

God's Unexpected Mercy

Jonah 1:17-2:10

30 April 2017 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: What was God doing by sending the fish to swallow Jonah?

Big Idea: God's unexpected mercy rescues us from death and gives us life.

Introduction

Small surf is boring.

We went to Woodgate Beach last year and I've got to tell you, I've seen bigger waves in a bathtub.

The "waves" made the tiniest 'plop' as they landed on the sand.

The kids loved it, but I was hanging out for the next week, which we spent at the Sunshine Coast with some real waves.

There is such thing as a wave that's too big though.

I certainly wouldn't have wanted to be swimming in the surf as TC Debbie made land.

Even in regular surf, my guess is that most people have experienced a wave that's too big.

That wave that's so strong and has so much force behind it, that it just knocks you off your feet.

For a few seconds, it feels like you're in a washing machine.

There's sand everywhere and bubbles as the water boils all around you.

Your arms and legs get moved around like toys by the force of the wave.

It's even hard to know which ways up until you finally hit the sand and you can push up towards the surface.

It's a beautiful feeling as your head comes up out of the water and you can gulp down a deep breath of air.

Just before you get slammed by another wave and the whole thing happens all over again – sometimes two or three times.

It can be a very scary experience until you can finally get your footing and stagger out of the water.

That feeling of panic is something like what Jonah experienced.

In our passage this morning, Jonah reflects on his experience of being caught up in the violent fury of the sea.

Outline

We're in the second week of our series working our way through the book of Jonah.

You can find this book at the end of the Old Testament, amongst the twelve prophetic books called the Minor Prophets.

As an Old Testament prophet, Jonah's job was to speak on behalf of God.

On the face of it, the book's about God saying, "Go!" and Jonah saying, "No!"

Really though, this little book's about God's massive and scandalous mercy.

It divides up into two phases – The first two chapters are about Jonah heading away from Nineveh and in the last two chapters he heads towards Nineveh.

Both of these phases have three movements.

We looked at the first two movements last week, seeing that God's mercy is unstoppable.

God gave Jonah a commission: go and preach judgement to the wicked and ruthless Ninevites.

Jonah decided to sail off in the opposite direction until the ship he was in was battered by a massive storm sent by God.

After trying everything else, the crew finally threw Jonah overboard.

The storm immediately stopped and the crew marvelled at God's power.

In chapter two we see a different angle of God's mercy.

God's unexpected mercy rescues us from death and gives us life.

- An Unexpected Rescue
- An Unexpected Prayer
- An Unexpected Life

An Unexpected Rescue

We pick up the story again with Jonah being thrashed around by the waves, struggling to keep his head above the water.

If you're reading this for the first time, you've got to be thinking that he's a goner.

There's only one way this could end.

It's not like the Coast Guard are going to turn up and pluck him out of the sea.

He's finished.

It's not curtains for Jonah though, because there's an unexpected twist.

The unexpected happens: God intervenes to rescue Jonah in verse seventeen of chapter one.

Instead of Jonah taking in a lung-full of water, a giant fish takes in a lung-full of Jonah.

The fish swallows him up in one big mouthful.

But the inevitable sound of grinding bones and gurgling of being dissolved by stomach acid don't come.

Admittedly, it's not every day that giant fish swallow up men whole.

Let alone them surviving inside the fish for three days.

And it's almost unheard of for them to then be vomited up onto the beach unscathed.

Actually, it just doesn't happen.

Does it?

From time to time throughout history, there have been other reports of people being swallowed by fish and living to tell the tale.

The most famous one is about the late nineteenth century sailor named James Bartley who apparently fell overboard a vessel called the *Star of the East* while hunting whales near the Falkland Islands.

However, like most of these stories, it's hard to find hard proof that this actually ever happened.

In the case of James Bartley, he wasn't aboard the *Star of the East* when this was meant to have happened, it was a whaling boat, the story wasn't reported until years later and his widow wrote a letter saying that he made it all up.

Regardless of who you are, the incident of Jonah and the fish raises a whole heap of questions.

