

Message #4

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Jonah

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## JONAH AND THE WAY BACK TO NINEVEH

JONAH 1:17-2:10

I.

Seven or eight years ago John Barth noticed a guy parked across the street from his house. John ended up speaking to him. I forget the details, but he had some story about needing help. Supposedly he had worked at a church in California and had a hard luck story. I got involved in the situation. Some of this fellow's story did not make sense to me, but in the end he asked for help to get to California.

We decided to use deacons' fund money to help him out. His vehicle had a problem, and he needed some kind of part. So John and I brought him to Autozone. There was another suspicious character there, who was the manager on duty. He helped us to get the part that we needed to get this California guy on his way. John and I struck up a conversation with the manager. We mentioned our connection with the church, and he expressed a need to get back to church. His schedule was such that he went on duty at noon on Sundays, and said that he could fit in our service. So we invited him to come.

Jay was one of the small, but significant, percentage of people who respond to an invitation to come to church. He turned out to be a recruiter. The van ministry is a product largely of his labors. We saw last Sunday some of the fruit of his efforts with the graduation from the Pride and Purity program. It was impossible to realize at the time how helping a down-on-his-luck guy trying to get to California would end up with the ministry opportunities and blessings that we have seen.

Jonah could make no sense of the circumstances that he faced in the ninth century before Christ. God told him to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, the largest city in the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were enemies of the Israelites. Jonah had probably never been to Assyria. He didn't even like the Assyrians. But the Lord was going to use Jonah and a series of events to create ministry opportunities and to provide spiritual and material benefits to a variety of people. In order to accomplish His purposes the Lord had to get Jonah on board with His program, even as he sometimes needs to shake us up to accomplish the purposes that He has for us.

II.

In the passage before us this morning we find that sometimes GOD USES DISCIPLINE TO GET US WHERE WE SHOULD BE. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. GOD USES DISCIPLINE TO...) That is the lesson of vv. 4-17 in #1 of Jonah, which is found on p. 774 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs. We looked at all of these verses last week, except for v. 17. We saw that God was dealing with Jonah. Jonah was a prophet from the northern kingdom of Israel. (DIVIDED KINGDOM) Israel and its kings had strayed from God. The Lord had sent famines and military defeats and prophets to get their attention and get them back on track with Him. But the people and their kings were resistant.

Prophets had begun to warn the Israelites that the Assyrians (ASSYRIAN EMPIRE) were going to become agents of discipline for God. God also called Jonah to go to Nineveh, the chief city of Assyria, to proclaim that God's judgment was coming upon it for its wickedness. Jonah did not want the job. His reasoning, it seems, was that if he did not go to Nineveh, God would have to do in the city for its wickedness. The Assyrians would be so weakened that they would not be able to hurt his fellow Israelites in the northern kingdom of Israel for quite a while.

So instead of going 500 miles east and a little north to Nineveh (JONAH 01), the prophet took off for Tarshish 2000 miles to the west. But we saw last week that God caused a severe storm to threaten Jonah's ship. The Lord worked through the superstitious fears and determinations of the pagan sailors to make it clear that Jonah was the cause of the problem. Upon Jonah's urging, the sailors threw him into the sea. (PROJECTOR OFF)

My reading of the evidence is that Jonah's attitude was still that he would rather die than go to Nineveh. But God was not done with Jonah. He wanted to discipline the wayward prophet, not to destroy him. Thus we read in v. 17, **"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."**

Notice that the translation says "great fish." This is a literal translation of the original Hebrew term. The creature could have been a whale. There was no separate word in ancient Hebrew for "whale," and there are whales in the Mediterranean Sea. But the actual term is "great fish." It is possible that Jonah did not even get a good look at this great fish. For the text indicates that Jonah was sinking into the sea when he was suddenly swallowed by something. Perhaps Jonah was not even exactly aware about what it was.

Since ancient times critics have ridiculed this incident as being a fairy tale. Some have argued that it is an allegory that was not intended to be taken literally. But there is no hint in the text that this was intended as an allegory. The book reads as a historical account.

Then also Jesus assumes its historicity. In Matthew #12 Jesus criticized the scribes and the Pharisees for their request for a sign. He is recorded as saying to them in vv. 39 & 40 (MATTHEW 12:39), "**An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. (MATTHEW 12:40) 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.**"

Thus Jonah's experience in the great fish was intended as a type, as a foreshadowing, of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For that reason some have suggested that Jonah actually died and was resurrected from the dead. I doubt that. The point of the type and its fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Christ does not center on death. Rather the focus is on the three days and nights of confinement--- in one case in the tomb and in the other case in the great fish. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The real issue here is the possibility of miracles. The same God who could arrange a virgin birth and a resurrection from the dead can just have easily arranged for Jonah to survive three days and three nights in the stomach of a great fish. This is what the text claims happened.

