

Praying with the Plankton

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Today, we finally arrive at the big fish in the Jonah narrative. This is, perhaps, the most famous part of the whole story. Before Peter Benchley brought us *Jaws*, before Herman Melville brought us *Moby Dick*, the Bible brought us this little tale of a giant, man-eating sea creature. And, it's captivated readers ever since.

In recent times, it's become something of a bullseye for individuals who want to poke holes in the veracity of Scripture. "How could someone survive in the belly of a fish for three days?" they ask. Surely, this is proof that the Bible is baloney—that we cannot trust it.¹ And, in response, many well-intending Christians have gone about trying to prove how someone could indeed survive in the belly of a giant fish for an extended period of time.²

Here's the trouble with this debate, especially from the participating believers: *the playing-field or the boundaries have been set by the skeptics*. The Christians involved have allowed them to determine what's possible and what's not possible. That is to say, when the debate began, God's sovereignty over creation and creature was off the table. God's ability to work the miraculous was off the table. And friends, that certainly isn't the playing-field of the biblical text. These aren't the boundaries for the Christian believer. To take miracles off the table is essentially to take God off the table.

(I once listened to an entire episode of NPR's *Radiolab*, where they attempted to find out whether or not it was possible to bring the walls of Jericho to the ground with a bunch of trumpets.³ But, that's not the focus of the biblical account of Jericho. The Bible isn't claiming the trumpets brought down the walls. The point of the story is that *God* brought down the walls. And, the point of Jonah emerging from the fish isn't whether or not someone could *naturally* survive for three days in a fish's belly. The point is that a person can *supernaturally*, according to the sovereign will of God.

¹ See [this](#) article attempting to debunk any story in which someone survives after being swallowed by a fish.

² See [this](#) article which is representative of many similar attempts to show scientifically how Jonah could have survived in the belly of a giant fish.

³ You can listen to the episode [here](#).

For God reigns over creation. And, nothing is impossible for him. *Even resurrection from the belly of a huge fish!*)

Let's pick up the story as Jonah gets his intimate introduction to this fish.

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 majority of today’s text is a prayerful poem. As such, we have to study it in a very different way than all that’s come before it. Poetry takes some unpacking—parallelism, motifs, and imagery all work together to bring out the poem’s meaning. And, because of this, we’re going to focus on two specific motifs which are repeated in this prayer. (1st) Jonah’s poem wrestles with the experience of God’s judgment. The Lord confronts Jonah with the wages of his sins. And, the prophet is horrified. (2nd) Jonah’s poem wrestles with the experience of God’s mercy. He praises Yahweh for his saving purposes—for his deliverance.

Let’s look at each of these themes in turn.

1. The experience of God’s judgment.

Well, from the beginning of this story, Jonah has wanted to escape from God. He has wanted to escape from God’s call on his life. He hears the Lord’s call clearly and immediately runs in the opposite direction. Presumably, he would rather perish than preach to Nineveh. Doesn’t he essentially ask for death when he tells the crew of the ship to throw him into the sea (1:12)? *His heart is very hard!*

His perspective changes a little once he’s in the water though. He thinks death would be better until death is upon him. When the Lord gives Jonah what he wants, he’s undone. He’s horrified.

Listen to what Jonah says; listen to the repeated images of God’s judgment upon this wayward prophet—of God sending Jonah away from him.

- *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 (vv. 3-4).*
- *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 (vv. 5-6).*

- ...my life was ebbing away (v. 7).

Friends, sometimes we think we'd prefer a world in which God doesn't exist. Sometimes we wish we could escape him—escape his will. Yet, when confronted with such a reality, when left to go our own way, we find only despair.

Christian philosopher William Lane Craig expresses the terrible reality of life without God when he writes:

If there is no God, then our life is not qualitatively different from that of a dog. I know that's harsh, but it's true. As the ancient writer of Ecclesiastes put it: "The fate of the sons of men and the fate of the beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All come from the dust and all return to the dust" (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20). In this book...of the Bible, the writer shows the futility of pleasure, wealth, education, political fame, and honor in a life doomed to end in death. His verdict? "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2). If life ends at the grave, then we have no ultimate purpose for living.⁴

And, atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell expresses much the same sentiment when he writes the following:

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.... Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation...be safely built.⁵

Sometimes we can take for granted the beautiful and the meaningful purpose which serving God brings to our lives. Sometimes we think we could do better alone.

⁴ You can read Craig's full essay: "The Absurdity of Life without God" on his blog [here](#).

⁵ You can read Russell's full essay: "A Free Man's Worship" [here](#).

Perhaps Jonah had taken God for granted. Maybe Jonah thought he could do better on his own. But, the simple prospect of separation from God quickly brought things into perspective for him.

Does this prospect do the same for you? Do you long for the nearness of God?

