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Jonah 1:1:17—2:10 – *The Lord's Salvation*

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[Recap: Jonah thrown overboard by the sailors; poetry bookended by big fish narrative]

Jonah 1:17—2:10

¹⁷ Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. ² ¹ From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. ² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ I said, ‘I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.’

⁵ The engulfing waters threatened me,
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.

⁶ 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.

⁷ “When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, Lord,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.

⁸ “Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God’s love for them.

⁹ 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.’”

¹⁰ And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

Jonah has been on a journey downward ever since the book started:

First, he went *down* to the port city Joppa (1:3) ...

Running away from the Lord’s command to go to Nineveh;

Then, on his way to Tarshish (1:5) ...

Jonah goes *down*, below deck, while the other sailors struggle to survive the storm;

Now, Jonah is sinking to the very depths of the ocean...

Down, down, down.

This journey downward—

His attempt to run away from God—

Takes Jonah to rock bottom:

That place where you can’t get any lower.

Things can’t get any worse...

Because you’re now at the bedrock of life’s misery.

I want you to listen to how the Message translates Jonah’s experience...

Listen to how low Jonah descends.

You threw me into ocean’s depths,
 into a watery grave,

With ocean waves, ocean breakers
 crashing over me.

I said, ‘I’ve been thrown away,
 thrown out, out of your sight.

I’ll never again lay eyes
 on your Holy Temple.’

Ocean gripped me by the throat.
 The ancient Abyss grabbed me and held tight.
 My head was all tangled in seaweed at the bottom of the sea where the mountains
 take root.
 I was as far down as a body can go,
 and the gates were slamming shut behind me forever.

Jonah is physically dying—

Water filling his lungs as he drowns in the ocean depths—

But there is another death taking place...

A spiritual death.

Jonah's descent takes him deep into the realm of the dead...

Or the "belly of Sheol" as it literally says.

Sheol is not a place you wanted to end up.

Around the time of this writing, "Sheol" was sometimes used to describe a place of
 divine punishment. (Bryan Estelle)

It was a place cut off from the land of the living...

And a place cut off from the heavens above where the divine dwelled...

Sheol was a place where you were cut off from God.

And this is exactly what Jonah is saying:

"I have been banished from your sight." (2:4)

"Cast away from your presence..."

"Never to look upon your holy temple again."

Jonah is using vivid language to describe a very intense suffering.

At his rock bottom...

Jonah is experiencing separation from God...

Not just *physical* death...

But *spiritual* death.

If you've ever seen the Harry Potter movies...

There's a creature called a dementor.

It's a hooded creature with a robe of tattered black rags...

That kind of looks like the grim reaper.

When the dementor comes around things get unnaturally dark and icy cold...

All of the happiness and peace of life gets replaced by depression and sadness.

If the dementor has too long with you...

They clamp their jaws over your mouth...

And suck out your soul...

Leaving you alive, but just an empty shell...

Irretrievably gone. (Harry Potter Lexicon)

This is the fate that awaits Jonah...

As he descends down, down, down...

Separating from God...

The author of life.

PAGE II

Jonah's experience should make *us* feel uncomfortable—

It should unsettle *us*—

Because this is not just Jonah's fate...

It's the fate of everyone who has sinned against God.

This is what sin does...

It separates people from God.

After Adam and Eve rebel against God's command—

After they hide themselves from God—

God sends them away from his presence...

Casting them out of the garden.

It isn't gravity that takes Jonah down into the heart of the ocean...

It is God's doing because of Jonah's sin:

Jonah says, "*You* hurled me into the depths..."

“*Your* waves and breakers swept over me.”

“How can God do this to Jonah?” we ask.

“I thought God was a God of love!?”

2 times in Jonah’s prayer he mentions God’s “*holy* temple...”

The dwelling place of God being set apart.

God’s holiness means God’s absolute moral perfection.

“In him there is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5)

God is unblemished.

God is untouched by sin...

Absolutely Pure.

So when Jonah chooses to sin against God by disobeying him...

He chooses for himself God’s wrath...

“God’s revulsion against that which contradicts God’s holiness.” (JI Packer)

See, at the same time that God is love...

God is also holy and just...

He upholds justice and righteousness.

God doesn’t permit sin to go unpunished...

He would not be holy, just, and righteous if God did that.

And the punishment for sin is death—

Death is what we choose when we go against God’s law—

Not just physical death...

But a spiritual death of separation from a holy, loving God.

And the feelings that Jonah vividly expresses in his prayer—

Drowning in the crashing waves...

Seaweed wrapped around his head not allowing him to escape...

Being entombed in the dark abyss forever;

The feeling of having your joy, happiness and peace...

