

# Stewing in a Fish

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Preacher: Andrew MacKenzie

[ 0 : 0 0 ] the book of Jonah, which you can find on page 928 in the Church Bibles. And we're going to be reading chapter 1, verse 17, all the way through to chapter 2, verse 10. Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God. He said, in my distress, I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead, I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me. All your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, I have been banished from your sight, yet I will look again towards your holy temple.

The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me, seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down, the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. To those who cling to worthless idols, turn away from God's love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed, I will make good. I will say, salvation comes from the Lord. And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. Our second reading is from Ephesians, which you can find on page 1173. We're just going to read from the start of chapter 2 until verse 10.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world, and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were, by nature, deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the uncomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Well, thanks for reading, Amy. Jonah, too, what a time. My name's Andrew, if we've not met before, I'm one of the ministry trainees here. And it would be a great help to me if, like me, your Bible has fallen closed. You could turn back to Jonah, which is on page 928 of your church Bibles, handily fitting perfectly on a page there. You'll find an outline of where we're going in the service sheet you should be given on your way in, and hopefully that will be of help to you. Let's pray together and seek the Lord's help before we dive in. Heavenly Father, as we spend time dwelling on your life-giving word this evening, we acknowledge that we need your help. All too often we try to shrink you down to be more like us, rather than seeking to be more like you. All too often we lose our thankfulness for the work of the Lord Jesus, and seek to serve ourselves rather than him.

[ 4 : 07 ] And so as we think on your word this evening, we ask that you would help us to humbly think big thoughts about you, and submit all of our hearts and lives under your word. In Christ's name we pray.

Amen. They say that drowning is a pretty quick process. Most of us can barely hold our breath underwater for long at all. 30 seconds tends to be most people's limit. Trying to get rid of the hiccups, it's a hard task. Even when you know it's coming, you can't hold your breath for long, but when you've been plunged into the Mediterranean ocean, thrown overboard, you can't survive for long.

Even as you fight trying to keep your head above water, it's tiring. And as you sink under, as your body does that natural urge to take a breath, well ultimately your lungs fill with water, and quickly you're unconscious, and before you know it, your life is drifting away, unless somebody comes down and rescues you. You'd perhaps be seeing your life flashing before your eyes, the regrets of what you did, how you treated people. Perhaps even thinking, how on earth did I make myself end up here?

We've seen the TV or film scenes of people desperately trying to keep their head above water, and then slowly sinking beneath the surface. Slowly sinking down to the depths.

And people talk about drowning in life too, don't they? We talk about drowning in paperwork, drowning in our endless to-do list that just gets longer and longer, and no matter what we do, there just seem to be more tasks that pile up, and we can never manage to get rid of them quickly enough. And spiritually, we know that before the Lord Jesus came into our lives, we were drowning in sin as Christians. We were just piling sin upon sin with no way of dealing with it whatsoever.

[ 5 : 59 ] Our sin was well above our heads. We were submerged deep into it all. Helpless. And this is exactly how we left Jonah last week, if you were here. Jonah was hurled into the Mediterranean Sea by these pagan sailors and left there to drown. God called him to go northeast to Nineveh, and actually he went southwest to Joppa to get a boat to Tarshish. God called him to go north-east to and preach to the Assyrians, and Jonah headed to get a boat and go away from the presence of the Lord, or so he thought. And to bring him back, God caused this mighty storm to come upon the boat.

But while all the pagan sailors bowed down, pulled out their mini-statuettes, and prayed to all of the different false gods that they could possibly name, well, Jonah was down in the bottom of the boat sleeping.

And even when they went and woke Jonah, they said to him, why don't you pray? He didn't. He was unconcerned with what was going on.

And Jonah knew that he was the center of all this after they drew lots, after they saw that Jonah was the problem. Instead of finally getting on his knees and praying to God in repentance and recognizing his sin, he went, well, throw me overboard and you'll be fine.