We might reasonably wonder why the Lord rescued Jonah in this way. Why not send along a boat that was headed back to Joppa with men from Nineveh on it? Why not have them rescue Jonah? I suspect that part of the explanation has to do with the religious background of the Ancient Near East. The miracles that are described in the Old Testament were often direct challenges to the claims of pagan gods. Thus the ten plagues in the Book of Exodus countered the supposed claim of Egyptian gods. The second to the last plague, for example, was the plague of darkness. The most powerful god in the Egyptian pantheon of gods was supposedly Re, the sun god. By the plague of darkness the God of Israel showed Himself to be superior to the false god Re.

In the Ancient Near East stories about the creation of the world often involved tales about the conquering of chaos, which was related to the stormy sea and to sea monsters. In choosing a great fish as the instrument of Jonah's deliverance the God of Israel was showing His sovereignty over chaos and over sea monsters. He was also showing His supremacy over the gods of the Assyrians. For one of their gods was a fish god. To the residents of Nineveh Jonah's story about deliverance through a great fish would have added impact, given their religious belief system.

While the great fish was a means of Jonah's deliverance, it was also a means of discipline upon Jonah. Jonah had made a decision to disobey God's call to go to Nineveh. He tried to resign from ministry. The Lord did not accept that. So He used a storm and a bunch of pagan sailors to straighten him out. He also used the great fish to bring him back to land. While this fish may have saved him from drowning, I suspect that it was also a frightful experience. I suspect that Jonah also had good opportunity to rethink his decision of disobedience. God was disciplining him.

God also disciplines Christians who get out of line. Last week I read from Hebrews #12, which says that God disciplines every son of His who becomes wayward. He may not always use a great fish. Sometimes He uses trials and guilt and accidents and health problems and words of other Christians to wake us up and get us back on track.

That is not to say that whenever we encounter trials or health problems or accidents or failures that God is disciplining us because of some sin that we have committed. Sometimes these things are just the result of the human condition. Sometimes they are just part of God's overall training program. Sometimes they have special purposes which we may, or may not, ever realize this side of heaven. But when we know that we are messing up in our relationship with God, we should not be surprised when hard times come our way. God uses discipline to get us where we should be--- spiritually or physically.

III.

In #2 we encounter Jonah's prayer. We learn here that WE NEED TO USE PRAYER WHEN WE REALIZE OUR SITUATION OF DESPERATION. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. WE NEED TO USE PRAYER WHEN...) After Jonah has had some time to think inside of the fish, he acknowledges God's hand of discipline. He says in vv. 2 & 3, **"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. 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."**

There is no evidence in the text that Jonah prayed during his flight from God until now. The pagan sailors prayed to their gods in the midst of the storm. There is no indication here that Jonah did--- until he is at death's door. He is a resistant prophet.

Jonah is describing his experience of being tossed into the sea by the sailors of the ship. It seems that he is about to be drowned. Sheol was the term that was used in the Old Testament to describe the place of the dead. To Jonah it must initially have seemed as he was swallowed by the great fish that he was about to die.

In describing his plight he uses language from several of the Psalms. Commentators have identified at least seven, and perhaps as many as ten, Psalms that are quoted in this prayer. Obviously Jonah was familiar with them. Apparently he knew many of them by heart. He found himself in a difficult predicament, and what did he have to which he could turn? God's Word, which he had stored away in his heart. Bible memory serves a useful purpose, especially in the storms of life, in a situation of desperation.

Notice also that Jonah sees God as responsible for his being tossed into the drink. He is not yet acknowledging his own responsibility for his situation. He does, at least, recognize God's hand of discipline. He also does not blame the pagan sailors for his predicament. Sometimes in the face of God's discipline we are tempted to blame others for our situation of desperation. We get mad at our parents. We get mad at our mate. We get mad at our kids. We get mad at the church. We get mad at God. We get mad at anyone who tries to tell us that we are getting off of the right path.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was mad at the evil Communist government that imprisoned him in the Soviet gulag in the 1950s. Eventually he was able to give thanks to God in his situation of desperation. He later wrote, **"In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed with myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, not between political parties either--- but right through every human heart... That is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: 'Bless you, prison!' I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: 'Bless you prison, for having been in my life!'"**

In vv. 4-6 Jonah continues with his prayer, **"Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever..."**

Jonah is saying that he was a goner. He was about to die. There was no hope for him. His need was desperate. He acknowledged that need to the Lord. His choice of words is similar to the language that David used in Psalm 18. (PSALM 18:4-5) There David wrote, **"The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me."**

David, however, had not actually died. He was saying that things were bleak. He was staring death in the face. I think that this is what Jonah was saying: "I was a goner. I was as good as dead, but God saved me."