Jesus tells a story about a rebellious son who longed to be free from his father. He asks for his inheritance and, once he gets it, runs off to live however he pleases—to do whatever he wants. And his freedom is good for a while. He eats and he drinks and he tastes all the pleasures life has to offer. But, in the end, he squanders it all. The pleasures all come to an end. The boy finds himself empty and alone.

Eventually he decides to go back to his father's house and ask for employment among the least of his father's servants. He is desperate. He misses the life he'd once longed to escape. He misses his father. He's looking for some identity. And, friends, what the boy finds when he nears his home is that his father—who'd given him all that he wanted, who'd let him go his own way—was looking for him and was waiting for him and was longing for him to come home. The boy's father let him run away so that he might have him back again, fully and for good.

Friends, if you like the boy or the prophet Jonah are running away from God, don't hesitate to come home. Your heavenly Father longs to embrace and love you. He longs to lavish grace and forgiveness upon you. He longs to give you a purpose and a meaning that will last—an identity as his child that will never dissatisfy you. The Lord loves to renew what's broken and resurrect what is dead.

And, this brings us rather naturally to our final motif.

2. The experience of God's mercy.

Imagine the terror Jonah felt. Imagine the reality before him. He's drowning in a vast sea. He's struggling to breathe—to just keep his head above water.

One of my wife's most vivid childhood memories is of being held under water by her brother in a motel swimming pool. She can clearly remember the fear of it. She is still uncomfortable with swimming pools today. My grandma was the same. She never learned to swim (*though she did learn to parasail but that's another story*). You know, I still have an aversion to swimming in the ocean after I watched *Jaws* as a teenager. I mean...seriously.

Deep waters can be scary to us but were even more so to an ancient like Jonah. For the Hebrew, the deep was a place of chaos and disorder—a place of darkness and danger. This symbolic idea climaxes in John’s vision in the book of Revelation of the new heaven and the new earth. Beach and sea lovers have long been perplexed and disturbed by his vision, for the apostle writes:

I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea (Revelation 21:1).

Rest assured, John isn’t telling us there won’t be any oceans or seas in heaven. Rather, he’s saying that chaos and danger—of which the sea was a representation—will be gone forever. That’s what John is getting at. And, knowing this about the sea helps us understand something about Jonah’s situation in today’s text.

In the sea, Jonah is beyond human help. He’s been plunged into the very heart of chaos and danger—the domain of no return. He’s in the very belly of death itself, literally, the belly of Sheol (v. 2). In Hebrew thought, Sheol was not simply the grave but the abode of the dead. In short, Jonah’s only hope at this point is with the Lord. And, he will need a resurrection.

Isn’t this what he prays for? Isn’t this what Jonah is setting his hopes upon? From the belly of the fish, he trusts and affirms God’s resurrecting powers.

- *From...the realm of the dead I called... / and you listened to my cry (v. 2).*
- *Jonah said, “I have been banished from your sight; / yet I will look again towards your holy temple (v. 4).*
- *...the earth beneath barred me in forever. / But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit (v. 6).*

Then, in an exultant climax, the prophet celebrates the saving purposes of God with this statement—“Salvation comes from the Lord” (v. 9). He’s still in the belly of the fish. He’s still in the tomb. But, nevertheless, he knows God can resurrect him. He knows, with the Lord, there is hope.

And, the Lord does save him. There is resurrection for this wayward prophet and in a most fitting fashion too. You’ve got to love Jonah’s reentrance into the land

of the living. It's confirmation that the Lord God has a marvelous sense of humor. With a giggle, I suspect, our author penned this line:

...the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land (v. 10).

Now, that's funny and fitting. But, friends, there's a lot of grace in that vomit. Jonah has done nothing to earn God's favor. He has done nothing but cry to the Lord for salvation. That he comes out alive is only by God's grace and mercy.

And this is the gospel; isn't it? We aren't saved because we're especially kind or nice or obedient. We are saved because God graciously showed his mercy for us in this—that while we were still sinners God sent Christ to redeem and reconcile us to him (Romans 5:8). And Christ's resurrection is the proof. He conquered the grave. He defeated death. His resurrection confirms our resurrection. Amen.

You know, Jesus is clear about Jonah's entombment inside the fish. He says it ultimately points to his stay, for three days and three nights, in the grave. He says that it points to his resurrection, *because* he will only stay in the grave for three days and three nights—*not forever*.

What things have been reduced to ashes in your life? What things are dying or are dead to you? What needs resurrection? What needs renewal and redemption? What needs the rebirth which only God can provide?

In the next few moments, I would invite you to write those things on the sheet of paper you received as you entered the sanctuary this morning. Then, if you'd like, come forward and drop them into the mouth of this fish trusting that God is the God of resurrection and of redemption. And, the elders and I promise to pray specifically for these requests as we approach Easter Sunday.