

Deliverance By Prayer and Indigestion
Jonah 2:1-10
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As the song says, prepare us O God to be your Sanctuary, your holy temples. Turn the soil, rough up the surfaces of our heart so that your Word would adhere and there become the wellspring of living water overflowing in prayer to you. This we pray not in our own power, but in the strong name of Jesus the Christ who is our savior and Lord, Amen.

Have you ever wondered if God delivers people from impossible situations? Let me ask you this, and please respond with a show of hands or a nod of the head, have you ever been delivered or rescued from a difficult circumstance? Proof, God delivers people.

I invite you to grab a copy of Scripture, either the one you brought with you or the one in the pew racks in front of you. And turn with me to a short, four-chapter book in the Old Testament called Jonah.

Jonah was called upon by God to do something great, and in ignoring the call, Jonah gets lost. What happens when his intention conflicts with God's direction? In a word, Jonah goes down. Ignoring who you were created to be and choosing your own way can land you in a place where you need a deliverer. God is that deliverer.

Listen with me as I read God's Word to us. This is Jonah's prayer when he needs a rescuer. When I'm done, I'll say, "This is the Word of the Lord," so that if you believe it you can respond by saying, "Thanks be to God." Listen carefully; we're reading God's Holy Word.

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, 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 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. Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head 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. When my life was fainting away I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!" And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God. And may the same Holy Spirit that inspired the writing and preservation of these words now inspire them in our hearing. Amen and Amen.

When I was about 10 years old, my family packed up our 1991 Dodge Grand Caravan and drove out west to go skiing—something we loved to do together. On our first crisp clear day in the mountains, we were together as a family on the slopes following my dad's lead. We traversed across the mountain on a catwalk to get to one of the more family-friendly hills. But along the way I noticed a black diamond run entitled Davie Jones Locker. And figuring that all slopes eventually end up at the same place I decided to go my own way. Which seemed like a good decision...for a while.

Shortly after beginning my descent, my skis gave out from under me. I fell and began to slide. Only I didn't slide to a stop. Surprisingly, a ten year old sliding along on a 50 plus degree slope covered with ice actually picks up speed as he goes. I was out of control and headed for disaster, trees or a chair lift pole would probably be my fate, and many broken bones to follow. In this moment, as much as I would like to admit that I began reciting the 23rd Psalm or saying how lovely are the mountains that are the feet of him, I didn't. All I can remember is crying out to my dad for help.

As I was picking up speed down the hill headed for ruin, I saw in front of me my deliverance. It was a family of foreigners posing for a picture in the middle of the hill with their backs to me. And because they didn't speak English, they did not comprehend my shouts of warning. There in the middle of the hill, my salvation came in the form of a game of human bowling: I was the ball and they were the pins, and let's just say I rolled a strike.

Like Jonah, we all have times in our lives when God tells us to go one way, and we decide it would be better for us to go another. And when this happens, we always find ourselves in distress in need of deliverance. In that moment, I needed a deliverer, because I could not rescue myself. God asked Jonah to go one way, he went another and what resulted was Jonah got stuck and needed help getting free.

The first point I want to make is this, and it's a really simple, but critically important. When we are in trouble, when we are in a free fall, we can do what Jonah does: Jonah prays.

From the guts of the fish he said, *"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."* It's a strange story... praying from the guts of a fish. But life can put us in some equally strange situations in which we need a real and immediate help. When Jonah is in need of help, he prays.

But what is so fascinating about this text is not just that he prays, but the words he uses. In the midst of his descent into the very depths of Sheol, into the very remotest wilderness on earth, Jonah says the very first thing that comes to mind. His prayer to God is precisely what he remembers as a young boy in the synagogue. You see, Jonah was weaned and schooled on the Psalms and every word of his prayer is taken from the Scriptures.

When we are in moments of crisis and in need of help, what God is saying to us is, “Don’t worry about the words or phrases you use, just cry out with what you’ve got.” My dad didn’t wait until I adequately expressed my need of rescue before coming to help. I cried, he came. Jonah was in distress, he remembered his catechism, and he cried out, and God listened. Whether it’s the twenty third Psalm, the Apostles’ Creed, or “Jesus Loves Me,” God’s Word is our rescue in distress.

