

Jonah Series  
Jonah 1:17-2:10

One summer morning as Ray Blankenship was preparing his breakfast; he gazed out the window, and saw a small girl being swept along in the rain-flooded drainage ditch beside his Andover, Ohio home. Ray Blankenship knew that farther downstream, the ditch disappeared with a roar underneath a road and then emptied into the main culvert. So he dashed out the door and raced alongside the ditch, trying to get ahead of the foundering child. Then, he hurled himself into the deep, churning water. As he surfaced, he was able to grab the child's arm. They tumbled end over end. Within about three feet of the yawning culvert, Ray's free hand felt something--possibly a rock--protruding from one bank. He clung desperately, but the tremendous force of the water tried to tear him and the child away. "If I can just hang on until help comes," he thought. But he did better than that. By the time fire-department rescuers arrived, Ray Blankenship had pulled the girl to safety. Both were treated for shock. On April 12, 1989, Ray Blankenship was awarded the Coast Guard's Silver Lifesaving Medal. The award is fitting, for this selfless person was at even greater risk to himself than most people knew. You see, Ray Blankenship can't swim.

We love rescue stories. Most of us will never forget Midland, Texas in October 1987. After being trapped nearly 60 hours down a dark, abandoned well shaft, little 18-month-old Jessica McClure, was rescued. We remember how good it felt when Army private Jessica Lynch was rescued from her Iraqi captors. We love rescue stories!!

As great though as those rescue stories are, they pale in comparison to the greatest rescue in history—the saving of mankind by a loving God. Mankind was lost, held hostage by evil, helpless and hopeless. God's only Son, Jesus, risked Himself—even gave His life—to rescue mankind. His is the greatest of all rescue acts, marked with nobility, dignity, and honor. "Rescue" resides within the heart of God. Our God is a rescuing God!

The Book of Jonah is "rescue" book. It's our loving God on a rescue mission. We've already seen how God rescued a group of pagan sailors. Later we'll see how God rescues the whole city of Nineveh. But the central rescue of the Book of Jonah is of Jonah himself. God seeks to rescue Jonah from Jonah. While Jonah has written God off for good, God has not written off Jonah. My Bible is open to Jonah 1:17-2:10 (p. 654). Though chapter and verse divisions help us, they're not inspired and were not part of the original manuscripts. Chapter 2 really should begin with 1:17. In fact, this is the first verse in the Hebrew Bible.

Let me say something that is very, very important. Too many believers have a distorted concept of who God is. Most got it during childhood. They view God through the grid of their own childhood history. An example of this is their misinterpretation of John 3:16. We all know, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."* So where's the misinterpretation? Some believers think that while God loves and seeks lost people **BUT** once you're in the family, once you're a believer...if you get out of line, if you stray, if you do something wrong – God will knock the snot out of you. And you're wrong! You need to read the Book of Jonah again because Jonah proves that God is not an ogre.

Along the line of that same distorted reasoning, some foolishly believe that the God of

the New Testament is a loving God while the God of the Old Testament is a mean God. You need to read the Book of Jonah again because Jonah proves that God is not a mean God.

By now you know that Jonah is more than just a fish story. But Jonah is not just about God showing mercy to pagan sailors or Nineveh. The Book of Jonah is primarily about God showing mercy and patience to one of His own, Jonah. In chapter 2 we discover the most words of Jonah in the entire book. It's a prayer. It's Jonah crying out to God **Rescue me!!** This morning we want to examine the **Three Parts** of God's rescue operation.

**1. God rescues Jonah.** Ulrike Ruffert said, *"Patience is the ability to put up with people you'd like to put down."* Most people get all caught up with the fish part of Jonah. Some question whether it was a miracle. Others want to know how it was possible that a man was swallowed by a fish, and then survived three days in the fish's stomach. But please mark it down; the greatest miracle of the Book of Jonah is not that Jonah was swallowed by a big fish. The greatest miracle is how much of Jonah's malarkey a loving God swallowed. By now, for most of us, Jonah would have been getting on our last nerve. That's because we are so unlike our God. The biggest miracle in Jonah is God's patience...that God uses everything and anything to bring his rebellious child back to Himself...that He pursues a fugitive and a rebel with such dogged persistence. The greatest miracle in Jonah is that God with so much longsuffering seeks to rescue Jonah.