Are there even fish that're big enough to take a man?

There are some massive fish like Whale Sharks, but most of them probably aren't big enough to fit a man.

Was the fish a whale? In Matthew's gospel, Jesus describes it using a word that's usually translated 'whale', but can mean any big fish.

How did Jonah manage to breathe in there? Some big fish have large gas pockets in their stomachs, but they're probably not full of air.

Was he conscious for the whole time? We don't know.

They're all good questions, but ultimately we don't know the answer to them.

It's fairly understandable that many people have doubted the Bible's account of these events.

Based just on our own experiences, it does seem very unlikely that this happened.

But – and this is a very important but – the Bible doesn't present this as an everyday event.

Everything about the situation is miraculous, from the supernatural storm to the way that the big fish turned up at exactly the right time.

Miraculous events, by their very nature, are unusual and don't just happen.

They can't be tested.

Whether we know of a fish that could possibly be big enough to fit a man inside is really the wrong question.

The question is whether the God who sent the storm and then could calm it again the moment Jonah went overboard.

I'm convinced that's possible even though I can only guess at how he might've done it.

You don't have to have blind, unreasonable, unthoughtful faith to believe that this account of Jonah's experience is true.

You do however need to believe that Jonah's God is powerful enough to have been able to perform this miracle.

That's a reasonable belief if it's grounded in the power and character of the God of the Bible.

There's also a wider context to this.

The stakes are even higher than for a man just surviving in a giant fish.

God sent the fish along to exactly the right place at exactly the right time.

That's even more incredible.

This wasn't just some random fish eating up some random bloke who happened to fall off a boat, though.

God was doing something truly amazing – stepping in to perform a rescue.

He's the God who shows his mercy by performing the most unexpected rescues.

Jonah was saved at exactly the right moment by God providing the most unexpected rescue vehicle you can't imagine: a giant fish!

An Unexpected Prayer

God's rescue method is unusual enough, but it's not the only unexpected thing to happen in this chapter.

Something else quite unexpected happens at the beginning of chapter two: Jonah prays.

You might be wondering what's so unusual about a bloke in the Bible praying?

It's so unexpected because this's the first time in the book that Jonah's even spoken to God.

In the middle of the storm, all the sailors were calling out to any and every God they knew.

Meanwhile, Jonah was asleep at the bottom of the boat.

Jonah was a man who laughed in the face of death.

Live or die, he didn't particularly care.

He was more willing to take God's judgement than he was to turn to the Lord.

Now though, something's changed.

Something happened in the water and he's finally calling out to his God.

We're not meant to just be surprised by the fact that he prays, but also how he prays.

Remember, Jonah's prayer comes from inside the fish.

No matter how big the fish is, he's got to be feeling claustrophobic in there.

I hate being in confined spaces, being surrounded by the warm, squishy flesh of the inside of the fish sounds like a nightmare.

At best, I'd be whinging and complaining about being stuck in there.

He's also got no guarantee that he's going to get out.

Smelling the salt water mixed with gastric juices, I'd be thinking that I'd gone from the frying pan into the fire.

Drowning is bad, but being digested by a fish is hardly any better.

Is dying in a fish the final act of God's judgement, perhaps even humiliation?

More likely, the prayer I'd be praying is, "Lord, just make it quick. Let's get this over and done with."

From inside the fish though, Jonah prays a prayer of praise.

The whole prayer sounds like a Psalm.

It even borrows phrases from the Psalms, which Jonah was obviously very familiar with.

He praises God in the fish because God heard his prayer even from the depths.

It was terrifying to be in the water with the current swirling around him.

The waves were crashing down on top of him.

Down he went into the very heart of the sea, sinking to the bottom.

There was even seaweed wrapped around his head, threatening to choke him.

He went down so far that he hit the bottom.

He's using poetic language here – he wasn't really at the bottom of the sea without SCUBA gear.

The description he uses is of being at the base of the mountains, at the bottom of the deepest trench in the sea.

