

God's Unexpected Mercy On Jonah 2:1-10

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Before we dig into the text, let's address one big issue. Many people say that the story of Jonah is just a legend or a metaphorical piece. They say this because they claim that there is no way a person could be swallowed by a large fish, survive in the digestive tract for three days, and then be vomited onto dry land in order to tell the tale. For the past 200 years, skeptics have doubted this story, saying, "It just can't happen."

Interestingly, that kind of mentality has seeped into the church as well. If you look around, you can find corroborating stories of other fishermen who have survived inside fish for a number of days. And those are nice stories. Let them strengthen your faith, but don't put your faith in those stories.

Here's why: the Bible portrays this as a miracle. Miracles, by definition, are suspensions of the natural order of things. Miracles are extraordinary events God does for the purpose of advancing his own glory. The problem is not so much that people have a problem with the incident; they have a problem with the idea of miracles.

The simple truth is that we're dealing with the God who created the universe and everything in it. This is not just limited to matter; God created the physical laws that govern the universe. And if God chooses temporarily to suspend the laws that he created in order to accomplish his purposes, are you going to argue with him? The Bible is filled with stories of the miraculous. Are you ready to extract all of them from the Scripture?

Now, as we look at this passage, we see that it's all about God's unexpected mercy. First, notice the depth of Jonah's suffering (Jon. 2:5-7). Jonah describes his experience in graphic and horrifying detail. Can you imagine the feeling of claustrophobia? Being closed in, tangled in seaweed in the belly of the fish? Can you imagine Jonah's panic as he sensed the fish going down deeper and deeper into the ocean?

You don't have to have desperate physical circumstances to understand Jonah's feeling. A recent article in *Time Magazine* talks about the precipitous increase in depression on college campuses. Forty-five percent of college students said they have difficulty functioning due to a bout of depression at least

once within the year. One student who checked in at a clinic kept repeating, “I can’t afford to get a C. I can’t afford to get a C.” When asked why, he replied, “I won’t get into medical school, and my parents will disown me.” When asked why they didn’t share their concerns with their peers, one student replied that they were all competing for the same grad school spots — she couldn’t show any vulnerability or weakness.¹

I believe these stories reveal something deep: deep down, for many of us, there is a worry that we have to prove ourselves. Deep within, there is a constant checking out of how we are doing, a constant worry that the rug will be pulled out from under us, a constant fear that those we trust will withdraw their affection. We can feel the seaweed wrapping around our soul, and we succumb to worry and despair and pessimism. Then we try to medicate that with anything we can get our hands on.

But Jonah doesn’t medicate. In the midst of his anguish, he expresses his confidence in God: “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave, I called for help, and you listened to my cry” (Jon. 2:2). And again: “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple” (Jon. 2:7).

Notice that in his deepest despair, he still goes to God in prayer. He’s been running from God, and he’s suffering terrible consequences for his actions. This is not some deathbed conversion; this is someone who has been faithful to God but who really messed up. Now he’s turning back to God in humility, asking for help.

Also notice that Jonah recognizes that his situation is a punishment from the Lord (Jon. 2:3-4). At times, God’s mercy is severe. Many times we go through pain as a direct consequence of our actions. Other times we go through pain that seems to have no sense. But it is all a part of God’s disciplining process:

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as sons.” Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline) then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and

¹ Kirn, Walter. “University Blues: A Crisis,” *Time Magazine*, Nov. 3, 2003 (also http://www.time.com/time/asia/covers/501031208/kids_drugs_college.html).

we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:4-11).

Here discipline is not just like a teacher disciplining an unruly child. Discipline is like an elite athlete enduring unimaginable pain to achieve the next level. Discipline is the aspiring surgeon who endured unimaginable work hours during medical school in order to hone her skills. Discipline is not always equated with punishment, as it is here in Jonah. Sometimes discipline is a refining process.

