

“In Rehab with the God of Grace”

Jonah 1:17 - 2:10

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 15, 2017

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bibles to Jonah 1.
- Six feet under. That is where Mike Simon said he'd be without the Youth Challenge Rehab Center in Virginia Beach California. Simon, a fifty-year old recovering heroin addict, marvels at the fact he's lived to see this or any day. Although rehab was overwhelming it literally saved his life.¹
 - Sadly, that was not the case for Amy Winehouse, the 5-time Grammy winning jazz singer. When her substance abuse got out of control her family tried to intervene. Her response has been immortalized in her song entitled *Rehab*. She defiantly sings, ***“They tried to make me go to rehab but I said, ‘no, no, no.’/I ain’t got the time and if my daddy thinks I’m fine/He’s tried to make me go to rehab but I won’t go go go.”***
 - On July 23, 2011 she was found dead in her home – the result of accidental alcohol poisoning. She was 27.
- Rehab can be an overwhelming and difficult experience. It's not easy to face up to your failings or to come off a drug like heroine. As overwhelming as it can be, the goal of rehab is freedom and wholeness. In Jonah chapter 1 we saw God stage an intervention in Jonah's life. Out of love, God sent a storm to wake Jonah up to his self-destructive ways.
 - But the goal of an intervention is not simply to wake the addict up to their destructive habits. It is to wake them up in order that they might enter a rehab program where they can get the help they need to change. If chapter 1 is God's intervention then chapter 2 is Jonah in God's rehab program.
 - But this is no beachfront rehab centre where Hollywood stars sit around doing yoga while Michael Bolton plays in the background. This is hardcore rehab. Jonah's rehab involves a near death experience in almost drowning and then spending 3 days confined to the belly of a great fish.
- Out of deep love for us God will not let us destroy our lives with sin. He will stage interventions. He will check us in to rehab. We have been careful to say that not all suffering is the result of sin. But Jonah's story clearly teaches that when we live in blatant disobedience, God, out of love, will bring storms into our life to wake us up to our self-destructive ways. Like all children we do not enjoy our Father's discipline. In fact, we can feel overwhelmed by God's discipline.
 - So here is the question: what should you do when God's discipline seems to overwhelm you? From Jonah chapter 2 we receive this comforting message: *Take hope when God's rehabilitation of your sin overwhelms you because he is lovingly working for your good.*
 - Isn't that what we see in Jonah? This chapter is Jonah at the end of his rehab. He is looking back on what God has done. And he is

¹ http://articles.dailypress.com/2001-08-14/news/0108140029_1_study-hall-bible-prayer

celebrating how God has brought him through his painful rehab. How can we find hope like Jonah? I see three things here.

THE ISSUE OF THE FISH

- Before we do that I want to take a pretty big rabbit trail to deal with an issue that so far we have not dealt with in this series. It is an issue that may have been nagging at you the entire time. It is the issue of this fish.
 - When modern people come to a story like this they say, *“It’s stories like this that make me unable to believe the Bible or be a Christian. Was Jonah really swallowed by a fish? Is such a thing even possible? It sounds quite literally like a big fish story. So why even read the Bible?”*
 - So even though this will take us right off our main point I think it is important that we take some time on it in order to strengthen your trust in the Bible. So hold the introduction in your mind and let’s take about eight minutes to deal with this.
 - I want to help you to see that it is intellectually credible to believe that this whole book and the fish are actual historical events. I’ll give you four reasons for this, starting with the weakest and moving to the strongest.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, you can believe this literally happened because it is possible for a “great fish” to swallow a man. This word “fish” simply refers to an aquatic beast. It could be a sperm whale, which can swallow something as large as a horse. But what most people have problems with is not that a fish could swallow Jonah but that he could survive for three days.
 - It is important to understand that by Jewish reckoning this does not have to mean 72 full hours. It means that at least a part of three separate days passed. So for instance Jesus is said to have been buried for 3 days from Friday to Sunday but it was literally only from late afternoon on Friday to early Sunday morning, which is around 36 hours.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second you can believe that this literally happened because bizarre events like this occasionally happen. Was it a miracle that Jonah survived or could it simply be one of those bizarre stories?
 - In August 2000 press around the world ran an astounding story about a man from French Polynesia who hid in the landing gear of a Boeing 747 airliner that was flying to Los Angeles. Astoundingly he survived the 7.5 hour flight. He survived being at 38,000 feet where the temperature is 50 below zero not counting the wind factor. He endured very little oxygen. UCLA medical officials said he had a core body temperature of 79 degrees. Experts say that dropping below 85 degrees is usually fatal. In every other case of stowaways going overseas the body drops out at the end of the flight.²
 - Additionally, David Langness, a hospital spokesman at UCLA said, *“We don’t know of any other person whose body*

