

# JONAH'S GREAT FISH

Jonah 1:17

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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 (JON. 1:17).

**F**or Jonah in his flight from God, it has all been down, down, down. He went “down to Joppa” to find the ship bound for Tarshish (Jon. 1:3). He went “down into the inner part of the ship” and slept while the crew was in peril (Jon. 1:5). When the lot fell to him and the storm continued to rage, Jonah was cast overboard into the sea, and down, down he went into the deadly depths. So it is with everyone who rebels against the Lord. O. Palmer Robertson writes:

The sinner goes down. He begins the descent by his own acts of folly. He tries to run from the will of God, and he trips on his own dangling shoelaces. It is just a fact: nothing can be in its right order when you are living in rebellion against the will of God... The circumstances of life will bring you down. Your own inner spirit will bring you down. The hand of the Lord will bring you down.<sup>1</sup>

The bad news for Jonah is that for every action he takes, God acts in return. But what seems like bad news is actually good news when it comes to God's people, since even God's hand of chastisement is ultimately meant for blessing. Believers will sometimes go down into the pit even when they have trusted God. Joseph discovered this when he was placed into prison for obeying the Lord. But he found that God was with him in the pit. The greatest instance was the descent of Jesus into the darkness of death. Robertson writes, “From the cross he descended into the tomb. But from there he rose in glory

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<sup>1</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *Jonah: A Study in Compassion* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 28.

to reign at the right hand of the Father.”<sup>2</sup> Jonah may not seem to fit in that company, since his descent stemmed from his sin. But even he discovered the grace of God in the deep. He too, as a child of God, discovered the power of the resurrection, so that in the deep of the abyss he found the saving grace of God.

## MIRACLE OR MYTH?

Jonah 1:17 is undoubtedly the most famous verse in this book, since it tells of the great fish that rescued Jonah from the deep. It states that “the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.” It is unfortunate that questions concerning the whale or great fish have preoccupied most readers, since this distracts us from the real points of the book. Thomas Carlisle wrote of making this mistake: “I was so obsessed with what was going on inside the whale that I missed seeing the drama inside Jonah.”<sup>3</sup> And, as Lloyd Ogilvie has pointed out, “The subject of the... sentence is not the great fish, but the Lord,”<sup>4</sup> so our attention should be on what God did and not on the fish.

One reason for the excessive attention on the great fish – and the Hebrew word is a generic word for fish, not necessarily a whale – is that liberal scholarship has brought its guns to bear on this verse. By showing that the Bible is clearly in error about Jonah’s whale, they hope to undermine the overall authority of Holy Scripture. Liberals argue that Jonah tells a fable, since it is impossible to believe that a man was swallowed by a fish and he lived inside for three days before being vomited onto the shore. At the heart of the liberal objection, of course, is the unwillingness to admit the possibility of the miraculous. Only by first ruling out the supernatural are the liberals able to rule out the possibility of Jonah’s fish.

A couple of specific objections should be considered, however. One states that since the larger whales eat plankton, none of them have throats large enough to swallow a man whole. In the early twentieth century, it was argued that even a sperm whale would have difficulty

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>3</sup> James M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vol. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), I:282.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd Ogilvie, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Dallas: Word, ?), 410.

swallowing an orange, much less a man. Since then, however, botanists have identified other sub-species of sperm whales with throats large enough to swallow a small house. The second issue deals with whether or not a man could breathe enough air inside such a creature to survive a three-day submarine voyage. The answer is that it is possible, although it would be a very uncomfortable journey.

The most famous answer to the liberal objections is the episode of the whaling ship *Star of the East*, which spotted a large sperm whale in February 1891. Harpoon boats were launched, one of which capsized with two men overboard. In time the whale was killed and drawn to the ship where it was secured and its blubber removed. The next day its stomach was hoisted onto the deck and there inside was sailor James Bartley, who was unconscious but alive. After being revived he resumed his duties aboard the ship.

## DEATH IN THE DEEP

**I**t is important for us to defend the validity of the text. But for those who can accept that God performs miracles in our world, the more important point is the text's meaning. And the first theme we should consider is the relationship between Jonah's descent into the deep and the atoning death of Jesus Christ. As the ancient church father Tertullian wrote, "What he endured was a type of the Lord's suffering, by which pagan penitents also would be redeemed."<sup>5</sup>

In this respect, we should note the symbolism of death embedded in Jonah's language about the deep sea. When we think about Noah's flood, Moses in the Red Sea, and Joshua crossing the Jordan, we realize that the sea symbolizes the power of death to swallow and destroy. Jacques Ellul comments, "The waters are the power of death and drowning. He who is plunged into them is plunged into death; he who traverses them traverses death."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the devouring fish symbolizes the powers of chaos and death that engulf the impenitent. Isaiah, for instance, symbolizes God's final judgment with imagery of the slaying of a great sea creature: "In that day, the LORD with his

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<sup>5</sup> Alberto Ferreiro, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, OT vol. XIV (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 135.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 41.

hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent... and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea” (Isa. 27:1). Moreover, the statement that “Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (Jon. 1:17), speaks of death, since that was the length of time traditionally understood to confirm a death. For instance, Jesus waited until his friend Lazarus had been three days in the grave before he arrived to raise him (Jn. 11:39), so that none would doubt that Lazarus truly had died. Of course, Jesus himself lay dead in the tomb for three days, in part to confirm to all that he had not merely swooned but truly had suffered death.