Verse 17 says, *"the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah."* The Hebrew word for *provided* means *"to assign" or "to appoint."* This big fish was on a mission. But it was not sent to catch Jonah, it was sent to rescue Jonah. It was his lifeboat. If God had not sent the fish, Jonah would have drowned (Jonah acknowledges that in his prayer). My friend, God is not like us so please never doubt the longsuffering of God. Yet most of us become so obsessed with the big fish that we forget the awesome God who sent this fish on a rescue operation. Thomas Carlisle confessed, *"I was so obsessed with what was going on inside the whale that I missed seeing the drama inside Jonah."* It's not a miracle that a man was swallowed by a big fish. There are other historical accounts of this happening. The real miracle is that Jonah was swallowed by a fish at just the right time. This fish was sent by God and obeying His command. Remember too that when Jesus walked this earth He controlled and commanded the fish of the sea. Peter caught a huge catch at Jesus' command when Jesus first called Him to be His disciple. Then, Jesus had a fish bite Peter's hook that had swallowed a coin to pay the temple tax. After the Cross and right before His ascension Jesus again commanded a huge catch of fish to "jump" in the disciples' net when they doubted about the future of their ministry. The God who created the fish of the sea can certainly command them. But what about this big fish? Did it really swallow Jonah? For Bible-believers, it doesn't pose a huge problem. If you believe that God created the world, that He resurrected Jesus, if you believe in the miracle of conversion, that a holy God forgives us of our sin, then this is not a big leap of faith. While it's not something that happens every day, it could happen and has happened.

We don't know that this was a whale. The Bible just says it was a *"great fish."* We're not even sure what kind of fish it was. It might have been a dogfish or a whale shark – part

of the shark family. The critics can't swallow the story of Jonah because they say it couldn't happen, but it could. The average sperm whale has a mouth 20 feet long, 15 feet high and 9 feet wide. It's a big animal. In fact, it's about the biggest mammal on the planet. That explains how this fish could swallow a person. Sperm whales feed largely on squid and these squid are often larger than people. Whalers will sometimes find an entire squid in the stomach of a dead whale.

As to whether a man could survive in a whale's stomach, he certainly could, though in circumstances of very great discomfort. There would be air to breathe, of a sort. It's needed to keep the animal afloat. But it would be very hot in that stomach; about 104-108 F. Unpleasant contact with the animal's gastric juices might also affect the skin. There was actually a case of a man who had been swallowed by a whale and lived. It happened on the ship, *Star of the East*. In February 1891, this whaling ship spotted a large sperm whale in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands. Two boats were launched, and shortly a harpooner speared the whale. The second boat attempted to get in another harpoon, but the boat was overturned in the process and one man drowned. But another man, James Bartley, disappeared and was assumed drowned. In time the whale was killed and drawn to the side of the ship, where it was tied fast and the blubber removed. The following day the stomach was hoisted onto the deck. And that's where James Bartley was. He was in the whale's stomach, unconscious, but still alive. He recovered and went back to whaling.

But regardless of what kind of "great fish" God chose to use to rescue Jonah, it was a miracle. As G. K. Chesterton noted, "*The incredible thing about miracles is that they happen.*" If you can't accept the miracle of Jonah and the great fish, then there are a lot of other miracles in the Bible that will give you trouble. Remember too, if you reject Jonah – you also reject Jesus because Jesus used Jonah as a historical illustration. God could certainly have kept Jonah alive without this big fish but He chose to use this as His "rescue" boat.

But the greater miracle is God's patience with Jonah. This fish represents God's forgiveness and patience with Jonah. It shows the tremendous lengths that God will go to reconcile Jonah and the people of Nineveh. It shows that God will not be dissuaded from His plan or rescue operation. The fish represents an "unbelievable" theology – God wants to save the rebellious, the wicked and the violent. All of us are Jonahs at some point. Some of you are running from God this morning. This big fish rescue reminds us of the radical grace and longsuffering of God. It reminds us of the great lengths that God will go to to rescue us.