² <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/aug/05/local/me-65084>

*temperature dropped this low who has survived.*³ With these kinds of stories why is it so hard to believe that one man may have survived in a fish? This may not even be a miracle. It may just be a crazy event. But let's say it is a miracle. People say, "This could not have happened because we know that miracles don't happen."

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Third, you can believe that this literally happened because such a thing would be very simple for God to do.
 - The debate about miracles is actually the debate about the existence of God. If God exists then it is really no big deal for him to sustain Jonah in a fish. But if you say this could never happen you must realize that you are actually making the dogmatic claim that God does not exist or else cannot intervene in this world. If you want to deny the existence of miracles then you must have an airtight case against the existence of God. For if God does exist then miracles are perfectly possible and plausible.
 - I would also add that this is arguably the easiest of all the Bible's miracles to believe in. Compare this to other miracles we believe in. Christians claim that God created the entire universe out of nothing. We believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he multiplied bread and fish, healed bodies, turned water into wine, and raised himself from the dead. Surviving a fish is comparatively simple miracle.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Finally, you can believe that this literally happened because Jesus believed it did.
 - Jesus believed that Jonah and the Ninevites were historical figures and that this story actually took place. For he said in Luke 11:32, "***The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.***"
 - Jesus also believe that Jonah literally spent 3 days in the belly of the fish for he made a one to one comparison between his death and Jonah's time in the fish. In Matthew 12:40 Jesus said, "***For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.***" Jesus was not speaking of his death in a metaphorical sense. He was saying that as Jonah literally spend 3 days in the belly of the fish so he will literally spend 3 days buried in the earth.
 - If Jesus, who is God in human flesh, believed it happened then I would submit that we should too.
- Alright, hopefully that answers some questions. But in order to transition back to the message I want you to see that the point of this story is not how to survive three days in the belly of a fish. The point is not about *physical survival* but *spiritual revival*.
 - The real miracle here is not what God did in the fish but what God did in Jonah's heart. As Thomas Carlisle wrote, "***I was so obsessed with what***

³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/867628.stm>

was going on inside the whale that I missed seeing the drama inside of Jonah.”

- So that brings us back to our theme today. Once again, we are trying to discover how Jonah found hope when God’s discipline overwhelmed him. Let’s look at the three things now.

GOD WILL ANSWER YOUR CRIES OF DISTRESS

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, take hope when God’s rehabilitation of your sin overwhelms you because He will answer your cries of distress.
 - Although Jonah was a leader of God’s people he did not yet understand grace. He was extremely self-righteous and a racist. He wanted grace for himself and Israel but not for the wicked Ninevites. When Jonah ran from God it revealed his self-righteous heart. But God loves Jonah.
 - He puts him into a rehab program where God saves him from drowning. Jonah is then given his own personal room inside the fish to think about how gracious God has been to him.
- This is a grace teaching boot camp. Look at the language in verse 1 and 2.
READ 1a, 2a - I called out to the LORD, out of my distress . . . out of the belly of Sheol I cried. To use an English idiom Jonah is saying, *“When I had one foot in the grave, when the jaws of death were open for me, I called for help.”*
 - But what his prayer tells us most emphatically is that God hears our prayers! Five times here Jonah describes his anguish and five times he comes back to the fact that God has heard him and is rescuing him. The rhythm of his prayer moves from his agony to God’s response, from his agony to God’s response. You can see it in the first three lines. ***“I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.*** Or look at verse 4. ***Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’***
 - God answers the cries of his people.
- Last week I showed you that Jonah 2 is a psalm – it is a medley of allusions to many psalms. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann breaks down the psalms into three categories.
 - First there are Psalms of orientation for when life is right.
 - Second, there are psalms of disorientation for when life falls apart.
 - But finally there are psalms of new orientation. These psalms recount how God comes in surprising ways to lift us out of the pit.
 - Jonah 2 is a psalm and it is a psalm of new orientation. Jonah has been rescued by the fish and as he looks back on his near death experience and his scream for help he sees that the God of grace has rescued him.
- Verse 6 says it best. ***READ 6 - I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.***
 - That little word “yet” is the heart of the Bible’s message. This is the story of history. As a race we were drowning in our sin. We were all but gone and forsaken from God forever. YET the God of all grace brought our life

up from the pit. He sent Jesus Christ to rescue us. That is why we shout with Jonah in verse 9, ***“Salvation belongs to the LORD!”***