And so they did, and the storm was calmed. But Jonah was in the sea. And we could have had a much shorter passage, actually. We could have been on chapter 3 already tonight.

[ 7 : 39 ] Because actually, if you boot chapter 1, verse 17, and chapter 2, verse 10 together, well, it actually just makes for straight reading. Jonah went down, and then he was vomited back up again.

But we don't. Instead, we have Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish. And that tells us that this prayer is important for us to look at, that it's doing something in this story.

It's doing something in God's word. So let's dive in. We're going to take two runs at chapter 1, verses 1, verses 17 to chapter 2, verse 7.

And then we're going to think about verses 8 to 10 in our third point. Firstly, grace that redeems. Plunged into the sea, no life jacket, no search and rescue helicopters.

Jonah's life all but gone. No hope for making it back to land. He is as good as dead until God in his grace provides this fish.

[ 8 : 37 ] God's gracious provision of a fish to swallow Jonah redeems Jonah's life. And in response to this redemption, Jonah prays poetically to the Lord while in the fish.

That's verse 1. But in many ways, God's provision of a fish to save Jonah is the exact opposite of what Jonah actually wanted. He wanted God to end his life.

He wanted God to be a God who would end his life. God called him to go to Nineveh and call out against them for their sin. And while Jonah went, no, I'm not going to be involved with that God.

They sinned so you should judge them. You shouldn't let them have a chance to repent. They don't deserve an opportunity to be saved. I won't be a part of that.

And so he fled. That's the God that Jonah wants to follow. But God brings this situation about to expose to Jonah his own faulty theology.

[ 9 : 47 ] And verse 2 is like the headline of the prayer. Look at it with me. Twice we get similar thoughts. It says, In my distress I called to the Lord and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help and you listened to my cry.

Why? As Jonah realizes what fate he has in store for him. As his lungs fill with water as he drifts down to the deep.

He realized that the rule he wanted God to impose on Nineveh. Wasn't actually a rule that he wanted to be imposed on his own life. He realized that actually if God is a God who just punishes people without giving them an opportunity to be saved.

Then that would mean the end of his life too. And so humbled from the pride of thinking that he knew better from God. He turns to God. He calls to the Lord for help.

And as Jonah sits in this fish and prays. He's clear that it was God who threw him into the sea. Who threw him overboard. Verse 3 says, You hurled me into the depths.

[ 10 : 55 ] It was your waves and breakers. He recognizes that in God's sovereignty he ordained these events to happen in order to bring back his rebellious prophet.

We know that it was the pagan sailors who threw Jonah into the sea. But with hindsight Jonah sees how it was God bringing him back. You simply cannot outrun the creator.

God exposes Jonah's sin. God shows him the foolishness of his actions. The selfishness of his thinking. And the errors in his view of God.

God says, God says, And sometimes we can feel like God is exposing our sin to us.

Well, don't bury your head in the sand. We can turn to the Lord and he will redeem you. Salvation is the Lord's to give.

[ 12 : 04 ] He gave it to Jonah. Despite what he had done. Jonah's caught in the deadly undercurrents of the sea. Being swept around.

Mired in the consequences of his rebellion. Jonah's been banished. Banished, verse 4, from the sight of God. Out of his presence. Out of relationship with him.

But he turns. He says, I will turn back and look towards the temple again. Look back to God and see his grace. That redeems life. And God's redeeming grace plunges right to the depth of the ocean.

And it pulls people out. Jonah really was in the thick of it. He knew that after how he had acted, he had no right to presume that God would save him.

He had no right to presume that God would come down and pull him out. And as he sinks, read verse 5 with me. He says, The engulfing waters threatened me.

