <sup>10</sup> And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

### 1. Call to Him: He Listens and Answers (vv. 1-2)

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 6:3-4, Gal 2:20, Col 3:3, Lk 9:23-24.

**Prayer:** <sup>1</sup> Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. Jonah hardly talked at all in ch. 1. When he did, he was talking *about* God. Now he's talking *to* God. **Don't get in the habit of talking too much *about* God without spending time talking to God.**

- What is prayer? Prayer is a heartfelt **conversation** with God in which we **commune** with our creator. It **changes** us, conforming us to God's will as we **understand** his plan.
- In prayer, we are not seeking to change God's plan but to understand and adapt ourselves to it (i.e., "your kingdom come, your will be done" Mt 6:10).
- "Prayer is the act of asking God to do what he has already promised to do" (Millar),
- Prayer is **not** about getting what you want but about **understanding** what God wants.
- "God will give us what we ask for in prayer or what we would have asked if we knew everything he knows" (Keller).
- "God's 'no' to our prayers is as valuable as his 'yes' because our goal in prayer is not to get God to do our will, but for his will to be done in our life" (Davis).

**Bad Things Happen to Bad People:** from the belly of the fish, Jonah's sin has brought him into the nasty, stinky, gooey guts of a giant sea creature. This "fish" has been popularly described as a whale (not in the text), we might think this is Monstro the whale from Pinocchio (the real terrifying scene is the boys turning into donkeys on Pleasure Island. There's no Jiminy Cricket here).<sup>2</sup> These fish guts are a suffocating, gooey, painful mess.

- We often ask the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" We never seem to ask the question, "Why do good things happen to bad people?" None of us is truly good. None of us are righteous.<sup>3</sup>
- Clearly, Jonah's situation is a direct result of his rebellion. Every difficulty you face is not necessarily from your sin, but every sin you commit will bring difficulty. "Everything happens for a reason. Sometimes the reason is that you're stupid and make bad decisions." *Jurassic Park* (the peak of cinema 🎵) ended badly enough (hubris). Who would visit the future Dinosaur Theme Park (we know how this ends). Cf. *The Lost World: Jurassic Park, Jurassic Park III, Jurassic World, Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom, Jurassic World: Dominion*. Stop cloning dinosaurs then being surprised when they eat people! Stop disobeying God and being surprised when your sin hurts you and other people!
- The consequences of disobedience are an opportunity to turn to God. "Three days and three nights... in the belly of the fish" was enough to get his attention (Jon 1:17).

**SOS:** <sup>2</sup> saying, "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress. These **fish guts** are the best thing to happen to Jonah (not the most comfortable). This would be the perfect example of a "**severe mercy,**" a painful situation meant to get your attention.<sup>4</sup>

- Don't assume God will give you a smooth passage to your final destination. Often, the most loving thing God can do is afflict you to heal you. If you think following God means no difficulty or suffering, then you will be frequently disappointed.

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<sup>2</sup> There are lots of Bible beliefs that have snuck into popular culture that aren't actually in the text (e.g., Paul v. Saul, silent night, three wise men, cleanliness next to godliness, etc.).

<sup>3</sup> Rom 3:10-12, Ps 14:3, Ps 53:3

<sup>4</sup> It is severe because it involves great, discomfort, fear, and even the threat of death. It is mercy because it gets Jonah's attention, redirects his path, and ultimately saves him from his own disobedience.

- Joni Eareckson Tada suffered a diving accident at the age of 17 in 1967 leaving her a quadriplegic with severe physical limitations and continual physical pain. Yet, she says, these seeming tragedy has deepened her relationship with God, helped her value eternity over temporary comfort, and clarified that Christ is her true joy and life. Ultimate comfort is not found in the absence of pain but in our eternal hope in Christ.

**Sheol:** Here Jonah describes his location as the belly of Sheol. Sheol is the Hebrew word for the “place of the dead,” the grave. Jonah’s rebellion has led him “down” to Joppa, “down” to the depths of the ship, “down” into the ocean, “down” into the bellow of the fish, and now “down” in the grave.

- God will continue to take you all the way down until you turn and trust him (e.g., construction project through a swamp, putting piling in but having to keep going to find the bottom).
- Imagine you have a malignant brain tumor. It is slowly growing and will soon impair your ability to talk, swallow, and eventually breathe. What are your options? **Ignore** (it will cause irreparable damage and, ultimately death). **Do it yourself** (it will cause irreparable damage and, probably, death). **Trust the surgeon’s skillful hand** (he or she will harm you, wound you, cut you, and it will cause pain but it will heal you). So it is with our sin and Christ. Sometimes he must harm us to heal us. Trust his skillful and loving hand.

**Answer:** and he answered me... and you heard my voice. A beauty of the gospel is that God answers us from the bottom! Whether you are suffering from your sin or the sin of others, God hears you and answers you! This is one of the most reassuring truths in all of Scripture. No matter where you are. No matter how bad it is. God hears you: all you have to do is call.