Tim Bolton joined the marines at the age of 18. His first assignment was in 1981 in Beirut: he arrived just in time to be a part of the rescue efforts after the U.S. Embassy bombing. This was his first encounter with death, and he left it angry at God, asking what kind of God would allow this to happen. His anger lasted for three years until he was in a motorcycle accident in the remote jungles of the Philippines. He went there to get as far away from humanity as possible. His motorcycle was broadsided by a car, severing his right leg — the occupants of the car rushed over to steal his watch and wallet, and left him to lie bleeding to death. There, in that moment, Bolton did something he hadn't done in a long time: he prayed.

A jeep came by and took him to the nearest hospital, where he was saved. But he had to spend a month in intensive care, then 16 months in a stateside hospital. He endured 35 operations trying to save his life. He came out addicted to painkillers and deeply depressed, and he stayed that way for 11 years, a wanderer and drifter, ultimately landing in a homeless shelter in Anderson, Indiana, where he met Jackie, his future wife. Bolton says, "She had a connection to God I didn't have. She pulled me through."

Bolton returned to school, earned a college degree, found a steady job, joined Jackie's church, and they got married. Now he's working on a doctorate and has three children. But here's the kicker: he runs a ministry called Operation Arise and Walk. He takes old worn prosthetic limbs, repairs and refurbishes them, and ships them off to third world countries where 10 to 20 thousand people are killed or maimed due to land mines left over from previous conflicts. Now he says he sees blessings everywhere, and he's making a difference in lives all around the world. Quite a difference from the angry kid in the Philippines

who wanted to get away from humanity! God showed mercy, but it was a severe mercy.²

Finally, notice Jonah's recommitment: "I've been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple" (Jon. 2:4). Jonah talks about activities he will do in the temple: "But I with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord" (Jon. 2:8). This is not bargaining; it is not "If you will do this, then I'll praise you." That will never do. We won't ever be able to bargain with God. Rather, it is Jonah's recommitment, rooted in his confidence in God's deliverance. It is a matter of being sure of God's provision, and of responding in recommitment.

What's interesting is the concern with the temple. The temple was the center of religious worship in Israel. It was the physical reminder of God's presence with his people. Quite literally, it was his throneroom. There weren't little statues of God all over the place, there was only one temple. It was at this temple that people saw that God was present as a majestic, all powerful being. It was at this temple that the people of God gathered together for the feasts.

Here's the rub: Jonah's confidence in his redemption comes through his relationship with a very personal God, the God who met with his people in the temple in Jerusalem. Centuries later, that very personal God would come to us in flesh and blood in Jesus. We were like Jonah: we'd messed up incredibly badly. Yet, God still showed us mercy, he still provided for us. Just like Jonah, we can say, "Salvation comes from the Lord!"

But here's the unexpected part of the mercy: In Jesus, God not only delivers us from our sin, but he also identifies with us in our pain. This is the astounding truth of the incarnation. He took on flesh, just like us. God is not just a cosmic iceberg; he's able to identify with us. The writer of Hebrews understands this truth as he talks about Jesus as our high priest:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb. 4:14-16).

That's unexpected mercy is not that God delivers his people from sin — he had been doing that for centuries. Jesus simply perfected all the work God had been doing up until that point. The unexpected mercy is that God comes to us in such a way that we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he identifies with us. It's like the great Shakespeare play *Henry V*. Shakespeare, painting

² "Minister finds need is great for artificial limbs," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Saturday, July 19, 2003.

Henry as a good king, shows him the night before the great battle. He is disguised as a common soldier and moving among the campsites of his men, so that he might identify with them. Julius Caesar and Napoleon were loved by their men because, unlike other generals, they risked their lives fighting in the front lines. How much more noble, then, is Christ, who moved among us and experienced all the struggles we endure, yet without sin?

In Matthew 12, Jesus' opponents ask him to perform a sign, and Jesus replies,

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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. 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 one greater than Jonah is here (Matt. 12:39-41).

The sign of Jonah: three days of enduring death, the ultimate identification. Jesus endured what most of us fear the most: death. And he rose again to conquer death for us.

Take some time to reflect on how, through his unexpected mercy, God identifies with you in your deepest pain. And then receive his unexpected mercy that doesn't take the pain away, but uses it, redeems it, and transforms it into something wonderful for the kingdom. You think about that. Amen.