There’s a story of a little boy who had terrible nightmares, and each time he woke up, it was as if these experiences were real and he was very scared. Until one night his mom said to him, “When you wake up and you’re scarred, just say the name of Jesus over and over and he will come and be with you.” Pretty soon, he realized that even in disturbing dreams, Jesus was already there. Friends, as the old spiritual says, there is power, wonderworking power not just in the blood, but in the spoken name of Jesus when we are in distress.

The second thing we must consider is the manner in which Jonah prays. You’d think that Jonah would be saying to himself, “Well it’s been a good ride, I guess this is the end for me,” and lament all the way down. He doesn’t. Jonah actually praises God. He says: **When my life was fainting away I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Salvation belongs to the Lord!**

One writer puts it that God does not punish us for our disobedience, but that sin and disobedience is punishment enough. The irony of this book is that it took Jonah going down into the depths for him to see that God’s way actually was the best way for him—because he had something special for which he needed Jonah. Spending a few days in the belly of the fish was actually God’s unexpected grace because it gave him time to see just how badly things had gotten and then realize that maybe God was being preparing Jonah for something much bigger than he was.

Listen, if God can make the blind see, raise Lazarus, and make a donkey talk, don’t you think God could use the belly of the fish to get through to Jonah? Could it be that in the midst of this, Jonah realized the sheer ridiculousness of his situation so there is nothing left for him to do but praise the name of God?

A few years ago, in the aftermath of the terrible earthquake that rocked the nation of Haiti, there was a medical compound called Mission of Hope who mobilized doctors and nurses and dentists from the states to come and address the needs of the thousands of injured and homeless Haitians. My family was there for a week. In that time, they amputated almost one hundred limbs and pulled something like two hundred teeth. But that didn’t compare to what they encountered when they gathered with the people for worship on Sunday morning. For even in the midst of such mind boggling suffering, thousands of people gathered that morning for worship, many without arms and legs, missing teeth, battered, bruised, and brokenhearted; and instead of beating their chests with sorrow and lament, these men and women sang from the very guts of their own

souls, “Savior he can move the mountains, Our God is mighty to save, he is mighty to save.”

Jonah prays prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God because he remembers that God is triumphant, that the seas and the mountains all bow before him. **Salvation belongs to the Lord!**

And once Jonah realizes this, the craziest thing happens. The text says the Lord spoke to the fish and the fish vomited Jonah out onto dry land. I’m so glad they didn’t choose to civilize the text by using a more palatable word. There is a reason why the writer says the fish barfed Jonah up. Jonah gets regurgitated so that when people smell the shrimp cocktail or tuna tartar, or whatever the fish ate on his jacket, he can say to others who are in need of deliverance, “Hey, I’ve been there, too.”

Our community is made up of all sorts of broken and hurting people, people with real challenges, real hopes, real joy, real heartache. And the way people go from being stuck to unstuck is first of all by lifting our prayers and praises to God and secondly by saying to one another, that wound, that smell, that remnant is proof that I have been redeemed. There are lots of broken people out there, some who’ve been delivered, some who are being delivered, and some who need a deliverer.

Jonah, we are told, is from a town called Gath-hepher, which is a few miles away from Nazareth. Does anybody remember another prophet who came from Nazareth? Jonah was asleep on a boat in a storm when everybody else on the boat panicked and woke him up and by his actions, the storm is stilled. Does that remind you of anybody else in the Bible?

Jonah's name means "the dove," which is a name that means, “beloved one.” Does anybody else remember someone who went down into the water, came up out of the water, and a dove descended, and a voice says, "This is my beloved Son..."

Jesus said toward the end of His life...He had one sign to give this sorry tragic world, and He called it the sign of Jonah. ***"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish (hit bottom, at the lowest there) so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the Earth."*** And then comes the third day.

See, the message of Jonah is a little foretaste of the deliverance and victory of Jesus who comes to meet us at the lowest place and says death loses, sin loses, lost loses, sorrow loses, sadness loses...joy wins. So when we are lost, when we are far away and we don’t know how to get home, we can remember the story of Jonah and know that God always has the last word.