

***RUNNING TO GOD: JONAH'S DELIVERANCE***  
**Jonah 1:17-2:10**  
**February 4, 2007 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

**I. God's Grace (1:17)**

**“And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.”**

**1. The means**

We noted in chapter 1 that Jonah was running from God and we saw the great turmoil it brought upon both him and the crew of the ship that Jonah had set flight upon. You will remember that even this ship was provided by God's grace. Jonah thought that he was hiding from God and had succeeded in his plot to escape for we found him asleep during the great storm. But he had not escaped God at all, but was right where God put him to get his attention. Jonah had disobeyed God's command and God in His grace provided both the storm and the ship as a means of divine discipline. Jonah recognizes that God's hand is in all of this and suggests that the sailors throw him overboard. We read in v. 15, **“So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.”** The sailors are delivered from the wrath of God and they acknowledge God in their sacrifices and vows.

However, Jonah has not yet been delivered. He is left to drown in the bowels of the sea—and God again intervenes by His grace and provides a new transport for Jonah in his distress. **“And the LORD ‘prepared’ (ASV, KJV, GNV) or ‘appointed’ (ESV, RSV, NAS) or ‘provided’ (NIV, NRS) a great fish to swallow Jonah.”** Much has been made of this fish in biblical scholarship. The liberal scholar suggests that the story of the fish proves that this story is mythical because: a) no fish known to man is large enough to actually swallow a man, and b) even if this could happen, no man could survive three days in the belly of a fish. However, it has been documented that there are certain types of fish capable of swallowing a human being whole, notably the sperm whale and the whale shark. There are also documented instances of a person living for several days in a fish or some other large animal. However, this story remains the target of liberal scholarship and unbelievers who refuse to accept the miraculous. They claim that to present this incident as historical narrative is absurd.

Other scholars of a more conservative stripe argue from a different perspective, but still focus on the identity of the fish. It has been common in evangelical thought to describe the great fish as a whale. Scholars are quick to note that the text does not say “whale” but “a great fish.” Others argue that it could not be a whale because a whale is a mammal and not a fish at all. While we must admire those that strive to be biblical, we must be careful that we don't go too far in our interpretation. For instance, while the text does not call the great fish a whale that does not necessarily mean that it was not a whale. The whale was not a species in biblical literature. As a matter of fact, the word “whale” is nowhere to be found in Scripture. So for a person in Jonah's day, they would have called a whale “a great fish.” Anything that swam in the sea and looked like a fish would be called a fish. Further, the classification of mammal did not exist as yet, so to argue that a whale is not a fish is really a moot point.

Having said this, it might seem as if I believe that the great fish that swallowed Jonah was a whale. But my intention is to show that we cannot be certain it was not a whale. But my main

intention is to show that both liberal scholarship and well-meaning conservative scholarship that focus on the identity of the fish miss the point of this verse entirely. The great fish is not the emphasis, but the God who prepared the fish. As G. Campbell Morgan stated, "Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God."<sup>1</sup> The focus of this verse is on God who prepared the great fish. For all I know, it could have been a guppy that God prepared to swallow Jonah. Your immediate response might be that it is impossible for a guppy to swallow a human. But may I remind you that with God nothing is impossible. If God chose to prepare a guppy to swallow Jonah then He certainly could have done so.

So the emphasis here should be on God who in His power prepared the great fish. As I noted in reading the verse, the word translated "**appointed**" is translated differently in other versions. It is often difficult for us to translate Hebrew into modern English. As I was discussing this passage with Shane yesterday, I asked him, "Which translation is correct: "appointed," "prepared," or "provided"?" Shane immediately launched into a sermonette on the translation. He said, "God appointed it for Jonah, he prepared that specific fish that He had appointed for Jonah, and He provided it for his deliverance." I think he is correct. All three translations convey God's actions in rescuing Jonah from death and destruction. He appointed the way, He prepared the way, and He provided the way at just the right time. Do you notice something here? Could it be that God's way in delivering Jonah from the chaos of the sea is a picture of God's provision of salvation in Jesus Christ, in appointing His only Son and sending Him to rescue us from His wrath and eternal death? This is certainly implied when we look at the remainder of the verse.

## **2. The length – three days**

**"And Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights."** O. Palmer Robertson notes the following concerning the length of time that Jonah was in the belly of the great fish:

Some people have proposed that Jonah actually died in the belly of the fish. We do not know, but it is at least possible. God then would have raised him from the dead after three days. Clearly God's intent in Jonah's experience was to represent the prophet as rising to a life of service to God after sinking down to death in disobedience. Why three days? Something in the order of things dictated the three days. If such a fate can be put positively, it was not to be more than three days that Jonah would be in the belly of the fish. For three days he was to rest in the bottom of the sea, as though death were being confirmed. But it must only be for three days. Then he must be brought up from the abyss.<sup>2</sup>

In Palmer's description we see the significance of the three days: God ordained it. Of course, we know that the three days in the bowels of the abyss were prophetic, a precursor of an even greater salvation that took three days and three nights to accomplish. Jesus Himself refers to Jonah's incident in Matthew 12:40-41, "For just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. <sup>41</sup> The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here." Jesus here is referring to His impending death, burial, and

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<sup>1</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Minor Prophets*, 69.

<sup>2</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *Jonah: A Study in Compassion*, 29-30.

resurrection. One writer remarks, "God restored Jonah to life so he would be God's instrument in providing salvation to a large Gentile population under God's judgment for their sins. He raised Jesus to life so He would be God's instrument in providing salvation for an even larger population of Jews and Gentiles under God's judgment for their sins."<sup>3</sup>

So this incident in Jonah's life served a dual purpose. It was God's means of judgment and deliverance for Jonah personally, driving Him to God, and it pointed to the One who is greater than Jonah, Jesus Christ, as a means of judgment for sin and deliverance from the wrath of God. It is a story of God's amazing grace!

