

**EFC Bemidji 6.9.24**  
**Jonah 2**  
**A True and Better Jonah**

*“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.*

*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.”*

As we continue this morning through the Book of Jonah, we arrive at the part of the story that most of us are familiar with. This huge fish, which we often refer to as a whale although the text just calls it a fish, has swallowed up Jonah. He is in the belly of the fish for three days and nights before he is vomited back onto dry land.

We immediately see the supernatural means that God is using to get a hold of Jonah. If you were with us last week when Pastor Jerry preached on chapter 1, then you know that the reason that Jonah is in this mess is because of his own doing.

He was running away from God calling on his life to go and preach to the city of Ninevah. He got on a boat and headed in the opposite direction from where God was sending him. And because of God's compassion, he sends a storm his way! But, in order that the sailors who were operating the boat could be saved from this storm, Jonah is hurled into the sea.

We pick up in chapter 2 where Jonah is praying to the Lord but this section really starts not with this prayer, but with a prayer of distress. In verse 2 we see that Jonah had called out to the Lord. While we do not have this prayer recorded, as it probably was not as eloquently spoken as the prayer we do have, we can all but imagine because you and I have more than likely prayed out a similar prayer. You may have not been literally sinking to the bottom of the sea, but you have experienced a time in your life when you were figuratively drowning. Whether the bills were piling up, or you just lost your job, a loved one passed away, a relationship ended, a test was failed, if you have lived life for any amount of time, you have called out to the Lord in distress.

The good news here is not that the Lord answered Jonah, although that is good news. The better news is that the **Lord answered Jonah in the middle of his transgressions**. The Lord answers Jonah despite of his sin.

Jonah is not a victim here. The storm was his fault because he was being disobedient to the Almighty. The sailors did not try and solve their problems by sacrificing Jonah, it was Jonah's idea for them to throw him overboard and they resisted it as long as they could. Jonah is sinking to the bottom the sea; he is drifting down to the pit because he has wronged God and sinned against him. It invokes one of my favourite phrases, "You play stupid games and you win stupid prizes."

God would not have been wrong to have allowed Jonah to sink to the bottom as punishment. God told us from the very beginning in Genesis 2 that if you sin, you will certainly die.<sup>1</sup> Jonah is in the middle of getting his just desserts for his sin but because God is compassionate, because God is a loving God, he hears Jonah's cry for help and he helps him.

Not all of the wrongs that happen to us are our fault. We often are the victims of the sins of other people when we cry out for God. But many times, we are in the predicament we are in because of our own sin. When you fail the final you choose not to study for and have to retake that class, you got yourself in that mess. When you lied and cheated at work and were fired, you got yourself in that mess. When you got a speeding ticket because you were speeding, you got your

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:16-17 says if you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will certainly die. Combined with Romans 3:23 that the wages of sin is death, we know that any sin leads to death.

self into that mess. You have not been wronged when you experience the consequences of your own actions.

But even in the midst of our distress, including the distress we have caused to ourselves, God hears us. And not only does God hear us, God answers us. No matter how bad it has gotten, no matter the depths of the problem you have gotten yourself into, God hears you and can save. Even, “*from deep in the realm of the dead (v. 2)*” God can hear our cries for help.

God has compassion on Jonah. God hears his cry and helps him even when he was not deserving of this saving. And so, Jonah responds to this great compassion through prayer.

From the inside of the fish, we get this prayer from Jonah, but something smells fishy about it. (Hold for the enormous laughter). This so-called prayer of repentance is a bunch of religious sounding words that aren’t the marking of true repentance.

This isn’t a prayer about God. Jonah isn’t talking about how great God is. Jonah is just talking about himself. “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.” There is a whole bunch of I, me, and my’s being used here. The my that he is leaving out here that he should have said was, “it is my fault I’m in this mess.” He is almost acting like this innocent man who fell overboard and God came and rescued.

He even seems to forget here that it was his idea to have himself thrown overboard into this sea! Instead, he blames the Lord for it. In verse 3 he says, “*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.*” The Lord did not pluck Jonah off the boat and cast him in. Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard because it was his sin that got them all in this mess.

He continues to play the victim in verse 4 saying that he has been banished. He views God’s compassion of putting a huge storm in his path to get his attention as banishment! But the one who banished himself was Jonah. He was running away from the Lord. He was trying to get away from God’s presence because He didn’t like that God was going to be compassionate to his enemies.

God did not do this to Jonah. Jonah did all of this to himself. So, even though Jonah is praying this prayer that on the surface sounds really nice, it is revealing his true heart. **Yet God continues to be compassionate with Jonah even through his false prayer.**

Where in this prayer does Jonah talk about his sin? Where does he repent from his running away from God?

In fact, the only time he even mentions sin is other people’s sin! Look at verse 8: “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them.” I’m sorry but last time I checked it was you Jonah who was turning away from God’s love. It was you Jonah who held onto your idol of self-righteousness and judgement of the Ninevite people! And it was the pagan sailors

who turned from their false gods and they were the ones with “*shouts of grateful praise and sacrifice.*”

We see Jonah in verse 9 say that Salvation comes from the Lord, but he is doing his best to withhold this salvation from the Ninevites. This whole prayer stinks! It was filled with some good stuff but it was all empty words. But the Lord doesn't call him out for his lack of true repentance, not yet at least. He instead allows him to safely think about what he has done.

