

Jonah: *In the Deep*  
Jonah 1:15-17  
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April 21, 2024

As we return to our series on Jonah, the storm has come to an end. The winds have settled, the sea is calm, and the sailors are worshipping the LORD. God's judgment upon Jonah has been executed...the runaway prophet has been thrown into the sea. That's where we left off last week. We'll pick up the action there and see what happens next. Our text is Jonah 1:15-17: <sup>15</sup> So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. <sup>17</sup> 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.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) Faith by Sight; 2) God in the Deep; and 3) A Necessary Dying.

### **I. Faith by Sight**

Up to this point in the story of Jonah, there are two primary witnesses regarding the events that have taken place: Jonah and the sailors.

Now, if you think about it, almost everything that we have read thus far could have been reported by the pagan sailors on board the ship to Tarshish. Even Jonah's original call to Nineveh may have been something Jonah shared with the crew when he confessed that he was fleeing the presence of God as we read last week in vs. 10. So, how does this story end from the perspective of the crew?

From the perspective of the sailors, Jonah's story ends at vs. 15 "So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea..." Jonah is dead.

Now, the story of the sailors continues on for a bit, apart from Jonah. According to our text, the minute Jonah hit the water, the winds settled, the sea calmed, the clouds parted, and their journey to Tarshish resumed without a hint of foul weather.

Church, let me ask you a question: how would we know any details about the storm settling or what the sailors did after Jonah was thrown into the sea unless those facts were reported by the sailors themselves? Think about it. Jonah is buried under the waves. We'll see next week in Jonah's prayer that he describes his experience of 'dying' in the deep quite vividly. The waves overwhelm him, his head is wrapped up with seaweed, and he goes to the place of the dead. Jonah could not possibly have witnessed what happened after he was hurled into the sea. That testimony could have come only from the sailors.

And here is what they later reported: having hurled Jonah into the sea at the prophet's bidding, the storm immediately relented, and they were saved...just as the prophet of God had predicted.

We read in vss. 15-16: ...the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

The heathen sailors, according to their own testimony, understood that God was in the storm. God had sent the wind; God had spoken through His prophet; and God honored His promise as spoken through the prophet. When the sacrifice was made, salvation was granted. When the sinner was handed over to death, the storm ceased immediately.

So, the sailors worship. They exceedingly fear the LORD of heaven, the maker of the sea and dry land. They offer up sacrifices...maybe there on the ship or later when they arrive in port. And they make vows...they make promises to God. They divert their allegiance away from pagan idols and set their hearts on the God who is there...the God who has been revealed in the storm...the God of Israel...the God of Jonah...the maker of heaven and earth.

Why do they believe and worship? Because of what they have seen and what they have heard. Their faith is based upon experience. They have been so utterly impacted by this experience that they will tell this story over and over again to whoever will listen. Their testimony will bear witness to the power of God, the judgment of God, the justice of God, and ultimately the mercy of God who spared the sailors when the prodigal prophet voluntarily gave up his life that theirs would be spared. Like the writers of the Gospels, these men will bear testimony of what they have seen and what they have heard.

Church, for thousands of years, for billions of souls, faith in God begins with experience, and often experience in the midst of a storm. In my trips to India it was very common to hear a testimony that began with, "I was sick, I was dying, I was tortured by demons, I was suicidal, I was addicted, I was in a life of crime...but then someone offered to pray for me in the name of Jesus, and I was healed, I was set free, the darkness left me, and my whole life changed! Sometimes the stories even tell of unnatural events. I remember hearing a man state that he was about to lose his crops due to drought. He cried out in the name of Jesus to save his family and the next day he arose to discover that it had rained on his land and no others for miles in any direction. Dramatic storm stories are common amongst the heathen who give their lives to the one, true God. That said, the deeper truths about God's nature and His infinite mercy are often those which cannot be discovered on the surface.