**2. When Jonah has no other plan, he prays.** Too often the only thing that brings us to our knees in prayer are the storms of crisis. Pushed to the brink, back up against the wall, right up to the wire, all escape routes closed...only then do many people turn to God for His help. Abraham Lincoln admitted, "*I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.*"

In his book, *Growing in the Seasons of Life*, Chuck Swindoll recounts the story of an airliner in 1968 bound for New York that began its descent when the pilot realized the landing gear had refused to engage. He worked the controls back and forth, trying again and again to make the gear lock down into place but had no success. He then asked the control tower for instructions as he circled the landing field. Responding to the crisis,

airport personnel sprayed the runway with foam as fire trucks and other emergency vehicles moved into position. Disaster was only minutes away. The passengers, meanwhile, were told of each maneuver in that calm, cheery voice pilots manage to use at times like this. Flight attendants glided about the cabin with an air of cool reserve telling the passengers to place their heads between their knees and grab their ankles just before impact. It was one of those I-can't-believe-this-is-happening-to-me experiences that led to many tears and even a few screams of despair in the cabin. The landing was only a few seconds away when suddenly the pilot announced over the intercom: *"We are beginning our final descent. At this moment, in accordance with International Aviation Codes established in Geneva, it is my obligation to inform you that if you believe in God you should COMMENCE PRAYER."*

Now the belly landing went off without a hitch. No one was injured, and aside from some very extensive damage to the plane, the airline hardly remembered the incident. In fact, a relative of one of the passengers called the airline the very next day and asked about the prayer rule the pilot had quoted. No one volunteered any information on the subject. Only a no comment response was given. Isn't that amazing? The only thing that brought out into the open a deep-down secret prayer rule was a crisis.

Just like so many, only when death and disaster is imminent; only when everything else has been tried; only then do they crack open a hint of recognition that God just might be there and that they should *commence prayer*. That's exactly what Jonah does. Only when he's totally exhausted and at the end of his rope; only when there is no where else to turn...only then does Jonah cry out to God for help. The fact is that we pray the best when we are the most desperate.

It adds further light to know that Jews were never seafarers as a people. They were afraid of the ocean. For them death by drowning was the very worst way to die. Their enemies would often execute them by drowning just to add that final touch of terror to the experience of death.

In his prayer Jonah describes that terror, the intense anxiety of being helpless against the ocean currents swirling around him and the waves crashing upon him, pushing him deeper and deeper. In his description of his downward descent Jonah tells us that the water was closing in on him and there was no way back to the surface. In vs. 5 he speaks of the horror of having water enter his throat and seaweed tangle itself around his head. Finally, he actually hits the bottom. We don't know how deep the ocean was there, but just imagine the fear of feeling your feet strike the bottom knowing that there is no way back up as your lungs are about to explode.

Jonah's prayer, though prayed inside the fish, appears to be recounting his near death experience before he was swallowed. But when you are rebelling against God like Jonah was, that's the best possible place to be. Until we get to that place where we've exhausted our abilities and sufficiency; until we give up on every logical human resource, most of us won't reach out for God. The trouble with most of us is that we have just enough comfort in our Christian experience that we never get desperate. We never quite come to the place where there's no hope for us except in God, so we ignore Him and rely instead on self. And when this happens God often sends storms our way, just like He did for Jonah—storms that are truly blessings in disguise because they drive us back to deeper fellowship with Him. Many times God throws problems in our lives...trials that push us back closer to a relationship with Him. Like Jonah we have to

be driven (or nearly drowned) to go to our knees but finally the time comes when we cry with the Psalmist, *“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word...It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees”* (Ps 119:67, 71). And Jonah had a lot to learn.