Indeed, our interpretation of Jonah’s descent into the great fish must be shaped by the teaching of the Lord Jesus. Some Pharisees had demanded that Jesus prove himself by performing miracles and Jesus replied: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt. 12:39-40). This indicates that Jonah’s “death” in the belly of the fish prefigured the true death that Jesus Christ would experience in the grave, after his crucifixion for our sins.

Jonah’s experience in the watery grave teaches us at least three things about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first is that the final end of God’s judgment is death. When Jonah was swallowed by the great fish, this was the climax of his judgment from God. So far as he was concerned, his entombment was a final judgment beyond remedy. Jacques Ellul writes, “It is damnation. The fish is in fact hell. Jonah has thus traversed the agony and death and come to this hell prepared by God to enforce the total separation of man and God.”<sup>7</sup>

This reminds us that hell is the final end of every desire to flee from God. Jonah was looking for a place where he could escape the presence of the Lord, and the belly of the great fish in the deep was the successful achievement of his rebellious desire.

All this is what Jesus endured in our place through his death on the cross. The Lord of glory and life suffered damnation in that final

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 44.

judgment of death. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus cried. His experience on the cross was not less dreadful than its corollary of Jonah in the belly of the fish; if anything, it was more dreadful. Jesus voluntarily took to himself the death that we deserved by our sins. As Cyril of Jerusalem preached long ago:

Jonah was cast into the belly of a great fish, but Christ of his own will descended to the abode of the invisible fish of death. He went down of his own will to make death disgorge those it had swallowed up, according to Scripture: ‘I shall deliver them from the power of the nether world, and I shall redeem them from death.’<sup>8</sup>

Like Jonah, every sinner has embraced a path of sin that can only lead to the damnation of death; but in his grace, Jesus has endured this death in our place on the cross. Just as Jonah’s death in the deep removed the storm from the sailors above, so Jesus’ cross removes the wrath of God from our sins. Gordon Keddie writes:

By it, Jesus paid the penalty of sin (expiation), placated the displeasure of God against the sinner (propitiation) and restored believers to the favour and fellowship of God (reconciliation). Jesus’ death procures a new heart (regeneration), a new record (forgiveness) and a new future (eternal life) for all who will trust in him as their Savior and Lord. Jesus went through the hell of the earth for the sake of people like us... Jonah’s three days in the fish emphasized that the wages of sin is death and that, if anyone was ever to be forgiven the consequences of his sin, then there had to be an atonement sufficient to cover the need. In this sense, Jesus’ death and burial was the ‘sign of Jonah’ for his own generation.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, to all appearances, the descent into the deep was the end of Jonah, just as Jesus’ death on the cross seemed to be his end. When Jonah went beneath the waves, the mariners may have stood reverently for some time, but then they would have moved on, never to see the prophet again. So it must have seemed to the Jews and the Romans soldiers when Jesus breathed his last upon the cross. But it was not the end, because through the death of his servant, God intended to bring life not just to him but to the world. Peter Williams comments: “Just as Jonah was delivered from his watery grave to continue the work of preaching repentance and salvation to the

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<sup>8</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, in Alberto Ferreiro, ed., *The Twelve Prophets*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT XIV (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 135.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Preacher on the Run: The Message of Jonah* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1986), 71-72.

Ninevites, so Christ through his resurrection continued – through the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church – to preach the gospel of salvation to the whole world.”<sup>10</sup>

The history of God’s people has shown this pattern at work time and again. Williams writes:

Witness what happened in the old Soviet Union under communism when the church was persecuted, believers imprisoned, and the Bible outlawed. God’s power was at work and it came to life again. The same happened in China when Christian missionaries were expelled and the church closed down. Many then thought that that was the end of the great vision of Hudson Taylor, but God was at work, and today there are more believers in China than ever before. The last word is never with men, but with God’s power.<sup>11</sup>

## SALVATION BY SOVEREIGN GRACE

**T**he third point made by Jonah’s descent into the great fish deserves extended treatment. For not only was the sea creature a sign of God’s judgment, but it also was a sign of God’s sovereign grace through that judgment. We can consider this by asking the question: “Where did the great fish come from?” The answer is obvious: it was God who arranged for the sea creature to be at just the right spot at just the right time, with just the right amount of hunger so as to want to swallow a foolish prophet who had just been cast overboard.