You see, as powerful as their experience was on the surface, the sailors could not anticipate what God was doing in the deep. According to their assessment on the surface, Jonah was dead...and sadly, it would appear that the poor prophet deserved to die. On the surface, as sincerely as the sailors worshipped, they could only conclude that disobedient servants of the one, true God were severely punished...so it is no wonder then that the sailors fear God and make vows. They now know that God is holy, powerful beyond anyone's estimation, and unrelenting in His justice against those who sin against Him. He is a God who is faithful to His promises, and He is a God who is able to save. Even so, the sailors were yet to discover a God whose love runs deeper than the offense of His glory. They could see only the wrath of God's justice in His left hand, but they could not see God's loving redemption in His right hand. That hand was hidden from them...and that is often the case even now.

We often see men fall...far too often, in fact. We hear stories of pastors who fall; of great Christian leaders who blow up their churches and their ministries. We wonder to ourselves, "How could they?" and we silently find satisfaction when they end up in jail or when they lose everything as a result of their unfaithfulness. We think to ourselves, "What comes around goes around. They got what they deserved." And that isn't wrong...our sins catch up to us. Choices have consequences. Our evil hurts other people, and it's only right that God removes those who are causing storms and putting others in harm's way.

Such was likely the perspective of the mariners there on the placid sea as they resumed their trip no longer encumbered by the tempest that accompanied the disobedient man of God. Jonah got what he deserved...he should have known better...may God have mercy on his soul. End of story.

But Church, death is never the end of the story. Justice is never the end of the story. Punishment is never the end of the story. God's grace runs deep--deeper than our sin, deeper than any ocean, deeper than the gates of hell. And it is there...in the deep...that God's hand is mighty to save.

## **II. God in the Deep**

Rest assured that no one...including Jonah...ever anticipated what comes next in this famous story. In vs. 17 we read, "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."

Beneath the surface of what could be seen by men, God was at work in ways that no one could have ever imagined. What looked like an execution on the surface...what looked like the end of a career...what looked like God's irrevocable punishment...what looked like the natural consequence of evil...was, in fact, not the end of Jonah's story at all. God had a plan beneath the surface...a plan of redemption...a plan of salvation...a plan to extend grace and life in the context of judgment and death. It is there in the deep that God's infinite mercy is revealed to a soul that was, to the eyes of all on the surface, dead.

To be sure, Jonah thought his life was over. And, to some extent, Jonah's life did end. It was the end of Jonah's running from God. It was the end of Jonah's quest for Tarshish. It was the end of Jonah's self-importance. It was the end of Jonah's escape from responsibility. Many things ended that day when Jonah was hurled into the sea of God's wrath and justice; but Jonah did not end. Death is not the end for Jonah, for "nothing can separate us from the love of God..."—not even a death we deserve.

Church, I hope you can see the profundity of this little story. Too often we get sidetracked by this picture of a large fish swallowing a man for three days and three nights and then spitting him out on dry land. We immediately question whether that could actually happen. Doubts creep in regarding the historical reliability of the story, and then we write the whole thing off as a fairy tale for children. I hope you have become convinced by now that this story is anything but a fairy tale. This story of Jonah is revelatory of a great many things that are true about us and about God, but none more important than the revelation of God in the deep.

This great fish represents the salvific work of God. It is a work that takes place below the surface, beneath the immediate experience of God that we might observe in the storm or in the

dramatic events of our lives. This great fish reminds us that God is moving in ways that are unexpected and unearned. The great fish reveals a sovereign, all-powerful God that is not satisfied with justice alone; His love for sinners is greater still. Even when we are slain...even when we have fallen...even when we have received just consequence as penalty for sinful choices...our story has not ended. God is moving in the deep.

Hugh Martin writes: Therefore, though He slay you, you may trust Him still. On His face—a frown of deep displeasure for your offence! In His hand—a raging storm, relentless, waiting for you! Could your case well be worse? Thus much upon the surface. Thus, to sense and reason. But to faith—what? Beneath the surface, while He holds the storm in His left hand, with His right hand “the LORD has prepared” a deliverance. And behind the frown, in the depths of the LORD’s heart—what? Protecting, redeeming, life-giving love! ‘Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.’<sup>1</sup>

Oh Church! Deep calls unto deep. Herein are the great mysteries of God’s perfect justice and God’s infinite mercy. The storm above, and salvation below. Both are perfectly true of God’s nature; neither can be dismissed or diminished. In Isaiah 56:1 we read: Thus says the LORD: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed.”