- [ 13 : 10 ] The deep surrounded me. Seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountain I sank down. The earth beneath barred me in forever.
- He's surrounded by the deep. Nowhere to rest. Nowhere to grab hold of. The seaweed is around his head. Getting more tangled. Making it harder and harder. To try and survive.
- Easier and easier. Just to give up. It's a messier and messier situation. And now he sank down to the roots of the mountains. And mountains in the Bible are symbolically where people go to meet with God.
- Think of Moses at Mount Sinai, for example. But Jonah's at the roots of the mountains, deep in the sea. As far away from meeting with God as you could possibly get.
- The earth beneath barring him in forever. Destined to be far off from God. Trapped at the bottom of the sea.
- [ 14 : 12 ] Maybe that's how you feel tonight. Maybe you feel like you're as far off from God as you could possibly get. Do you feel dragged down by your sin? Your rebellion?
- Like there's a weight, there's a burden constantly on your shoulders that no matter what you do, you cannot get rid of. Feeling like it's constantly dragging you down underwater.
- No matter what you do, it's just so hard to keep your head above the line. Like you're entangled in so much mess that there's no hope, there's no visible way of getting out.
- Well, if you're a Christian here tonight, that is how we once were before we knew the Lord Jesus. And if you're not a Christian or if you feel like you've drifted from God for whatever reason, lately, this is not the way that life has to be.
- Hope breaks in to Jonah's prayer. Keep reading verse 6 with me. It says, But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit. Hope breaks in.
- [ 15 : 14 ] The Lord reaches right down to the bottom of the pit and redeems Jonah's life. He brings him up out of the pit. As verse 7, Jonah's life was ebbing away, he remembered God and turned back to him in prayer.
- And God, in his immense grace, redeemed his life from the darkest of pits. God's grace redeems all those who turn to him. No matter how messy your life is, no matter what your history is, whatever shame or guilt you might carry around, if you turn to God, he will give you life.
- And Christians, we can be thankful that like Jonah, but through the blood of Jesus, we have been rescued up out of the pit. Ephesians 2, which we read together, speaks of us being dead in our sins as we were disobediently following the world's ways.
- Paul writes, we too were deserving of wrath, but God made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved.
- And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. This was us. We were drowning in sin. The world's ways wrapping around our head.
- [ 16 : 39 ] We're getting more and more entangled in mess, dragging us down to be barred in by death forever, only for Jesus to step down into our world of sin and death, the messy place that it is, and to raise us up from the pit and take our lives on high to be with Christ secure, safe with him in heaven.
- Meaning that no matter what happens in life, we can always be thankful to the Lord Jesus because we know that he has defeated our biggest problem.
- Whatever happens, the Lord Jesus has solved our biggest problem. And so there is always cause to be thankful. God's grace is grace that redeems even the worst of sinners.
- That's what we heard after the confession this evening. And God's grace is grace that compels us to show compassion to others.

Our second point, grace that compels. Knowing that we've been redeemed from the pit of death ourselves should compel us to go and show God's compassion to others.

[ 17 : 53 ] Knowing from the testimony of our lives that we're not any better than anyone else on this earth. And there's no one that God can redeem. I wonder if Jonah thought that he needed saved before he was thrown overboard.

Certainly he seemed to think that he was better than those in Nineveh, better than the Assyrians. And he seemed to think that he knew better than God that actually he shouldn't have compassion on those people.

Did he now have compassion on Nineveh? Well, it's not a question this passage answers. You'll have to come back next week for that one. But I think there are some ominous hints here that in Jonah's prayer that perhaps suggests he's got a bit of work to do.

The prayer is sound. It's orthodox theology. There's nothing that he says specifically that's wrong. But in the context, there are perhaps a few things that are concerning.

As I've prepped this week, as I've dived into Jonah 2, turns out it's a very controversial prayer. Some people think it's just pure selfishness. Some people think it's genuine.

[ 19 : 04 ] So this is my attempt to have my cake and to eat my cake. I think Jonah's prayer is a reflection of where he's at with God. It is not perfect.

It's not packed full of theological truths. It probably shouldn't be a prayer for us to use as a model. But he's still turned back to God.