The key word here is “appointed”: “The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah” (Jon. 1:17). Some versions translate this that God “prepared” the great fish who would swallow Jonah. Together the two words render the idea perfectly. God had long since been preparing his plans for the appointed fulfillment of his saving will for and through the prophet. This is a theme that recurs throughout this book, with its strong emphasis on the sovereign grace of God. Later God appoints and prepares a plant to shade Jonah, then he appoints a worm to destroy the plant, and finally God prepares an east wind to blow on the prophet in order to achieve his will. Williams writes:

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Williams, *Jonah – Running from God* (Epsom, Surrey, UK: Day One, 2003), 42.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, *Jonah*, 43.

“Each of these instances was a deliberate act by God to provide for the outworking of his purpose. As the omnipotent God he not only ordains the end, but also provides the means to that end.”<sup>12</sup>

This theme of God’s sovereignty in salvation is not new to the Bible with Jonah. All through God’s Word we read of God providing and preparing that which would advance his redemptive plan. God had Noah prepare the ark for saving him and his family through the great flood (Gen. 6:14). When Abraham obeyed God by taking his son Isaac up on Mount Moriah as an offering, God provided him with a ram appointed to be sacrificed in Isaac’s place. Likewise, when Elijah was hiding at the brook, God appointed ravens to bring him his daily bread. When the Ethiopian eunuch was reading the prophet Isaiah, God prepared and appointed that Philip the deacon be on hand to explain the meaning of the gospel (Acts 8:26-40). Williams comments: “In all these instances we are meant to see how God prepares the way, and provides the means for the outworking of his eternal purposes.”<sup>13</sup> We might continue all through the New Testament, in which the sovereign God prepared and appointed the means of his saving purpose at every step, whether it was Peter’s need to meet Cornelius in order to take the gospel to the Gentiles or Paul’s need for the earthquake to deliver him and Silas from the Philippian jail.

When we turn back to the cross of Christ, we see that the same is true. God prepared for the Messiah to come through the prophecies of the Old Testament and the ministry of John the Baptist. God appointed that his Son would be betrayed by Judas and delivered by the Jews into the hands of the Gentiles, and that together representatives of the whole world would nail Jesus Christ to the cross. And God appointed that Jesus would rise again from the dead on the third day, arriving back in the world in resurrection power, just as Jonah would in time come to Nineveh as proof of God’s sovereign, forgiving, and life-giving grace for all who will repent and believe.

From this perspective, we can see that all along God’s purpose had been working even in Jonah’s flight of rebellion. God purposed to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 41.

bring wicked Nineveh to repentance. He did this out of mercy for them and also for the display of his own glory. But it was not God's plan for Jonah to simply embark from Israel to arrive in the enemy capital with a message from Israel's God. Instead, God appointed and prepared that Jonah would first join them in rebellion, that Jonah would experience the kind of death about which he would warn them, and Jonah would serve as an emblem of the resurrection life that comes as the gift of the gracious God. In this way, the Jonah that God intended to use for the salvation of Nineveh was himself a trophy of saving grace. It was a bedraggled, humbled, and God-reliant prophet who emerged on the shore from the belly of the fish, ready and now equipped to serve God's purpose in the world.

God intends for our lives to bear this same message to our world. The Christian witness is not that of good and faithful people who have merited God's favor by our own actions, and whose lives display the power of virtue and success. That is way the religions of the world seek to achieve their aims. But the Christian witness is that of rebellious sinners who have been delivered from a just condemnation by the sovereign grace of God through the atoning death of his Son.

It was after he had experienced his own deliverance that Jonah found mercy in his heart to preach to wicked Nineveh. Every Christian should look on the world with the same realization. It was as a prophet of God's mercy that Jonah was fit to speak grace to the wicked, and so it is with each of us. Like Jonah, every redeemed sinner who has experienced the death of conviction to sin and the spiritual resurrection of the new birth is sent forth by God to serve his gospel. We are to preach salvation as those who have been redeemed and bear a new life within our souls. And realizing that in our need for forgiveness from sin and deliverance from the abyss we find the great unity of all mankind, we are to break through every barrier that might separate us from others in the world.

Lastly, Jonah's experience speaks to those who have yet to believe. Jonah typifies for you the inevitable end or your own rebellion against God. "The wages of sin is death," says the Bible (Rom. 6:23). But through faith in Jesus Christ, who died to conquer sin and death, the sea monster of judgment is tamed so as to deliver us onto the shores of a new life. Will you not admit your need of such a

deliverance? Will you not look to the God of sovereign grace for your own redemption and deliverance into resurrection life?

If you will not, then Jesus will not be the only one to condemn you for unbelief. Having spoken of his own death as the sign of Jonah for his generation, he added that the Ninevites would also have a testimony to give. Jesus said, “The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Mt. 12:41). If wicked Nineveh repented at the sight of resurrected Jonah, how much more ought we to repent of unbelief and sin, embracing the gospel offer of the Son of God, who died for our sins and rose to give us eternal life.