

PROPHET IN THE DARK!

*Sometimes We See in the Dark What We Missed in the Light:
Surrender isn't always Submission!*

*A Journey through Jonah:
Embracing and Extending God's Scandalous Mercy*

Text: Jonah 2:1-10

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ² 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.

³For 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. ⁴ Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.

⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head ⁶ 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.

⁷ When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. ⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. ⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

The ancient Chinese proverb, "A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step," captures the important, self-evident truth that every journey starts with a single step. This is as true for spiritual journeys as it is for physical ones. What isn't captured by this proverb is the important reminder that ***the direction of that first step will eventually lead to a destination.*** And, for a Christian, if that step is out of step with God's, then the journey may lead to a spiritual destination far from His will, His protection, and His blessing.

As we continue our journey through the wonderful book of Jonah, we have observed that Jonah began his journey with an intentional step in the wrong direction – he stepped out on a journey that would take him 2500 miles in the wrong direction as far away from the will of God as he could get from where he started. As you can see from the map, God wanted Jonah to head 550 miles Northeast to Nineveh but instead, Jonah went down to Joppa and boarded a ship headed 2500 miles in the opposite direction – to Tarshish, the Timbuktu of his

day. In other words, Jonah didn't care where the journey took him as long as it didn't take him anywhere near Nineveh.

What Jonah didn't realize then that he wants to show us now, is that a single step away from God and out of His will led him on a downward journey that brought him to the very bottom of an angry ocean and to the very end of himself. In fact, Jonah was so far down and so far, gone, that had God not mercifully intervened, he would not have lived to write the book we are studying this morning.

Jonah's journey began with an intentional, willful act of disobedience. But not all journeys away from God begin with that kind of bold, intentional, willful disobedience. Sometimes a journey away from God starts with something as simple as an innocent distraction, a sweet temptation, or a wrong turn. Sometimes it starts when we decide to delay our obedience by convincing ourselves that now isn't the best time to start down the path of obedience.

Regardless of how and when a journey into disobedience begins, or how much we try to justify that disobedient step – eventually that step leads us to a place away from God – away from His will, His protection, and ultimately His blessing.

And frankly, that is where some of us may find ourselves this morning – out of step with God, out of His will, away from His protection, and far from His blessing. We may be in our own perch next to Jonah in the belly of some “great fish” God has appointed to bring us back to Him!

And if that is where you are, Jonah has a message of hope for you this morning! God will not leave you there in the dark any more than He left Jonah at the bottom of the ocean in the belly of the fish!

No matter how far we wander or how deep we fall – we are never out of God's sight or out of the reach of His loving grace and merciful kindness.

In the first two scenes of Jonah, we witnessed God moving the ocean to reach Jonah and rescue him from himself. When Jonah got to the very bottom and reached the very end of all human help and hope, he discovered that God was waiting for him there in his darkness.

God heard Jonah's cry for help from the deep and providentially used His creation to bring Jonah to his senses (the angry ocean), to bring him to safety (the fish), and to bring him home (back to Joppa). And when we find ourselves like Jonah at the end of our rope and at rock bottom – God will do the same for us when we do what Jonah did and we cry out to Him.

This section (1:17-2:10) represents the third major scene in the story Jonah is telling. Before the curtain rises and we see and hear what is happening in this scene, there are a few observations we need to make to help us better understand what we are about to see and hear.

Summary of the Scene:

In this scene, we are **listening** to Jonah describe something that happened in the belly of the fish at the bottom of the ocean. There are many spectacular parts to this scene – an angry ocean with massive waves crashing down on the boat filled with terrified sailors and then on Jonah – all of which **capture our sight** and grab our attention. How could anyone survive a storm of this ferocity? Then, out of nowhere comes a massive sea creature that swallows up Jonah and disappears from human sight. And immediately everything goes still and quiet – the sailors are safe above the sea. And though we don't know it yet, below the sea, so is Jonah.

So, there are magnificent sights that capture our attention. However, Jonah directs our attention ***away from the spectacular things we have seen to what we must make sure to hear*** – a one-sided conversation Jonah has with God. The main points and key lessons of this scene are taught through this conversation – and by the way, this is the first time in the book that Jonah talks to God about what has been going on inside his heart.

This conversation is very important because, as Jonah looks back in thankfulness for God's deliverance, he reflects on what God taught him in the dark that he should have learned in the light!