Sucked out by a dementor—

This will be our experience if we're separated from God...

If we receive just punishment for our sin.

PAGE III

This is bad news.

This is news that's hard to receive:

We've all sinned.

We've all chosen for ourselves separation from God.

We've all chosen the suffering of the abyss as our "resting" place.

The bad news is *really* bad!

But if the bad news is *that* bad...

The good news must be great!

The good news is that salvation belongs to the Lord.

It doesn't belong to or depend on us.

Salvation belongs to God...

And God delights in rescuing his people.

For all of the talk about the fish that swallows up Jonah—

Is it a real fish?

What kind of fish was it?

Could a person really survive that long in the belly of a giant fish?—

For all of these questions...

We miss the point of the fish.

The fish is an instrument of the Lord's salvation.

God sends the fish to deliver Jonah from his watery grave.

Before God uses the fish though...

He brings Jonah to his lowest point...

To his rock bottom.

Jonah has been a defiant, self-reliant prophet.

Being an Israelite, he thinks he knows Yahweh...

“I worship the Lord, the one who made the sea and land.” (1:9)

This is just lip service though.

God needed to allow Jonah to descend to his very lowest point—

Away from all of his other attachments and thoughts about God—

To a place where he would be open to the Lord as he reveals himself...

Not as Jonah has made him out to be.

Jonah is at a place where the Lord is all he has—

He is fading away...

About to be lost in the abyss forever—

And it is only at *this point* when Jonah cries out to the Lord:

Jonah doesn't pray to God when he is first sent to Nineveh;

He doesn't pray to God during the raging storm;

And he doesn't pray to God when he is thrown overboard.

It is at his place of greatest distress—

“When I was ebbing away,” Jonah says—

That he remembers the Lord.

God allows Jonah to hit rock bottom...

Because this is where Jonah finally learns to depend on God.

And when Jonah finally cries out to the Lord in his distress...

The Lord listens to his cry.

And God sends a giant fish to rescue Jonah.

Even though Jonah has been running from God since we met him—

Even though Jonah doesn't deserve to be rescued...

Even though it would be perfectly just for God to allow Jonah to lie forever in the Pit—

God shows Jonah mercy.

God delivers Jonah from his watery grave.

If salvation belonged to anyone else...

Jonah would never make it out alive.

Salvation belongs to the Lord...

And Jonah is rescued.

PAGE IV

This same God who rescued an undeserving Jonah from certain spiritual death...

Now shows us mercy...

And rescues us.

And just as Jonah's deliverance via the fish was a hard-to-believe miracle...

So too is *our* rescue absolutely miraculous...

In a way that is only received by faith.

Because as Jonah *began* to experience separation from God...

Jesus Christ experienced full separation from God.

Jonah got a taste of what it was like to be cast out of God's sight...

And we heard his words of agony.

Jesus doesn't just get a taste...

He is made to experience separation from God in its totality.

And as he hangs on the cross—

Hands and feet pierced with nails to fasten him to the wood—

He cries out in desperation:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This is desperation not just caused by physical pain...

But caused the mental, spiritual and emotional pain of having God the Father turn his face away.

This is the pain of abandonment by God...

This is *Christ's* descent into the abyss.

And it is all for you and for me.

As we read in our confession and assurance earlier:

“Christ sustained in body and soul...”

“The anger of God against the sin of the whole human race.”

“This he did in order that he might set us free from eternal condemnation...”

“And gain for us God’s grace.”

In Matthew 12, Christ identifies himself with Jonah saying:

“As Jonah was in the belly of a huge fish for 3 days and 3 nights...”

“So the Son of Man will be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matt 12:40)

As Jonah suffered separation from God for his sins...

Christ suffered the ultimate separation from God...

Not for his sin, but for ours.

“God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us...”

“So that we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Cor 5:21

So now, whenever we’re in that dark valley;

Whenever it feels like we have reached our bottom...

We can be absolutely confident that God has not turned his face away from us.

God will never again turn away from his people because of what Christ did.

There is nothing in heaven or on earth—

Nothing that you or I or anyone else can do—

To cause God to abandon his children.

God’s righteous anger against sin has been satisfied...

Christ has suffered in our place...

And now we don’t have to suffer.

We don’t have to worry about the torments of separation from God.

So, when we do find ourselves in life’s low points...

When we’ve been beaten up by life for any number of reasons...

We can cry out to the Lord in our distress.

And we can be sure that he hears us.

And we can be sure that he will deliver us.

Because this is who God is.

Salvation belongs to the Lord.

May we turn to him in faith and know his love and mercy for us in Jesus Christ.

Amen.