Jonah wanted to get away from God, and he got a taste of what that is like. It turned out not to be so desirable. He found only despair and futility. At times we likewise may find it tempting to try to get away from our responsibilities. We may be tempted to run away with another man or woman, or to escape from our parents or our job. But such temptations also involve an effort to escape from God. Getting

away from God does not turn out to be as attractive as it initially appears. And it is easier going out of the way when we are in than going in when we are out.

The ultimate futility that results from a choice to reject God will be experienced by those who reject Christ as their Savior. (2 THESSALONIANS 1:9) Paul writes, "**They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...**" They may look forward to having all of their friends there, but it won't be the kind of party for which they had hoped.

What is necessary to avoid this outcome is a decision to trust in Jesus. The Bible says that Jesus was God who became man. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. He rose from the dead to demonstrate that He is God. Our responsibility is to recognize that we are sinners in need of a Savior. If we will trust in this Jesus and receive the gift of eternal life that he offers us by faith, then we can look forward to heaven. Eternal life becomes ours when we trust in this Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jonah is at least recognizing that his difficult circumstances reflect God's implementation of discipline. He has turned to prayer to God in acknowledging his need. He has confessed his hopeless estate and his own inability to save himself. When we find that we have departed from the straight and narrow, that is the procedure that we need to follow as well. We need to recognize God's hand of discipline. Then we must acknowledge our need and inability.

Jonah continues his prayer at the end of v. 6 as he begins to recognize that he is still alive within the belly of the great fish and that there is hope that he might yet survive: "**... yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.**"

The word translated in v. 8 as "idols" is not the primary Hebrew word for idols. It literally means "vapors, breaths, things of a fleeting nature." In the Book of Ecclesiastes it is the word used in the phrase "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

To what is Jonah referring? It could be the idols of the sailors--- the false gods to which they cried out in the midst of the storm. It could be the objects of worship to which Jonah's fellow Israelites had turned in their straying away from YHWH. We might also wonder if Jonah himself has been paying regard to the vanity of loyalty to country, at the expense of obedience to God. That is always a danger to God's people throughout history.

Then we might also think about the vapors, the temporary things of little importance, to which we are paying regard. Sometimes our encounters with desperate situations wake us up to what is really important. Are we paying too much regard to vanities?

I got a call this week from a Christian friend who recently took a missions trip to Africa. After seeing the poverty that is common there and recognizing the opportunity there and even here for Christian service, he told me that he has decided to make some radical changes in his life. He has decided to sell his house and get a place that is half of the size of what he has now. He has decided that he is spending too much time and money keeping up a nicer house when he could do fine in a smaller place. He says that he wants to put more energy into ministry opportunities.

As Jonah's life was about to be snuffed out, he turned to the Lord in prayer. The Lord responded. He recognized God's discipline on his life. He acknowledged His need. He turned in faith to the Lord. What confidence could Jonah have that he would get out of this predicament? God could have allowed him to die. He was under no obligation to prolong Jonah's life. The Lord could have gotten someone else to carry out the mission.

There were two things upon which the prophet could rely. One was God's grace. The other was the fact that he was still alive. To be thrown overboard in the midst of a raging storm and to end up alive inside of a great fish was as strange and unusual to Jonah as it seems to us. But there he was. Perhaps God was not done with him yet. God may not have Jonah's heart yet, but He seems to have his will. Jonah had turned to God in prayer in the midst of his desperation.

IV.

In vv. 9 & 10 we find that GOD WANTS US TO ESPECIALLY LEARN THAT SALVATION IS OF THE LORD. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. GOD WANTS US TO...) In v. 9 Jonah concludes his prayer: "**But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!**"

A godly Jew would recognize that rescue from a desperate situation would mean making a thanksgiving offering. According to the Old Testament Law, that was to be done at the temple in Jerusalem. Whether godly Jews, such as those in the schools of the prophets in the northern kingdom of Israel, had access to the temple, we do not know.

But at least Jonah recognized his need for an offering and for thanksgiving. He had begun to sense that his preservation inside of the great fish, the fact that he was still alive, meant that he might yet survive this situation. He did not realize it at the time, but the pagan sailors on the ship were making vows to

make offerings to Jonah's God as the result of their deliverance. Certainly Jonah was obligated to do a similar thing.

Jonah's promise to pay what he had vowed in the second part of v. 9 could be a reference to thanksgiving offerings. My suspicion is that it might involve more than that. The whole point of God's divine intervention was to get Jonah back on track to take on a crusade in Nineveh. So perhaps Jonah is here agreeing to go to Nineveh. YHWH may not yet have Jonah's heart, but at least He has his will.

In the last line of Jonah's prayer our ESV says, "Salvation belongs to the Lord!" The NIV translation says that "Salvation comes from the Lord." The NASV has "Salvation is from the Lord." The literal translation of the original Hebrew is simply "Salvation is of the Lord." It seems to me that there are at least three implications from this important spiritual truth.