He's just got some issues to work through. He's not instantly been made perfect when he's been swallowed by the fish. But at the same time, take verse 4 for example, which says, yet I will look again towards your holy temple.

It seems like it's the temple in Jerusalem that Jonah's hoping to go to, not Nineveh to preach. Coupled with the temple reference in verse 7, it seems that it's very much locating the way you can approach God in Jerusalem and certainly not in Nineveh.

I think that's potentially ominous. And it sounds a little presumptuous as well that he thinks he'll be able just to get back in to the temple. There's also no confession of sin.

[ 20 : 12 ] There's nothing linking his current state to his actions before. As he sits in the fish and recounts the events, it's very much a, you hurled me in, I called to you, and you saved me with a fish.

There's no verbal confession of sin. But that doesn't mean that he's not repented. It's just quite a self-centered prayer. The words I and me are well used in this.

He'd do well to pray more about how God is so great, about all that God has done. But mightn't we do the same after such a deliverance?

Jonah's prayer reflects where he's at. He has been redeemed, but he's got work to do. He might not quite still be as compelled as he ought to by God's grace.

But that's how redemption works isn't it? Which of us can say that when we were saved we quickly got all our theological ducks in a row, we stopped struggling with any sin whatsoever, our whole mindset changed and we were perfectly in line with God's will?

[ 21 : 22 ] Who says that we have no trouble showing compassion to our enemies? That's just not the case, is it? we're redeemed by Christ and then we work on becoming more like him, knowing that we were all dead in sin at one point together, but that we have been redeemed by Christ only by God's grace.

It humbles us and it compels us to show compassion on others. And let's be clear that for Jonah, anyone outside of Israel was a political, a war enemy.

The Assyrians were effectively a terrorist state, as Martin said last week. And if the Geneva War Crimes Convention was around back then, they would be in perpetual breakage of it. Like to really get what he's being called to, I think we need to think of it as asking Ukrainians to go and preach the gospel to Russian soldiers who are actively deporting their children.

Deep-seated enemies. I think that we would find it hard to go and have compassion on them. But a proper view of God's grace does compel us to go and do that.

We too needed rescued. Jonah needed rescued by a big fish. And then his salvation is complete in verse 10 when he's vomited out. He is saved by becoming fish from it.

[ 22 : 53 ] It's not very glamorous. It's pretty humbling, actually, isn't it? And remembering that helps us to not become proud, to not think that we know better than God.

Instead, it compels us to have compassion, his compassion, on the lost. Have you ever looked at someone and thought, you know what, they're just like me before I met the Lord Jesus?

Because ultimately, we're all either in Christ or we're dead in sin. And so all those who don't know Christ are just like us before we knew Christ. And we should have compassion on them.

Let me invite you to consider, is there anyone in your life who you would hesitate to or just straight up refuse to share the gospel with? even if they came asking.

Maybe it's not a certain person, but a certain type of person. And God's grace is not only grace that compels, but grace that propels.

[ 24 : 01 ] Verses 8 to 10. God's grace propels Jonah to humbly! He's not only to serve him as he brings salvation about, his salvation about. He says, verse 8, I will not be an idolater who turns away from God's love and clings to worthless idols instead.

You see, there are two ways to be an idolater and forsake God's love for you. The first is how we often think about it, is when you pull out your mini statue and bow down and worship a false god instead of the creator god.

But the second one, and I found this really helpful this week, is to take Yahweh the living God and to shrink him down to make him pocket-sized or that he can fit in our bag.

Something that we can comfortably carry around. Jonah made an idol out of God, well, out of the idea of God. Not by misplacing his worship towards somebody who doesn't deserve it, but by making God something that he's not and then worshipping that.

He took our all-powerful, omnipresent God and tried to shrink him down to be a small god that he could just leave behind if he wanted, that didn't have control over the sea.

[ 25 : 21 ] Jonah wanted God to be just like him. Jonah wanted God to do his bidding and to do so is to turn away from God's love and cling to worthless idols.