If Jonah could talk to us in person this morning, he would remind us that this conversation with God finally happened after he had sunk to the very bottom and had reached the end of everything that mattered to him. ***And from that place three important things happened*** – 1) Jonah came to his senses; 2) God intervened and rescued His prodigal prophet AND 3) Jonah began to talk to God again. ***Remember, thus far in the book, while God has been talking to him, Jonah has not been talking to God.***

Main Point of the Scene:

As we listen in on this amazing conversation, ***Jonah wants to teach us lessons God had to teach him the hard way: that theological orthodoxy and personal piety are no substitute for personal obedience; that surrender to God's power is not the same as submitting to God's plan; and that breaking of our will is only the first step on the journey to God breaking our heart.***

Here at the bottom of the ocean sitting in the dark, God got Jonah's attention; He revealed the depths of Jonah's sinful, self-righteous pride; He broke Jonah's stubborn will; and He rescued Jonah from the deep so that He could rescue Jonah from Jonah.

God also did something else that was extremely gracious – in the midst of rescuing Jonah from his disobedience, He revealed that there were much deeper heart issues Jonah needed to recognize and resolve: 1) Jonah's theological orthodoxy and religious piety are no substitutes for personal obedience; 2) his surrender to God's power is not the same as submission to God's plan; and 3) his outward conformity and remorse are not the same as genuine repentance.

And that is really the question that Jonah wants us to wrestle with as he recounts his talk with God from the belly of the fish – is his conversation with God coming out of true repentance and a desire to be right with God? Or is it coming out of a desperate desire to be delivered from the difficult condition and dire circumstance that Jonah was experiencing?

Structure of the Scene:

With that in mind here are several things Jonah wants us to note as we watch and listen to his prayer in this scene:

1. This is the first of two prayers that Jonah prays in this book.
2. The language of this prayer is filled with appropriate expressions of gratitude, is shaped by theological orthodoxy, and expresses appropriate outward spirituality.
3. This prayer appears to obtain the immediate results that Jonah desired – deliverance from death and rescue from danger.
4. This prayer expresses the willingness to turn to the Lord and to return to His presence.

However, before we jump to conclusion that since Jonah has come to his senses and returned to the Lord, all is now well between himself and God – Jonah stops us in our tracks and counsels us, *“Listen for what I didn’t say as much as you are listening to what I did say when I prayed this prayer! And when you do listen to what I said, think about how I said it as opposed to how I should have said it!”*

What Jonah wants us to observe and learn is that ***surrender to God’s power is not the same thing as submission to God’s plan.*** Jonah may have been driven to the place where he was willing to conform outwardly to God’s stated will, but he had not yet internally submitted to God’s mission, nor had he repented of his self-righteous, self-justified disobedience to God’s bigger plan.

Jonah would say, *“When you listen carefully to my prayer, what you won’t hear is repentance from my hard-hearted, self-righteous, stubborn disobedience! I may have been forced to comply with God’s will, but I remained firmly convinced that my way was the better way!”*

As we look at this scene and listen to Jonah's conversation with God, we need to make sure we don't miss the major components Jonah highlights for our attention:

I. Grateful Reflection (2:1-2, 6b)

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,² 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.

For the first time in the book, Jonah cries out to God. God has instructed him to cry out to the Ninevites (1:2). The captain has urged him to cry out to God (1:6). The sailors have cried out, first to their gods (1:5), and then to Jonah's God (1:14). But the one person who hasn't cried out is the very one who desperately needs to cry out – and now finally, he cries out to God for the first time in the book (2:1-6).

A. The Nature of this Prayer

- The kind of prayer recorded in these verses is a *"todah"* or a thanksgiving prayer – in other words, it was an official or formal type of prayer one would pray after being delivered by God from some great danger or affliction.
- In Jonah's case – deliverance from God's just wrath!
- This prayer is flavored with ***gratitude***.
- This prayer is filled with ***praise***.
- This prayer is marked by ***reflection*** – *"What did I learn?"*
- This prayer is intended for ***instruction*** – *"What should you learn from my experience?"*

B. The Perspective of this Prayer

1. In terms of its physical location

- There are two prayers in this chapter.

- The first is a desperate prayer by Jonah from the middle of an angry ocean where he cried out to God to rescue him from drowning – *“I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol, I cried.*
- The second prayer is a longer prayer of thanksgiving that Jonah prayed from the safety of the belly of the great fish God sent in answer to his first prayer – *Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,² saying,*

2. In terms of its temporal orientation

- Jonah puts his prayer from the ocean (which occurred first in time) **after** his prayer from the belly of the fish – so, clearly, the second prayer is where he wants to focus our attention. (This prayer occupies the chapter.)
- Furthermore, Jonah described these two prayers long after he prayed them. In fact, he wrote the book of Jonah (including these two prayers) long after the events described in the book happened. God taught Jonah some valuable lessons in these four chapters – and after Jonah learned them, he wants to teach them to us which is why he wrote the book.
- The way he frames this prayer – what he says and doesn’t say as well as how he says what he says – are very important to the point he is trying to make.