- God meets you at the bottom, in your pain, in your suffering. **Calling out to Jesus isn’t a magical prayer to remove all difficulty but an honest acknowledgment that you need his help.** God is not waiting for you to get your act together or clean yourself up but admit your weakness and depend wholly on him. It’s a prayer of desperation, not holiness. It’s not the pompous prayer of religiosity but the prayer from death’s door that makes it to God. “It’s not simply being at the bottom that begins to change Jonah but prayer at the bottom” (Keller).
- Rock bottom is only useful when you acknowledge it and respond accordingly. Jonah prays to God from a place of weakness, not strength. That’s the kind of prayer God answers.

I’ve spent some time in my own personal “Sheol.” The past two years, it has been related to foster care. I stepped out of the boat like Peter, full of swagger and confidence, only to find myself drowning in waves of difficulty and doubt (the only thing worse than Philly potholes are Philly courts). By the time I found myself at the bottom, I didn’t have any articulate prayers left (no Thees or Thous, no expiations or eschatologies). All I had was the desperate, heartfelt, needy prayer: “Lord, save me” (Matt 14:30).

- Here’s what I can report: Jesus meets us at the bottom, in the belly of the fish, in the depths of Sheol. Jesus, who is subject to no one and nothing, subjected Himself to

suffering to save us.<sup>5</sup> **The cross proves that Jesus doesn't distance himself from our pain, but puts it on his shoulders.**<sup>6</sup> He doesn't abandon us, he carries us.

## 2. Follow Him: The Way Up is Down (vv. 3-7)

**Deep Darkness:** <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'

- Everything about this prayer is about how **deep** into the **darkness** Jonah goes. He's as far away from where he needs to be as possible. It is in the deep dark of the ocean depths that he finally sees God. The ocean terrifies me (full of monsters that can eat me and hide the body); swim in pools, look at oceans.
- The darkness of the deep is a terrifying place to be, but it actually gives you something important: **light**. How can the darkness give light? There are 4,598 stars able to be seen by the human eye in ideal circumstances (trust me, I counted). But in Philadelphia, you can see like 12 (Philly, Philly, not these bougie mainline suburbs). Why? **Light pollution**. The lights of the city cloud our ability to see the much greater and purer light of the stars. But when you're in the country, with no streetlights, the sky looks like a planetarium (e.g., Rwanda). It's not that the light isn't shining, it's that we can't see it because we are distracted by lesser lights. **The darker things get, the more brightly the light shines.**

**Presence:** Jonah finally recognizes the *real* problem of his sin: it has **separated** him from God's presence. He was running (ch. 1) not just from God's commands but from God's very presence (1:3). Our sin separates us from God (e.g., Adam and Eve hiding, naked and ashamed).

- Until God's presence is more important than simply removing the consequences of your sin, you'll never fully repent. You might shed some tears for getting caught but it will always and only be a superficial confession. Do you want relief from the consequences of judgment without changing your behavior? If so, you want God's blessings without God! That's not how it works. **Superficial sorrow** and **true repentance** are different. I'm not interested in the embarrassment of being caught or fear of the repercussions. "True repentance is having a broken heart over what breaks God's heart" (Hopper) and a change in allegiance that genuinely loves God more than sin and self.

Salvation is not freedom from suffering but being in the life-giving relationship with God for which I was created. This is why it is simply not enough to ask, "Do you want to go to heaven?" or, "Do you want to go to hell?"

- In Exodus 33, God tells Moses he is going to give the people of Israel all he promised them, e.g., "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 33:3), cf. "a land flowing with WIFI and Pizza," or "coffee and ice cream," etc. He'll even send an angel to protect them from their enemies (Ex 33:2). But, because of their sin ("calf-cident"), he will not go with them (Ex. 33:1-3).<sup>7</sup> Moses tells God, If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up

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<sup>5</sup> Heb 2:10

<sup>6</sup> Is 54:4

<sup>7</sup> He *can't* go with them because he would consume them because of their sin. It's not that God can't be in the presence of sin but, more truly, sin can't be in the presence of God (e.g., light destroys darkness).

from here (Ex 33:14). Moses goes “all in” on what matters most. “Show me or leave me” (100%). Following God is an all-or-nothing proposition. Until you get to this point, you’ll always struggle to see God.

- It’s possible to embrace God’s gifts and marvel at his miracles but forget that God himself is our highest joy and our greatest reward. There is a fine line between “God-cherishing gratitude and gift-cherishing idolatry” (Piper). “If you could have heaven, with no sickness, natural disasters, human conflict, and have all your family and friends, favorite foods, leisure activities, natural beauties, and physical pleasures, could you be satisfied, if Christ were not there?” (Piper *adapted*).
- Only “in [God’s] presence is fullness of joy” (Ps 16:11), which means every earthly joy will be, *at best*, incomplete. Paul says that Christ is “the fullness of God” (Col 3:19), which means you won’t find fullness anywhere else.