Far too many of us are “surface” believers. Our faith is built upon a few shallow episodes of cause and effect that shape a moral conviction that we ‘had better be good or else.’ We’ve seen enough storms caused by disobedience to know that our evil always catches up with us, so we need to fear the LORD and make vows. That’s where the sailors ended up in our story. As sincere as they are in their prayers and their fear of the LORD, we know that they are on a path to disillusionment. Why? Because no matter how great they fear the LORD, no matter how desperately they seek to follow God’s law, they are destined to failure because of the power of sin. And at this point...because their faith is limited to what they have seen on the surface, they have no awareness of God’s redemptive power to save sinners who deserve death. As far as they can see, if you really anger God, you’re toast. You see,...if our knowledge of God stops at choice and consequence...if we stop at crime and punishment...if we only gaze upon the left hand of God’s righteous judgment against sin...if we never see beneath the surface and discover God’s redemptive love for sinful souls in the deep, then our faith will ultimately rest upon our performance...not on God. We will fall into a moralistic religion of sin management and storm avoidance rather than trusting that God is always good in the storm, even when that storm is directed at us, even when we are slain, because God’s plan of deliverance is at work in the deep. Judgment is not the end...death is not the end. God’s mercy is greater still. God’s grace is at work beneath the surface. “Even though He slay you, you may trust Him still.”

This is what the story of Jonah reveals, and it points beyond itself. It points to the Gospel; and inasmuch as it points to the Gospel, it points to our necessary dying.

### **III. A Necessary Dying**

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Martin, Jonah, p. 187.

The story of Jonah reveals a truth that hurts, yet it is unavoidable. For Jonah to ever achieve the purposes that God has planned for him, there will need to be a necessary dying. God will have to meet Jonah in the deep and do the work of salvation that only God can do before Jonah can be reborn and restored to his mission. That's a profound truth. It's a biblical truth. But it's not an unusual story.

Many of you probably know a little something about the story of Chuck Colson. For those of you who may be too young to know that name, Chuck Colson became famous for a scandal in the 1970's called "Watergate." I'll get to that in a second, but first, it would be helpful to go back a bit further into Colson's life. Chuck Colson was extraordinary by anybody's estimation. He was raised by extraordinary parents who volunteered, serving the poor and helping those in need, which influenced Chuck toward a career of public service. Growing up, Chuck was a brilliant student. He was the best at everything he did. He turned down a full scholarship to Harvard in order to get his education in Cambridge, then Brown University, and finally a law degree from George Washington University Law School. After university and prior to entering law school, Colson served for three years with the U.S. Marines and achieved the rank of Captain. After only two years in the service he was appointed to serve alongside the Secretary to the Navy. Everything that Colson touched turned to gold. In 1961, at the tender age of 30, he began his own law firm that soon would have a huge presence in Boston and the nation's capital. While serving as a lawyer Colson began to work behind the scenes in politics until he finally left his law firm to join the Nixon administration in 1969. He was soon appointed to the role of special counsel to the President.

Colson was brilliant, and he was driven. He believed deeply in what he was doing. He was a patriot to the core. But much like Jonah, Colson's commitment to his country led him to compromise his character. Within a year of joining Nixon's administration, Colson became known as Nixon's "hatchet man." A famous article in *Slate* magazine described Colson as 'the evil genius of an evil administration.' They weren't wrong.