## II. Jonah's Praise (2:1-9)

God's gracious judgment and provision had its desired affect on Jonah. Chapter 2 is Jonah's Psalm of Thanksgiving. It is a hymn of praise to God for delivering him out of the depths of doom and despair. John Piper offers some expository thoughts on this prayer of thanksgiving<sup>4</sup> that is a testimony to God's goodness in answering His children when they cry out to Him in distress.

### 1. God answers us in spite of our guilt (vv. 1-2)

**"Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish,<sup>2</sup> and he said, 'I called out of my distress to the LORD, And He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice.'"**

There are a few things to note here. First, **"Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish."** As we saw last week, there is no indication that Jonah had prayed during the entire storm. In v. 6, the pagan captain approaches Jonah and exhorts him, "Get up, call on your God," literally, "Cry out to Him." The sailors cry out, but we never see Jonah call upon the name of the Lord. While on the ship, Jonah never prayed. His conscience restrained him. He was not yet at the point of repentance. As Robertson notes, "Not until he was ready to do the Lord's will in going to Nineveh was he able to pray."<sup>5</sup>

That is what unconfessed sin does in the life of the believer. Robertson describes it as "a fishbone caught in the windpipe. You cannot breathe with any semblance of normality until you remove the obstruction."<sup>6</sup> If you have ever had a little crappie bone stuck in your throat you can certainly relate. It is like a popcorn kernel lodged in your throat. It remains bothersome until it is dislodged. That is what unconfessed sin does to our conscience. It irritates and distracts and renders us unable to cry out to God aright until it is removed.

And yet, in spite of our guilt, God hears our prayers. Hear Jonah's words, **"I called out in my distress to the LORD."** What was the cause of Jonah's distress? His disobedience. He was guilty. And yet, **"He answered me."** From the edge of death, a just penalty for his disobedience, he cried out for help, and God heard Him.

The psalmist captures this wonderful truth that God answers us in spite of our guilt in Psalm 107:10-15:

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Dr. Constable's Notes on Jonah*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper,

[http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/27/367\\_Cry\\_of\\_Distress\\_and\\_Voice\\_of\\_Thanks](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/27/367_Cry_of_Distress_and_Voice_of_Thanks)

<sup>5</sup> Robertson, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> There were those who dwelt in darkness and in the shadow of death, Prisoners in misery and chains, <sup>11</sup> Because they had rebelled against the words of God And spurned the counsel of the Most High. <sup>12</sup> Therefore He humbled their heart with labor; They stumbled and there was none to help. <sup>13</sup> Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble; He saved them out of their distresses. <sup>14</sup> He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death And broke their bands apart. <sup>15</sup> Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness, And for His wonders to the sons of men!

John Piper concluded, "If your disobedience is the cause of you distress, repent and cry out to the Lord. He will answer you in spite of your guilt." Robertson agrees, "When real distress in life comes, cry out with a full earnestness. He will hear, answer and deliver."<sup>7</sup>

## **2. God answers us in spite of His judgment (v. 3)**

**"For You had cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the current engulfed me. All Your breakers and billows passed over me."**

Jonah's statement is interesting because of who he now attributes his judgment to. In 1:15 it was the sailors who had cast Jonah overboard. But here Jonah knows that it was all part of God's righteous judgment for his disobedience.

God's divine discipline is always to drive us back to Him. We often despair in our distress and fear approaching the God whom we know we have offended. But God's divine discipline is an act of His grace. His judgments are to bring us to repentance. There is a punitive side to God's discipline, but there is always the redemptive side as well. Job 36:15 says, "**He delivers the afflicted in** (literally, "by") **their affliction, and opens their ear in time of oppression.**" Piper notes, "Adversity is redemptive, not merely punitive. Even if you have felt as though the very hand of God is against you in your distress, do not despair to call upon him. He answers his children in spite of his own judgment."

That is what Jonah realized. He understood that the sailors who through him overboard were merely instruments of God's judgment. The waves that crashed in around him in the sea were God's instruments as well. But he did not despair. He called out to God. Notice what he says in v. 4, "**I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless, I will look again toward Your holy temple.**" Jonah recognized the peril of his condition. It was much more than physical. His soul had been cast off by God. He has been banished from God's presence. *Nonetheless*, He turns to God. That is true repentance. Even though Jonah understood that he was being disciplined by God, even though he realized that he had been banished from God's presence, he recognized something more about God. There is forgiveness with God for those who repent!

## **3. God answers us and delivers us in spite of impossible circumstances (vv. 5-6)**

I think we would all admit that the prospect for Jonah's survival did not look very promising.

## **4. God answers our prayers in his time and in his way (v. 7)**

## **5. God answers our prayers when we acknowledge that salvation is in Him alone (vv. 8-10)**

Psalm 3:10, "Salvation belongs to the LORD."

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<sup>7</sup> Robertson, 32.

**Conclusion:<sup>8</sup>**

- 1. True faith clings to the Lord even when he is chastening you.**
- 2. True faith offers a perpetual sacrifice of thanks to the Lord.**
- 3. True faith manifests itself in keeping its word.**
- 4. True faith recognizes that all salvation comes from the Lord.**

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<sup>8</sup> The following points of application are from Robertson, *Jonah: A Study in Compassion*.