At the foot of the mountains at the bottom of the sea is as far as you can be from the temple on top of the mountain in Jerusalem.

In Hebrew thinking, the earth rests on foundations – two giant pillars holding up the earth.¹

That's where he was, how low he was.

He was at death's door.

God had taken him right to the brink.

And when he stood on the edge of the abyss and looked death in the face, everything changed.

When people stare death in the face, often their perspective changes.

Death is the great leveller – it takes away all our other options.

That's one of the reasons that it's so sad that we live in a culture that goes to such great lengths to hide death.

By denying our own mortality we lose perspective.

Facing the reality of death helps us to see how small we are and how big and good God is.

From that deep and dark place, Jonah called out to God for mercy.

He prayed towards the temple because it's the place where God is.

This idea is common in the Psalms and which direction did Daniel pray in exile? Towards the temple in Jerusalem.²

Most Bible translations make verse four sound very positive but the Hebrew isn't that definite.

Jonah's call was uncertain, he didn't know if he'd be heard.

Praise God, though, from the deep place Jonah was in, God heard his prayer.

And he didn't just hear the prayer, he also answered it.

Verse 2:

Jonah 2:2 (NIV)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.

There's nowhere that's too far from God's mercy.

There's nowhere that the Lord can't hear you.

What an encouragement that is to us.

God heard Jonah from the middle of the ocean, far from anywhere.

There's nowhere that's beyond his ability to hear your prayers.

Because of the Christian influence on our society, my guess is that most of us take it for granted that God hears and answers our prayers.

We forget that it's a privilege to be able to call out to God from anywhere.

We don't have to go to a special place for God to hear us when we speak to him.

And there aren't special words that need to be used.

We can even pray to him in the middle of the night, because he's up.

The reason Jonah is praising God is because his prayer has been heard.

God answered by rescuing him.

He's experienced God's love, the love that who cling to idols miss out on.

The kind of love being talked about here is *hesed* – God's covenant faithfulness, often translated as loving-kindness.

Jonah 2:8–9 (NIV)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.’ ”

Isn't that true!

An idol's something that takes our heart's affections from us.

Anything that we substitute for the Lord himself.

Idols offer us so much, but they fail to deliver.

They offer us contentment, happiness and lasting joy.

When we trust in them though, we miss out on the goodness of the Lord.

When Jonah prayed to the Lord, he saw the great mercy that God has shown he praises God.

He praises God for he is the one who shows mercy.

Having experienced what God has done, the only right response is gratitude.

So, Jonah declares that he will worship the Lord because of it.

As we come to the end of the prayer, we find the most unexpected thing about it.

I think the most unexpected thing about this prayer is that Jonah doesn't repent.

I know that people often call this chapter Jonah's prayer of repentance, but he's not doing that at all.

Everything's God's fault.

He's the one who hurled Jonah overboard (no it wasn't, it was the sailors because Jonah wouldn't go over himself).

According to Jonah, God's the one who banished him, verse four.

Jonah conveniently forgot that he's the one who ran away!

Jonah is thankful for being rescued, but he's still very much in the driver's seat.

There's absolutely no acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

He doesn't say anything about not doing what God told him to do.

He does go to Nineveh next week, but without acknowledging his wrongdoing in going the opposite way.

He doesn't take an ounce of responsibility.

This shows us that God isn't just merciful.

He's merciful to people who don't deserve it.

He reaches out and shows his mercy to those who rebel against him.

Of course, God's not finished with him yet either.

That's great news for sinners.

It doesn't matter how bad we are or what we've done.

There's hope for people like me, because God will listen when we call out to him.

Regardless of why we are there in the depths, we can call out the Lord and he will hear and answer.

That's the heart of Jonah's unexpected prayer.

An Unexpected Life

Finally, we see that this account is just about avoiding death, it's also about gaining life.

While he's still trapped in the whale, Jonah has a quite unexpected expectation – that he will receive life.

Where the NIV tells us that he's "deep inside the fish", verse two, in Hebrew, the writer goes out of his way to highlight that the fish is female.