A.

The first is that GOD IS OUR ONLY SOURCE OF ULTIMATE DELIVERANCE. (IV. A. GOD IS OUR ONLY SOURCE...) Jonah faced a desperate situation. He appeared to be a goner. He should be dead, but he was alive. God was Jonah's only hope of deliverance from this difficult situation. Jonah was a genuine believer who needed this reminder that YHWH was the only source of ultimate deliverance.

Eventually all of us humans will die, unless the Lord returns first. We are good at ignoring the reality of our mortality. The Bible says that the One who created us is also the One who offers redemption to us. Because all of us are sinners, our only hope for eternal salvation is a gracious God who has provided forgiveness for us in the death of His Son. He is our only source of ultimate deliverance.

B.

There is also a second related truth that comes from this statement of the prophet Jonah. GOD PROVIDES ALL THAT WE NEED IN SALVATION. (IV. B. GOD PROVIDES ALL...) What happened to Jonah illustrates what God provides for us in our spiritual salvation. God created a need in Jonah for which he was prompted to turn to him in faith. The Lord brought along a storm and had him tossed into the Mediterranean. His desperate need was suddenly apparent. In a similar way the New Testament tells us that the Holy Spirit makes us aware of our great sinfulness before a Holy God. He reveals to us the desperate situation that our sin creates.



The Lord then provided an unusual means of deliverance for Jonah. He prepared a great fish to rescue him from death. He was preserved alive within it. In a similar way the Lord provided an unusual means for our deliverance. He sent His own Son to become a human being. Then he had Him die upon a Roman cross. This Jew died a humiliating death. Yet Jesus Christ became the means of our eternal rescue.

In the end the great fish delivered Jonah safely upon dry land. Some day Jesus Christ will bring us safely to the celestial city. The Lord provides all that we need in salvation.

C.

Then thirdly there is a hint in this statement at the end of Jonah's prayer that GOD WANTS SALVATION BROUGHT TO LOST PEOPLE. (IV. C. GOD WANTS SALVATION...) God had ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh so that the evil Assyrians would have the opportunity to be saved--- to be saved from physical destruction and to be saved from eternal punishment. Jonah did not want to see them saved. They were the enemies of his people. He hoped that they would be destroyed so that his countrymen would be given an extended opportunity to get right with God themselves.

But in this last line of Jonah's prayer there is perhaps an acknowledgment that he has no right to make that kind of decision. Salvation is the Lord's. If God wants to see salvation brought to the Assyrians or anyone else, he has no right to stand in the way.

Jesus specifically indicated in the New Testament that He wants His salvation brought to all people. The danger is that we can consciously or unconsciously adopt the attitude of Jonah. Why extend ourselves to the people of Las Vegas? Why reach out to prisoners? They are bad people who do not deserve the gospel. And the only concern that we should have for illegal immigrants is to keep them out of the country. In Europe, especially, the problem is that these countries are being flooded with people from the Middle East, in fact, from the lands of the Assyrian Empire. What interest should we have in bringing salvation to them? It would be better to wipe them all out. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We need to recognize that salvation is of the Lord. Jonah had to learn that important truth. He had turned away from the God who had wanted him to bring that message to Nineveh. He tried to run away from the Lord. He found that it is easier going out of the way when we are in than going in when we are out. But there is a way back to Nineveh and a way back to the Lord.

Yesterday was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. That day in the religious calendar marks the end of a ten day period, begun on Rosh Hashanah, where God's people are called upon to focus upon repentance for their sins. On Yom Kippur Jews are called upon to cast their hope upon a merciful Judge.

We Christians know something about that merciful Judge. Robert Robinson as a teenager heard the British evangelist George Whitefield preach the gospel. He soon decided to put his trust in Christ for eternal life. He discovered that he had a talent for writing songs and proceeded to write a number of hymns. He also became a pastor, first in the Methodist churches, later in Baptist churches. But then he strayed away from the faith. As he got further off track he found more and more vanity and emptiness in his life.

Robert Robinson was riding on a stagecoach on one occasion when a young woman sought to witness to him. The woman was humming the melody of a hymn. She showed him the words and asked him what he thought of them. The hymn was entitled "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." Robert Robinson tried to evade her question, but she pressed him for an answer. He began to cry. With tears streaming down his cheeks he confessed, **"Madam, I am the poor, unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feeling I had then."**

The woman assured Robinson that the streams of mercy described in that song were still available. Mr. Robinson took that truth to heart, and turned back to the Lord.

If there is something in your relationship with the God who is really there that needs to be made right--- if you have strayed from the path that God wants you to take--- make the words of this hymn which we shall now sing your prayer.