C. The Essence of this Prayer

- So, what are the key things Jonah wants to make sure we grasp from these two prayers?
- Put differently, when a disobedient prophet prays – how does he pray, and more importantly, how does God answer?
- In other words, how did Jonah pray and what happened?

1. Jonah prayed **desperately** – “*I cried unto the Lord out of my distress. . . out of the belly of sheol.*” (2:2)

- The idea here is that Jonah cried out desperately as the waves pounded him down.
- He shouted for help as he descended into the depths of the ocean.

2. God heard **graciously** – “*He answered me . . . You heard my voice!*” (2:2)

- His cry came up before the Lord and instead of ignoring His disobedient prophet or leaving him to suffer the consequences of his repeated, arrogant disobedience, God heard, and God responded!
- In other words, when God heard Jonah’s call, He did what Jonah refused to do when he heard God’s call – He responded out of grace and with mercy!

3. God delivered **mercifully** – “*Yet You brought up my life from the pit.*” (2:6b)

4. Jonah returned **personally** – “*O Lord, my God!*” (2:6c)

- Up to this point Jonah has fled from the presence of God. He has renounced his position before God, he has removed himself from the place where God had established His presence through the Torah and temple, and he had abandoned his own people. But when God’s merciful grace came when Jonah most needed it and least deserved it, it moved Jonah to reconsider.
- Divine mercy moved Jonah where divine wrath could not.
- And Jonah returns. He returns to God. He desires to return to God’s temple. And He desires to rejoin God’s people.
- *Illustration: Paul and Paula – pursued by God’s mercy!*

Jonah points us back to this prayer and asks us to witness his grateful reflection on the gracious mercy God extended to him – ironically, the very mercy that he was glad to accept personally but horrifically offended that God would extend to Nineveh!

But Jonah also wants us to know what he was thinking as he prayed from the belly of the fish.

II. Desperate Contemplation (2:3-6)

³*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.* ⁴*Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'* ⁵*The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head* ⁶*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.*

A. Desperate Conditions

- Cast into the deep, into the very heart of the sea.
- Waters surrounded him, waves crashing over him.
- Depths swallowing him – weeds drowning him.
- Life departing from him – *I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever* (poetic description of death and the abode of the dead).
- Jonah had sunk to the very bottom – he had come to the very end of all help and hope.

B. Divine Causes

For you cast me into the deep . . . your waves and your billows passed over me

- Jonah realizes that all that has happened to him is God's divine providential response to his disobedience!
- No matter how self-righteous or theologically justified Jonah felt about his actions – God had rendered a clear verdict!

C. Deliberate Consideration

Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.

- Jonah acknowledged that his disobedience resulted in him being driven out of God's presence – like Adam, Cain, and eventually Israel.
- His decision to disregard God's word, disobey God's will, and depart from God's presence had a horrific spiritual consequence – *"to be driven away from God's sight!"*
- BUT . . . God heard his cry and granted merciful deliverance through the fish in whose belly Jonah now safely resides.

- And since God had granted this merciful deliverance, Jonah was confident that he would once again stand before the Lord in His glorious temple in Jerusalem!

D. Divine Compassion

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

- God has reached down and rescued Jonah from the depths of his disobedience and a grateful Jonah has returned!
- And God will do the same for us!
- God doesn't disown us when we disobey and depart from Him – rather, He pursues us!!

III. Self-Righteous Comparison (2:7-8)

When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

- Jonah has cried out to the **right person** – “*I remembered the Lord*” - *Yahweh, the God of Heaven who made the sea and dry land (1:9); the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Israel (1:9 – I am a Hebrew); and His own God (2:6).*
- He has cried out by the **right means** – “*I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you*” (2:7a).
- He has oriented his prayer to the **right place** – “*my prayer came to you, into your holy temple” (2:7b).*
- And he has expressed his prayer with the **right theological truth** – When Solomon dedicated the temple that Jonah was talking about, he stated that when God's people were in trouble and directed their prayers toward the temple where God's visible presence resided, God would hear from Heaven and answer (2 Kings 8; 2 Chronicles 6).

BUT there are clues in the way Jonah prays that reveal something is still very wrong with his heart.

1. First, he omits two important things from his prayer – confession of his disobedience, and repentance before God. Jonah knows that he has disappointed or even displeased God, but he does not truly believe he has sinned against God!

2. Second, he states things in ways that point to his prideful spirituality – *“I remembered the Lord!”* In every other place in the OT where someone was forgiven or rescued by God, they say it this way, *“The Lord remembered me!”* Jonah seems to be pointing to his spiritual piety as grounds for God to extend him mercy!

3. Third, he compares himself as worthy of mercy since he is not like the pagan idolaters who are not worthy of mercy because they worship idols instead of the true God of Israel!