**Buried Alive:** What did it take for Jonah to realize this? Death! <sup>5</sup> The waters closed in over me **to take my life**; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head <sup>6</sup> at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose **bars closed upon me forever**; All of the language of this song points to Jonah’s death. Jonah is trapped in the inescapable prison of death, and the **cell door is locked shut for good**.

- Jesus himself compares his three days in the tomb to Jonah: “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” (Matt 12:40).<sup>8</sup> Usually, death means **game over**, but for Christ, it is the necessary prerequisite for **resurrection**.
- Jesus goes down into death itself and defeats death so you can have life. Victory is not possible in your strength, but it is possible in his. He goes down into your anxiety, insecurity, pornography, jealousy, and apathy, to bring you up to new life in him. He dies the death you should’ve died, pays the price you couldn’t pay, obeys the law that would condemn you, and defeats death and hell, to bring you up to new life.

**Die to Live:** Yet (despite my death) you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.

- True salvation is not simply behavior modification or turning a new leaf; it is death to sin and self to find new life in Christ. It is not “my life” with a little Jesus sprinkled in; it’s Jesus’ life in me.
- And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Eph 2:1-2, 4-5).<sup>9</sup> **We don’t need behavior modification, we need heart resurrection.**
  - That’s impossible. Yes! But nothing is impossible with God. That’s why every salvation is a miracle. Jonah’s fish grave isn’t ultimately his death but his salvation.
- The hardest death to die is the death to self. In 2 Kings 5, there’s a story of a Hebrew slave girl and her powerful and important Syrian army general. When he contracted

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<sup>8</sup> Sign of Jonah.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Side of the road, dead body, dieting tips, etc.

leprosy, she told him of a prophet in Israel named Elisha who could heal him. He loaded up his wagons, armor, and cash, and went demanding a cure. No amount of cash can buy a miracle. Elisha didn't even come out to greet Naaman (making him angry) and simply sent word for him to bathe in the local river. "Was this a joke? Wash in that nasty little river? Anyone can do that. I'm special! I'm important." Naaman rode off in a rage. **All Naaman needed was nothing, it was the one thing he didn't have.** Jesus didn't come for the healthy, but the sick. Jesus is not available to the powerful but to the weak.

"Jesus loves all the wrong people. People who can offer him nothing. People who cannot love him the way he loves them. People who [often] hate him. He doesn't seem hindered at all by their lovelessness or their unloveliness" (Wilson). Jesus doesn't need you to get your act together and figure it all out before you come to him, in fact, in your weakness he is calling you to **abandon all pretense of self-sufficiency and depend completely on him.**

- Jesus isn't an addition, he is a resurrection. It's not Jesus + hard work, good behavior, knowledge, etc. **It's by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.**<sup>10</sup>

**Surrender:** "Christian faith is not a negotiation but a surrender. It means to take your hands off your life" (Keller). It doesn't matter how far down you are (you can drown in less than two inches of water; death is death regardless), the only way up is Jesus. Jesus is the *only* way to life that starts now and last forever.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Trust Him: Salvation Belongs to the Lord (vv. 8-10)

**Salvation:** The question the Philippian Jailer asked in Acts 16:30: **What must I do to be saved?** And the answer from Paul and Silas is the same answer I would give you if you asked me that question: **"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved"** (Acts 16:31). Believe = trust = faith.

- Back to the surgery illustration. Belief is not simply information (e.g., research, read reviews, ask friends, etc.). Those things can inform faith and build faith, but they are not faith. Faith is getting on the table and surrendering to the surgeon's knife, and only then can you experience healing.

On who or what will you base your life, your confidence, your eternity, and your hope? It's either on Jesus or something else. Jonah knows if you place your faith in something else, it will disappoint you...

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<sup>10</sup> **Temple Prayer:** <sup>7</sup> When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. At the bottom of the ocean, he gets a moment of clarity. In the presence of God, his perspective finally shifts. In the pit of despair, the solution to Jonah's problem is not to "find himself" but to "find God." He didn't "discover his inner strength" but remembered the character of God. His focus is on God, not his problems. What does the temple have to do with Jonah here? Jonah is only one part of the larger story of Scripture (it's like watching Avengers endgame without any of the other Avengers movies or Marvel franchises; what's up with the talking racoon riding on the back of the war tree?). The temple was the place where the Israelites went to meet God. It was **good news** because it represented God's presence. But it was **bad news** because their sin meant they couldn't enter the holiest part, the Holy of Holies, where God's presence dwelt on the ark of the covenant, the "throne" of YHWH. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle the blood of a sacrificed animal on the "mercy seat" as a "propitiation" to appease the holy wrath of God which rightly comes against our sin. This sacrifice would cover their sins so they could commune again with God. Jesus is the perfect, permanent, final, and complete "propitiation" for our sins (Rom 3:23-26, 1 Jn 1:8-2:2).