Jonah's not just in the fish, more specifically he's inside the fish's womb.

He's waiting to be reborn.

He's being given new life.

Up until this point, Jonah's been on a downward trajectory.

He went down to Joppa, 1:3.

He went down below decks, 1:5.

He went down into the sea, 2:3.

Down, away from the temple, 2:4.

Into the deep, 2:5.

To the depths of the pit 2:6.

But now, everything's turned around, the unexpected happened.

He's on the way up again.

God has lifted him up from the pit, 2:6.

Even while he's in the fish, he seems to have the sense that this isn't the end.

It's no accident that Jonah stays in his floating hotel for three days either.

In the Ancient Near East, three days was a common symbol for people going from death to life.

The same is true in the Bible.³

For example, Hosea 6:1-2:

Hosea 6:1–2 (NIV)¹ “Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. ² After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.

Being in the fish for three days, is a sign that Jonah will be reborn – taken from death to life.

At God’s initiation, the fish releases Jonah.

He gets vomited up onto the dry ground.

I don’t know quite how that happened.

However, I can’t help but have this picture in my mind of a whale on a beach surrounded by vomit saying, “I’m beached. Beached az. I’m beached az, bro.”

Covered in spew, Jonah must’ve looked quite a sight.

How’s he going to explain that to his friends?

Where have you been Jonah?

“I’ve been saved from death and in his mercy, God has given me life!” Jonah would say.

On the ship, Jonah sailed into trouble.

In the belly of the fish, God brought him back.

He had to pay to go on the ship.

The fish brought him back all expenses paid!

God’s unexpected mercy had brought him back from near-certain death.

A few weeks ago, we looked at Matthew 12.

Some Pharisees and scribes – teachers of the Law – asked Jesus for a sign.

Jesus told them that they wouldn’t get a sign, other than the sign of Jonah.

Knowing Jonah’s God, we should be starting to expect the unexpected.

When Jesus was laid in the grave, it wasn't the end of him.

Three days later, God raised him back to life again.

He made the place of death a place of life by rising again.

Jesus has opened the way for us to be spat out of the grave too.

When we stare death in the face, we can know that if we call out to God then he will rescue us.

Because of the resurrection, we can have hope that dust can be raised back to life.

Through the grave, Jesus has shown us mercy and brought life.

From inside the fish, Jonah hoped for physical rescue.

By raising from the grave, Jesus has spiritually rescued us.

And he gives us the hope that one day we will be delivered from this broken world too.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead gives us the hope of new life.

If you're here this morning and you're wondering about Jonah going into a big fish, let me suggest that you put that aside for a minute.

There's a much bigger and more important question than whether a man can be saved by a fish.

The most important question is, "Can the God who rescued Jonah from the deep also raise people from the dead?"

Jesus' resurrection shows us that he can.

And if he can raise people from the grave, then a giant fish is a doddle.

The truly astounding – and unexpected outcome – is that in God's mercy, Jonah was rescued from death and brought back to life.

Conclusion

Jonah 2 is so much more than just a story about a miraculous whale.

Is a tale of God's unexpected mercy.

The God of the Bible – Jonah’s God – our God – is the God who shows his mercy to the needy and undeserving when they call out to him.

He’s the God who brings people back from the brink and gives them life.

What an amazing God to serve!

¹ Job 9:6, Psalm 75:3

² Daniel 6:10.

³ Other examples include Genesis 22:4 and Exodus 15:22

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Big Question: What was God doing by sending the fish to swallow Jonah?

Big Idea: God's unexpected mercy rescues us from death and gives us life.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you respond to a friend who asks how you could possibly believe the events in this book happened?
2. What was God doing by sending the fish?
3. Why is it unexpected that Jonah would praise God from inside the fish?
4. How would you summarise Jonah's experience in the water?
5. How can Jonah's experience encourage us when times are tough for us?
6. Do you think Jonah's prayer demonstrates repentance?
7. What's the significance of Jonah being in the fish for three days?
8. What are the similarities between Jonah's experience and Jesus'?