For three days in that smelly, dark fish belly he pondered his situation. One author describes it this way, *“Pitch black. Sloshing gastric juices wash over you, burning skin, eyes, throat, nostrils. Oxygen is scarce and each frantic gulp of air is saturated with salt water. The rancid smell of digested food causes you to throw up repeatedly until you only have dry heaves left. Everything you touch has the slimy feel of the mucous membrane that lines the stomach. You feel claustrophobic. With every turn and dive of the great fish, you slip and slide in the cesspool of digestive fluid. There are no footholds. No blankets to keep you warm from the cold, clammy depths of the sea. For three days and three nights you endure this harsh womb of grace.”*

You see, Jonah just wasn't getting it. Are we? Will it take almost dying to wake us up? Will it take being swallowed to get us to turn to God? God sends Jonah to *fish school*. He's trying to teach Jonah what he wouldn't learn from His Word or in the Temple. Does God have you in a *fish school* this morning? God because He loves us will do whatever it takes to get our attention. Jonah was not learning this lesson in Nineveh or Tarshish but at the bottom of the sea, in the belly of the fish. If you don't learn from Scripture, you will have to learn the hard way! You can learn from God's Word or you can learn via God's painful chastening.

Friend, what form will the belly of the fish take for you? Could it be financial reversal? Maybe a family crisis? Could it be illness? Emotional problems? Could it be a rocky marriage? Could it be exposing your foolishness before others? God loves us so much that He will even use strange ways to get our attention. Friend, what form will the belly of the fish take for you? While the belly of the fish is not a happy place to *live*, it is a good place to *learn*. Are you in fish school this morning?

Jonah's prayer is important. It's the most words that he says in this whole book. His prayer also has vital characteristics of all true prayer.

**a) Jonah prays honestly.** This prayer isn't flowery. Jonah cuts to the chase. He's in trouble. He's desperate and he lets God know it. He acknowledges his misery and that he knows that God caused it. *“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. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas”* (vss. 2-3).

**b) Jonah praises.** *“But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you”* (v. 9). Jonah is thankful God cares enough to deliver him from death and had sent the fish to swallow him. It demonstrated God's love and care for him. Jonah is thankful for God's discipline because it demonstrates that he is loved. Amazingly, he expresses gratitude while he's still in the fish. He gives thanks before he is on dry land! That's amazing! Unlike us, Jonah did not see God as just a life preserver but as his life.

**c) Jonah commits to obedience.** *“What I have vowed I will make good”* (v. 9). Jonah is a prophet. What God tells him to preach or prophesy, he is supposed to preach or prophesy. He's just the messenger but he is to take the message where he is sent. He now commits to that. He's willing to return to his prophetic post.

**d) But Jonah is still Jonah.** Warren Wiersbe points out concerning Jonah's prayer. *“His prayer was born out of affliction, not affection. He cried out to God because*

*he was in danger, not because he delighted in the Lord. But better that he should pray compelled by any motive than not to pray at all. It's doubtful whether any believer always prays with pure and holy motives, for our desires and God's directions sometimes conflict. However, in spite of the fact that he prayed, Jonah still wasn't happy with the will of God. In chapter 1, he was afraid of the will of God and rebelled against it, but now he wants God's will simply because it's the only way out of his dangerous plight. Like too many people today, Jonah saw the will of God as something to turn to in an emergency, not something to live by every day of one's life."*

Even in his prayer Jonah shows his self-centeredness. His self-focused orientation is seen in his repetition of the pronoun "I" ten times, "me" seven times and "my" seven times in just eight verses. Jonah's perception of reality and God's will is distorted. And while he makes vows, he's not repentant. He recalls his trust in God but shows few signs of real trust. He expresses thanks that he is still breathing but that's about all. Bruckner points out, as we see later in chapter 4, that "*Jonah is both grateful and defiant.*" He has the right *actions* but his *attitude* still stinks. He's like the tyke who's parents told her to sit down in her high chair...and she did. But she told them that she was still standing up on the inside. While Jonah wants mercy and compassion for himself, he still has none for others. He may be doing God's plan but he doesn't agree with it.