On May 4, 1970, four students were shot dead at Kent State University while they were protesting American's involvement in the Vietnam War. As an act of sympathy for the students who were killed (including a student from NYC) the mayor declared a day of mourning and ordered the flags to be flown at half-mast. Within hours the streets of NYC were packed with students protesting the war. Colson was incensed that Nixon's administration was being blamed and shamed for the war as well as the shootings at Kent State, so, according to a transcription from the White House tape recorder on May 5, 1970 (the day I was born!), Colson conspired with some union leaders to quash the demonstration. The result led to a massive, violent clash on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1970 between the protestors and 200 construction workers armed with rods of steel rebar. The famous Hard Hat Riot lasted for two hours resulting in over 70 people injured and six people arrested. Two weeks after the riot, Colson arranged for a reception to honor the union leaders responsible for the riot. That is one of many stories to be told about Chuck Colson the patriot. Chuck may have loved his country, but he had no mercy when it came to political conquest.

That brings us to 1971 when a handful of men from Nixon's team got caught stealing documents in a building found in the Watergate Complex. Colson eventually was indicted for covering up the

crime in 1974, and later pled guilty to obstruction of justice. He then was disbarred and spent 7 months in prison.

Now, I tell you this story because, on the surface, lots of people made judgments about Colson. On the surface, it looked as though Colson, along with Nixon and others, were responsible for a huge storm. And when Colson was disbarred and thrown into prison, it looked as though his reputation was forever ruined and his career was over. And part of that is true.

The relentless lawyer and politician named Chuck Colson died in 1974. He was thrown into the waves of God's justice, and he disappeared from the public eye. As far as the political observers were concerned, Colson was dead, buried, and forgotten. He got what he deserved...end of story. However, those on the surface could not anticipate the movement of God in the deep! Even before Colson's arrest, God was moving to reclaim this brilliant man for His glory. Just before the news of Watergate hit the press, a friend of Colson's asked him to read *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. Colson was a brilliant man, but he immediately recognized one who was even more brilliant than he was. The writings of Lewis brought him to his knees, and he accepted Jesus as Lord. When the news of Watergate hit the press, everyone assumed that Colson was in on it. We know now that neither Colson nor Nixon was aware of the Watergate burglary, but Colson's conscience was seared by the things he did know regarding other unethical ways he had obstructed justice. So, as a new Christian, Colson volunteered that information, recognizing, like Jonah, that he deserved to be hurled into the sea.

However, while in prison, Colson's faith in the Lord grew exponentially. And it was there...in the belly of the prison...that Colson observed abusive behavior towards the inmates and a lack of any real efforts at prisoner reform and rehabilitation. It was there that Chuck heard a new call upon his life to serve those who were incarcerated, in the name of Jesus. Chuck went on to create Prison Fellowship in 1976, and countless hundreds of thousands of incarcerated souls have been led to the Lord and brought into the Light as a result of that ministry that still continues on to this day in over 120 countries. Colson would go on to write 30 books, receive 15 honorary doctoral degrees, and serve as one of the greatest Christian thinkers and influencers in modern history.

Chuck Colson "the evil genius of an evil administration" had to die...it was a necessary death, but that death was not the end. Chuck was swallowed up by the grace of God who found him in the deep, and he was spit out as a new man with a new identity and a new mission that blessed the world and brought glory to God.

You see, Jonah is not just an ancient story...it is a human story; but more importantly, it is God's story. God's justice pursues sinful souls, even to the point of death, so that by God's grace, accomplished once and for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus, there might be a resurrection and a new life for those condemned in their sinful nature. The New Testament is full of this imagery.

Jesus said in Matthew 16:25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Paul writes in Galatians 2:20: I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

Paul states in 1 Corinthians 15:31, "...I die every day."

Church, there is a necessary dying that must take place before we will ever meet the LORD in the deep. It is a dying to self. It is a dying to our pride and our idolatry. It is a dying to our self-made, self-promoting, self-centered worldview. It is a necessary dying...and that's exactly where Jonah is right now. We'll pick up with the story next Sunday, but for now, let us close by asking God to show us what our necessary dying might look like. What is it in your life that means so much to you that you are willfully disobeying God to keep doing it? What group of people are you so angry at that you are unwilling to forgive them? What has so much power in your life that you see no way out?

Surrender these things to God. Surrender yourself to God. Come clean and allow God's righteous judgment to slay you even now, for as Hugh Martin stated so well, "Even though He slay you, you may trust Him still."

Let us pray.