Jonah believed that God was real. That was not a problem for him. But he didn't like God's word, God's call or God's plan. Ultimately, God wasn't who Jonah wanted him to be.

Jonah thought that God should only care about saving the Israelites. He should just judge the Assyrians. He shouldn't be interested in their salvation. And when God wasn't how Jonah wanted him to be, well, Jonah wasn't willing to submit his will under God's.

Instead, he tried to flee. And so, as God so often does, he gave Jonah over to what Jonah wanted. Jonah decided that he wanted to go down and flee God's presence.

And so, just glance back to chapter 1, verse 3 with me where we see that. It says, but Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa. Jonah. We're then told later that he goes down into the boat to sleep and the sailors knew that he was fleeing the Lord.

[ 26 : 41 ] And so, God gave him what he wanted. We read in verse 3 of chapter 2 that God hurled him down into the depths. And verse 4, he was banished from God's sight.

Jonah persistently tried to escape God and God gave him over to what he wanted so that he'd realize the error of his ways. And then, from the deep of the sea, God worked miraculously to save him.

God gives people over to their sinful desires when they persistently chase after them. That's what Romans 1 tells us. You want to see where God, just like you, gets you, Jonah?

Well, it gets you to the bottom of the sea, close to death, far away from the only source of life with no hope. And so, Jonah resolves in the bottom of the fish, verse 9, to sacrifice to God with shouts of joyful praise, thankful for the redemption that he's received.

He's propelled on to live in right relationship with God, making sacrifices for his sin as he's called to do, worshipping and submitting to him as he ought, recognizing that actually salvation belongs to the Lord.

[ 27 : 58 ] It is his to give and his purposes are better than ours. Just like the pagan sailors, Jonah makes vows to God and will sacrifice to him, presumably once he's thrown up out of the fish.

Propelled by God's grace into worship, God is not like us. He is so much better. When we were dead in sin, through his grace, he gave us life.

God and that propels us into submission to him. How much sin and disbelief comes from us shrinking God down, trying to make him like us, trying to boot our will above his, booting our desires above what he has to say.

That means that when we realize that our will isn't his will, we need to submit to his. when what he says isn't best, isn't what we think is best, what he says is best, isn't what we think is best.

We need to submit to his, act in line with his wisdom. Maybe for you there's something in his word which you're reluctant to accept is true and right.

[ 29 : 14 ] If you're honest, you so deeply wish that actually he didn't say that, he said otherwise. God's grace propels us to submit to him, knowing that the living God is not like us and we need to humbly accept his word.

Jonah shows us that running away from God leads to death, only to the pit of death. Or maybe there's ongoing sin in your life that if you're being honest, you're reluctant to kill.

Maybe really what you'd like is to be able to worship God but to also be able to indulge in anger, pride, lust, or whatever else it might be. God's grace that redeems us propels us to boot sin to death and to follow his plan for our lives.

Perhaps at the root of that and so much more is that we find it hard to trust in the goodness of God's sovereign grace. God's love.

Jonah, Jonah, we struggle to trust that God is not like us. He doesn't do things the way that we would do them and that is good.

[ 30 : 28 ] And so we wonder, is this really a good way to do it? Are the things that God calls sin really that bad? Is God's design good? good. But when we struggle with that, instead of trying to flee like Jonah, we need to turn to Jesus and remember the kindness and the love of God that redeemed us from death.

God's sovereign grace is good. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2, God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

A couple of verses later he writes, for we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared for us in advance.

We do not have to be perfect for God to use us. We all have much to learn. Jonah has much to learn. But when we trust the almighty God and respond to his good grace, there are many good works prepared for us to do, to do humbly as he brings across his salvation plan.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, how good you are to us. We're so thankful that your sovereign grace sent Jesus down while we were running from you and dead in sin to bring us up out of the pit into life with you.

[ 32 : 07 ] Help us, Lord, to be compelled to have compassion on others and to be propelled to submit to your will. In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Well, let's sing together.