

The LORD disciplines his disobedient children by appointing appropriate means that serve both to chastise them and deliver them; such discipline teaches us to see God’s difficult dealings with us through the lens of Christ’s suffering and glory.

Introduction – [Story of parent assigning to their child public jumping jacks while confessing his disobedience (“I-will-not-use-potty-talk-especially-at-the-table”).] But for some, God’s punishment of his wayward prophet Jonah calls into question his fairness in discipline. If I (as God’s child) sat down right now and refused to preach the rest of this sermon, would it be right to throw me overboard to drown and become fish food? Could God consider this appropriate discipline?

I. Desperation Awakens Us to Our Need of Salvation

A. Trial by ordeal (vv. 3-6a)

In the ANE people accused without evidence of crimes were sometimes tested to discover their innocence or guilt. Such a test was known as “trial by ordeal” (second law of *Code of Hammurabi*; cf. Num 5:11-31). These tests supposedly revealed the divine verdict for the accused. If the person survived the trial, he was innocent because God would not let an innocent man die. If the person died (or otherwise failed) in the trial, he was guilty because God would not rescue a guilty man. Jonah’s trial is a “watery ordeal.” God stirred up the tempestuous sea to be Jonah’s trial of ordeal! That is why Jonah told the sailors to throw him into the sea, and why the sailors pleaded with God to forgive them if Jonah proved to be innocent (Jon 1:14-15), because if he was innocent the penalty would fall on the sailors. Jonah knew he would not survive this watery trial because he was the guilty one. He was desperate, and needed salvation.

B. The great fish: agent of judgment or deliverance? (vv. 17; 1, 10)

1. Objection: Is it possible for a man to survive such an ordeal? Disputed account of James Bartley in 1891 (fell overboard, swallowed by a whale, whale caught, rescued from its stomach 15 hours later). Even if similar natural accounts are nothing more than tall tales, we must remember that Jonah’s ordeal was supernaturally intended.
2. Remember chapter and verse divisions are not original to the text. The Hebrew Bible puts verse 17 at the beginning of ch 2. This is significant because if the fish swallows Jonah at the beginning of ch 2 (and fittingly concludes with the fish vomiting him up to safety at the end of ch 2), we should conclude that the fish was God’s first agent of deliverance (although Jonah is not out of “deep water” yet lest he presume on God’s mercy).

II. Prayer Turns Us to the God of Salvation

A. Jonah remembered God and cried out in prayer (vv. 1-2, 4, 7)

Jonah had finally “gone down” to the bottom (cf. 1:3, 5; 2:6). The water had engulfed him and he sank to the “roots of the mountains.” From the belly of the fish and the belly of death (*Sheol*), Jonah finally prayed. Jonah did not merely wrestle with natural foes (the flood and the loss of biological life) but with cosmic forces as well. It is *Sheol* with whom he contends. It is God himself who has plunged Jonah into this watery ordeal. He prayed for deliverance from this distress so he could once again see God’s holy temple—to return to God’s presence. Jonah had faith that his dying prayer reached from the depths of the sea up to God’s heavenly temple (2 Chr 6; 7:14).

B. God heard Jonah's prayer and listened (vv. 2, 7)

That God listens to our prayers may seem trite. After all, isn't that God's business—listening to and answering prayers? But ancient people who understood the transcendence (highness and loftiness) of God knew that God doesn't have to listen to our prayers. God is free to listen or not (Isa 1:15). He is God and Jonah knew God didn't owe him anything, especially a rescue after he had disobeyed. But Jonah recognized that the fish's stomach was not his tomb, but God's vehicle for salvation. Jonah thanked God for sending the fish to swallow him and thus deliver him from his watery ordeal. The fish was proof that God heard Jonah's prayer and mercifully forgave him.

III. Restoration Enables Us to Work Out Our Salvation

A. Restored to a life of worship (vv. 4b, 8-9)

When God restores us from our trials it is always that we may worship him again (cf. Ps 22:21-23). Jonah hoped he would worship in God's presence again in the temple. Jonah hoped in God's love (Hebrew: *hesed*) which is covenant love that manifests in faithfulness, steadfast love, mercy, and lovingkindness. He also confessed that idolaters (literally those who "revere empty nothings") forfeit their hope in God's love. This shows that Jonah, despite a restored life of worship, still does not rejoice in the love of God for pagans. Jonah was probably thinking of the idolatrous pagan sailors who threw him into the seas as outside the love of God. Jonah will thank the LORD for hearing his prayer and mercifully restoring his life. Jonah will sacrifice to God and pay his vow (probably as an act of worship in the temple). Jonah will proclaim to all that salvation belongs to the LORD!

B. Restored to a life of obedience (vv. 6b, 10)

God brought Jonah's life up from the pit, restoring his life so that he could continue to use Jonah as his prophet (cf. Phil 2:12-15). Although the sailors could not save Jonah, and Jonah could not save himself, God saved Jonah by commanding the fish to vomit him up on dry land. Jonah is now back where he started—safe, on dry land, and available to go to Nineveh to preach God's message. God had not treated Jonah as his sins deserved. God had given him a second chance. The story of Jonah could have ended here, but he still needed to learn how wide God's mercy is, how far it extends across the earth, and how deep his own sin extends into his flawed theology of God's love.

C. Restored through Christ's trial by ordeal (Mk 10:38 || Lk 12:50; Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:11-14)

Like Jonah, Jesus also suffered a "watery ordeal" (Lk 12:50; Rom 6:3-4), being "cut off" from God (Col 2:11-14). Jesus dived into the waters of God's judgment and sank to the very pit of death, banished from God's presence. God turned his face away from his obedient Son and did not listen to his cries for deliverance (Mt 27:46) so that he could listen to and rescue sinners. Jesus died in his trial by ordeal, but because he was innocent, he passed the test, and God the Father vindicated him by raising him from the dead (Acts 13:28-35), restoring him by giving him all authority and power under heaven (Mt 28:18).

Conclusion – God rescued Jonah because he delights in saving desperate runaways. All those who are united to Jesus' death in the watery ordeal of baptism will likewise be united to Jesus in his resurrected life! His death is your life. His suffering means your glory (Isa 43:1-3a). This means your suffering, although perhaps painful, is not cruel because God is restoring your life for worship, obedience, and thankfulness to Jesus Christ, the one greater than Jonah. When you grasp this truth and marvel at Christ's loving sacrifice in enduring his trial of ordeal for you, you will begin to understand, appreciate, and even take joy in your trials for what they are—God's customized means for your deliverance from your suffering to your glory.