<sup>11</sup> Jn 14:6

**Forsake Hope:** <sup>8</sup> Those who pay regard<sup>12</sup> to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

- Pay regard = worship. He's talking about what you worship.<sup>13</sup>
  - **We're all worshippers.** We all give our allegiance to something. I can usually tell by where you spend your money and/or time (tell me sports aren't a worship service with its own liturgy).
- You will either worship God or something else. Jonah calls the "something else" vain idols. An idol is anything other than God that you put in the place that only God should occupy in your life, anything you look to for what only God can provide. When you worship something other than God, it leads to despair, loneliness, and anxiety because the idol cannot give you what you want it to give. The idol doesn't have the power to give you the purpose that only God can give.
  - Only God can rightfully bear the weight of our worship. "A [person can get] enough of the world to sink them, but never enough to satisfy" (Brooks). Even good things can be idols (e.g., family, academics, etc.; but like a hammock, they will snap under too much weight).
- Jonah, speaking from experience, says simply that "people who rely on something other than God for the love only God can give miss out on the very thing they are searching for." Jonah, on the other side of his salvation, is warning us not to sacrifice God's steadfast love for empty promises. It's not a good trade!
- **What idols in your heart and life do you need to forsake to embrace God's steadfast love?** In some regions, local hunters use a simple method to catch monkeys. They put food inside a gourd or coconut, with a hole just large enough for a monkey to put its hand in. But when they grab the food, they can't remove their hand with a closed fist. The monkey is only trapped by its unwillingness to release the food. The same is true of us with our idolatry. All you have to do is let go (e.g., reputation, money, fear, etc.) **If you stubbornly stick to your sin and stubbornly try to rule your own life, you will destroy yourself (he won't have to).**

**Turn Around:** <sup>9</sup> But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Rather, with a joyful heart, take the path that Jesus calls you on. Experience the grace of God and apply it to every area of your life! Rather than fighting God, Jonah is happily following God.<sup>14</sup>

**Monergism:** Salvation belongs to the LORD!" Salvation belongs to YHWH, not Jonah. It is by grace that we are saved. "This is the whole Bible in one verse" (Keller). Cf. Hitch 90/10.

- I didn't earn my salvation, so I can't lose it. I also didn't earn it, so I can't keep it from others. If it's free to me, it's free to everyone.<sup>15</sup>
- Grace is an undeserved gift from an unobligated giver. God doesn't have to love us, he chooses (wants) to love us!

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<sup>12</sup> "Cherish" (CSB)

<sup>13</sup> "Pay regard" (ESV), "Cherish" (CSB), "Worship" (NLT), "Cling to" (NIV), "Obey" (φυλάσσω), "Keep" (ἠνθ cf. Deut 6:2-3)

<sup>14</sup> Grace elevates obedience, rather than minimizing it.

<sup>15</sup> You are not the gatekeeper of salvation.

- (1) Some people miss out on God's grace because they think they deserve it. They have **too high a view of themselves** (e.g., I'm pretty good, better than that guy, etc.). They misunderstand how bad their sin really is and how holy God really is (e.g., 1° off in **infinity is massive**).
- (2) Other people miss out on God's grace because they think they are too bad for God to love them. They have **too low a view of themselves** and **too low a view of God's grace**.

"The devil has two major tricks with people. One is, 'You're so good you don't need to be saved.' The other is, 'You're so bad you can't be saved.' And, he's a liar on both counts" (Ravenhill).

- The reason any of us can ever be saved is not because of us, good or bad, but because of God: **Salvation belongs to the LORD!**"

**Now What?:** <sup>10</sup> And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

**Story:** It's not primarily about a great fish's miraculous meal; it's the story of a great God going to great lengths to save. It's a profound but simple story. Jonah had to be humbled to finally turn from his sin and himself and surrender to God. God meets him at the bottom and brings him up.

- **Are you ready to admit your sin and surrender complete control of your life to God?**
- 🙏👁️ **I want to place my faith in Jesus to save me and I want to give him complete control of my entire life.**
  - I confess that I am a sinner and my sin has separated me from God.
  - I recognize that I cannot save myself and need Jesus to save me.
  - I place my faith in him for the forgiveness of my sins.
  - I commit to go where he calls me to go and do what he calls me to do.

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<sup>16</sup> Don't get distracted by the fish. It's not about the fish. It's about the God who sent the fish. "If you accept the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ (a far greater miracle), then this isn't hard to read literally" (Keller). Only two brief verses mention the fish and it is described as a normal, simple fact.