Jonah is a bit like a light snow fall on a garbage dump. It looks beautiful until you begin to stir around a little. At first glance Jonah's prayer has all the appearances of piety but after a little probing and reflection, it's pretty skin deep. There's just no evidence to believe that Jonah has repented in any way, shape, or fashion. Add to that, chapter 4 reveals that Jonah's attitude hasn't changed. While Jonah *submits*, he does not *surrender*. He *relents* but does not *repent*. After being fish food Jonah is still Jonah. Too often we do the same thing. Our *actions* are *right* but our *attitude* is *rotten*. And God wants both. He wants obedience from the heart.

Jonah's prayer is a warning to us of the danger of superficial spirituality. Superficial spirituality is very skilled in following approved religious forms and in the use of pious platitudes. Because of this, it initially looks holy and good. But a little probing reveals its true character. A little persecution or suffering also quickly exposes the spiritual reality. Sadly, superficial spirituality is the norm in the American Church. I fear too that there is much of this in my own life and in our church. May God give us the grace to see it for what it is and to deal accordingly with it.

Superficial spirituality has several tell-tale symptoms. For one, it relies on the wrong things. It relies on one's background, one's heritage, one's position (Sunday School teacher, church leader, etc.), or one's knowledge. None of these constitute spirituality. Many of them are used to counterfeit it. Superficial spirituality relies heavily on forms. It borrows much from others; it mimics piety rather than manifests it. Superficial spirituality prays only in dire circumstances; it's motivated by crises, and is manifested by foxhole prayers. It's self-ward in orientation, rather than Godward or even manward. It's insensitive or oblivious to personal sin, yet it recognizes sin in others. It lacks a depth of intimacy with God and has little evangelistic fervor. It has a very narrow band of concern, and is usually very introverted in focus. It prays for our families, our needs or at best, our missionaries. It even tends to distort doctrines to accommodate or excuse one's sins just as Jonah used of God's sovereignty to cover his own sin. God wants

Jonah to change all the way through his soul...and He wants the same for us!

**3. God commands a giant of the sea.** But God still takes Jonah where he is at. Since he's willing now to at least obey, God's sovereign control extends to the timing of this sea creature's action. "*And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land*" (v. 10). It's noteworthy that the Lord only had to speak once and the fish obeyed instantly. How unlike Jonah! But even worse, how unlike you and me. How many times does God have to tell us the same thing over and over again before we obey?

Just a sidelight here. This is the only time when "*vomit*" is used as a positive thing in Scripture. Friend, remember that God is in control...even of that which to us seems completely uncontrollable, like a huge fish.

**Conclusion:** God is in the rescue business. Sadly, Jonah missed out on God's greatest blessings. He was only interested in saving his hide and he missed the heart of God. God demonstrates to Jonah what Jonah will not demonstrate to the Ninevehites – mercy!

In an episode of *The X-Files*, Agents Mulder and Scully are in a discussion with a prison chaplain who claims that God speaks directly to him. When Mulder expresses skepticism that such a thing could ever happen, Scully asks, "Don't you think God can talk with people?" To which Mulder replies, "God is just a spectator. He only reads the box scores." How different from the Biblical view of God and specifically from the view of God in the Book of Jonah. Here we find that God does care and that He does intervene. God is on a rescue mission!

This is the end of a perfect rescue. Jonah was not left out in the deep nor was he sent to the surface to swim to shore. He's in no danger. While Jonah is rejected by the fish, he is accepted by God.

Friend, please don't allow yourself to doubt the love that God has for you. If God will rescue a Jonah, He'll rescue you. If an unattractive, unsympathetic, calloused, disobedient character like Jonah can pray while he suffered the consequences brought on himself by himself, so can we! God meets us even in our own self-imposed struggle and difficulty. That's because He wants to get us back on the right track. And, He has what it takes to get us back on track! God can make the best of our worst. No matter how bad we have made it, we have not made it impossible for God. He's in the rescue business...He loves us so much that He will even hunt us down to rescue us. Friend, if you're on the run, it's time to turn around. God's been speaking to you, don't make Him use a more drastic action. When you know you're caught, stop running. Realize that the pursuit of God is for your benefit—He chases because He loves—He chases because He saves. He chases because He wants to rescue!! This morning do you need to cry out to your heavenly Father, "**Rescue me!!**"