Jonah stands before us and says, *“If you listen carefully to the prayer I prayed when I was in the belly of the fish – you won’t hear contrite confession or humble repentance. Instead, you will hear my spiritual pride and self-reliance coming through!”*

IV. Self-Confident Surrender (2:9)

But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

- Jonah has been brought to the point of desperation by the providential hand of God and through the difficult circumstances God has brought upon His prodigal prophet.
- Jonah is out of options – there is nowhere else to go and no one else to help – and so finally, **Jonah concedes defeat.**
- *God, you win! I can’t go any deeper or run any farther, so I surrender to your plan!*
- *I am thankful you delivered me from death by drowning – and I know I owe you a thanksgiving sacrifice which I intend to offer.*
- *I realize that it is pointless to continue to resist your will and so as soon as I get back to dry land, I will head to Jerusalem and appear at the temple to pay what I have vowed to you here in the belly of this great fish You sent to rescue me.*

- *But . . . I still believe that salvation rightly belongs to people like me who worship you alone, who sacrifice only to you, and who come to the right temple – the one in Jerusalem. Your salvation belongs to you and should be extended only to those who belong to you! Those who worship idols have no right to this mercy!*
- *So, while I surrender to your will, I am not submitting to your plan! I will go Jerusalem and pay up what I owe you and then I will head to Nineveh like I agreed. . . . but when I get there, I am going to announce your judgment but not your mercy!*
- Jonah was willing to say “Uncle!” but he was not yet willing to say “Lord!”

V. Gracious Recalibration (2:10)

And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

- Jonah has come to God with the right words – but he has not come with the right heart.
- Jonah was like the Israelites in Hosea 6:1-3 who were so desperate for relief they decided to “return to God” and get relief from their distress and healing from the damage they had done to themselves – *“After all He is our national God, and it is His job to forgive us and heal us!”* **But they failed to bring a broken heart of true repentance!**
- And so, there were more lessons they had to learn, and God brought more pressure to break their heart and not just their will so that in 14:1-8 they came with repentant words flowing out of hearts truly broken over sin!
- God is not done with Jonah – but lest we think He is pleased with Jonah; God spoke to the fish and instructed it to hurl Jonah out of its mouth!
- Every reference to “vomiting” in the OT is negative, and so as Jonah tells us this part of the story, he wants us to realize there is more work that God has yet to do.
- Though his will may be broken into compliance, his heart is still resisting the work God wants to do in Nineveh and in him!

Conclusion: Lessons for Life

As we wrap up this scene – we see a bedraggled prophet coming up through the surf to the shore of Joppa – back where he started.

God has gotten Jonah's attention; revealed his self-righteous pride and sinful arrogance; and broken his stubborn will. BUT Jonah himself would tell us ... as thankful as he was for this gracious and merciful work of God in his life ... there was more to be done – much more!

And in chapter four, God will continue that merciful work in the life of Jonah as He reveals and deals with Jonah's sinful, self-righteous indignation at God; his misplaced, theologically orthodox nationalism; and his hard heart and unmerciful spirit.

But for now, let's make sure we learn the lessons Jonah is teaching us this morning – lessons he learned the hard way in the dark and is now teaching to us in the light:

- 1. God providentially orchestrates our circumstances to get our full spiritual attention!**
- 2. God teaches us in the dark what we refuse to learn in the light!**
- 3. God is more interested in granting us repentance than merely giving us relief!**
- 4. Theological orthodoxy and religious piety are no substitutes for personal obedience.**
- 5. Surrender to God's Power is not the same as Submission to God's Plan.**
- 6. Genuine Repentance is not the same as Personal Remorse.**

7. Repentance begins with a prayer from desperate people to a merciful Savior who is ready, willing, and able to deliver!

- So . . . where are you this morning? Are you truly repentant or just personally remorseful?
- Have you merely complied and surrendered to God's will, or have you gladly submitted to God's Word and to His Way?
- Have you cried "Uncle!" or have you come to the place where you are willing to cry out "Lord!"
- Jonah would say, *"No matter how deep you have fallen or how far you have wandered . . . God will hear you when you cry. He will meet you there! And He can and will deliver you from the deepest place or darkest spot-on earth! So, what on earth are you waiting for? Look to Heaven for help!"*

Addendum – On God's Merciful Compassion

Why Does God Intervene and Show Mercy to His Disobedient Children?

- A. Because it is His Nature – He is full of mercy and compassion.
- B. Because it is His Desire – He is full of Kindness.
- C. Because it is His Right – He is sovereign over both His wrath and His mercy. "Salvation belongs to the Lord."
- D. Because it is His Glory!

He intervenes and extends mercy on the basis of two things:

- Grace – always
- Repentance – usually (but not always)