This fish has come and swallowed Jonah up but it doesn't spit him up immediately. Now the boat set off and this storm comes upon them. We're not given a distance or time table of how quickly the storm came but it is implied that it came quickly. So, they must not be very far from shore, certainly not 3 days away from shore. Yet God makes Jonah sit in this fish, surrounded by fish guts, as a means to help him figure his life out. **He is compassionate to Jonah by working on his character not just his circumstances.**

This fish, much like the storm from chapter one, is meant to change not just his circumstances, but his heart. Jonah is sitting here going, “Wow! God saved me! He heard my cry to help the predicament I was in and he can and helped!” Jonah is completely missing the point!

The problem is not that he is sinking in the water and is about to drown. That is a secondary problem. His problem is that his heart doesn't care about compassion. His problem is that he thinks he can run from the Lord. His problem is that the great theology that he has had so far does not line up with how he practically lives.

So, in his compassion. God gives him an extended timeout. He makes him sit in the belly of the fish to think about what he has done. But instead of reflecting on where he has gone wrong and turning to God, Jonah just keeps on with his imitation life.

He also thinks that God is sending this huge fish to help his circumstances. But God is there to work on his character. Jonah's focus is completely external. I was in a bad situation and I was drowning so God saved me from drowning. I was dying and God helped me not die. But God isn't just focused on the eternal problems. God is trying to fix Jonah on the inside. So, he shows him the inside of the fish as a parallel to the inside of Jonah: a gross inside lacking compassion.

And the compassion that God has for Jonah, and the Ninevites, is the same compassion that he has for you. Because Jonah is really just a picture for us to see Christ. To steal a phrase made popular by the late pastor Timothy Keller, **Jesus is the true and better Jonah.**

In Matthew 12:38-41, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees and he points to the Book of Jonah. It says, “*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.”*

What we see here is a couple of things. First, the issue with chapter 2 that we haven't really addressed yet: was Jonah really swallowed by a fish? You might have all types of questions of if this is really possible? What type of fish was this? How did he breathe or eat or drink water? These questions have led many to believe that the story of Jonah is actually a parable. It's just a creative story to illustrate a spiritual lesson. The issue with that is first that nowhere do we see in the books of the prophets them writing in parables. That is not the style in which the other prophets of this time were writing. But second, Jesus is regarding this not as a parable but as a true historical event.

He is comparing what happens to Jonah to what will happen to him. He is comparing the Ninevites to the people of his generation. Jesus believes this to be a historical truth not a parable or figurative story. So, how do we account for Jonah surviving in the fish? Well, if God can raise Jesus from the dead, I think a miracle with a fish can work in our worldview. If God is a God of miracles, then we by faith can trust that God could appoint a fish and sustain Jonah.

But much more important than the historical accuracy of this event is Jesus' comparison to himself. If you do not know, the term Son of Man is the name that Jesus used for himself. It is how he refers to himself most often in the Gospels. It comes from a prophecy for the coming messiah in Daniel 7.

Jesus is making the comparison for Jonah being in the belly of the fish for three days just like he, the Son of Man, will be in the tomb for three days. But the comparison between these two figures goes deeper than that.

Jonah was in the midst of running away from God's command. Jesus was walking towards Jerusalem with his eyes on the cross to do God's command.

Jonah was cast into the depth of the sea and faced his own impending death for his own sin. Jesus was cast into the depth on the cross and actually died for others sins.

Jonah prayed a fake prayer that was void of repentance and connection with God. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prayed that God's will be done whatever it took.

Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of a great fish because he was in timeout. Jesus spent three days and night dead in a tomb because he was saving others from timeout.

Jonah was vomited out and preach a message of repentance for the Ninevites. Jesus rose from the tomb and continued to preach a message of salvation for the whole world.

Jesus is the true and better Jonah. In every way that Jonah failed, Jesus fulfilled God's message. Because we are like Jonah. Because of our sin we deserved death. God didn't get us into the trouble and sin we got ourselves into. And God would be completely justified if he allowed us to get the consequences of our actions. But God is compassionate.

In the midst of our sinking; in the midst of our drowning; He dives into the waters to save us. He takes our place. He suffers and dies so that we go free on dry land.

Yes, we can call out to God in the midst of our calamities and our strife. In the times that we are drowning in our lives God hears our cries and can save us. In the midst of our false prayers of promising to never to do it again. In the midst of our prayers for rescue that ignore the fact that we got ourselves into our own mess, God can come and save us.

But more importantly than the physical problems that we get ourselves into, God hears our cries for rescue. God hears our cries of repentance. We can call out to God in faith that we need to be rescued from our sin. That we are headed towards spiritual death and Jesus steps into our place.

Now, something greater than Jonah is here. Will you repent at the preaching of Jesus?

### **Benediction**

Psalm 18 gives us a song of deliverance. While King David wrote it about how the Lord delivered him from Saul, much of the imagery mirror the cross with the earthquake and the darkness. I encourage you to go and read it but I want to focus on verse 6,

“In my distress I called to the Lord;  
I cried to my God for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice;  
my cry came before him, into his ears.”

Be Blessed.