- In this overwhelming experience of rehab Jonah has come to understand God’s grace for himself. He sees that he does not deserve anything but that God has been gracious to him.
- Are you in distress today? Call out in your distress. And know this: The God of grace hears you and that in his good time he will rescue you from the pit you are presently in.

GOD’S SOVEREIGN HAND HAS BROUGHT YOU TO THIS PLACE

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, take hope when God’s rehabilitation of your sin overwhelms you because His sovereign hand has brought you to this place.
 - To show you this point let me ask you a question: who threw Jonah into the raging sea? Right. It was the sailors. Look back at 1:15. **READ 15** – ***“So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.*** But that is not what Jonah says in his prayer.
 - Look carefully at verse 3. **READ 3** – ***For you cast me into the deep.*** So Jonah says that although the sailors threw him in, it is ultimately God who was behind their actions.
- Everywhere the Bible teaches this. On the one hand God ordains whatsoever comes to pass. Nothing comes to pass outside his will. And yet on the other hand God ordains whatever comes to pass in a way that does not make us into robots, that does not make him the author of evil, and that leave us morally responsible.
 - The Bible is filled with examples of this. Who threw Joseph in the pit and sold him to the Egyptian slave traders? His brothers. And yet Psalm 105 says, ***“[God] sent a man before them— Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass.”***
 - Who put Jesus on the cross? Acts 4 says, ***“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.”*** So these people acted freely and are morally responsible. And yet the very next verse says, ***“They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”***
 - So even though we cannot explain it, we must say that God ordains whatever comes to pass in your life. Yet he is not the author of evil, you are not a robot, and people are morally responsible.
- Now this has huge implications for finding hope when God’s rehab overwhelms you. Romans 8:28 says it best:
 - ***“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*** So many people stop reading here. And then they say, ***“How is my pain good? This is not good.”*** But the next verse defines what “good” is. ***“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.”***

comfort, pleasure, or fun, you'll worship money or prestige as gods who hold the power to bless or curse you.⁵

- But none of these things can satisfy our souls. But there is one thing that can keep us going. It is the one thing that Jonah is now turning back to. God's steadfast love.
- These words "steadfast love" are the Hebrew word "hesed." There is no one English word that fully conveys the idea of hesed. It contains at least three ideas.
 - First it contains the idea of relationship, especially a covenantal relationship. When two parties make a covenant they are bound to each other by that commitment. So hesed is a relational term that speaks of deep and abiding loyalty.
 - Second hesed is an action that seeks to relieve need. It is not just feelings for the other. It is a loving act performed for the benefit of a person who is in real and desperate need.
 - Third, it is a voluntary act of extraordinary generosity. It goes beyond the call of duty. It goes beyond what the law requires. Therefore, you can never command hesed.
 - So what is hesed? Within a covenant relationship it is a situationally stronger person relieving the situationally weaker person not because the law requires it but as an act of grace.
- Is this not what God did for Jonah? In rescuing Jonah God has shown His unfailing love and kindness. Jonah gets it. That is why he says he gives thanks and then when he gets back on dry land he will offer sacrifice and keep the vows he has made to the Lord.
 - Friends, it is the hesed of God that will keep you going when you feel overwhelmed by his rehabilitation of your soul from the idols you serve. And we know God's hesed in a far greater way than Jonah. For Jesus said at the last Supper, ***"this cup is the new covenant in my blood."*** Jesus spilled his blood that you and I might be part of the new covenant people of God, that God might never stop showing his hesed to us. Jesus, the stronger one, sought us out and in an act of extreme generosity gave himself for our sins. He was not bound to it but did it as an act of sheer grace.
 - Take hope when God's rehabilitation of your sin overwhelms you because His love is worth more than anything sin has to offer.

CONCLUSION

- Was Jonah changed by his time in God's rehab? Yes and no. Yes he was changed in that he now understood God's grace in his own life. But like us he has much more to learn about grace. While he understands his need for God's grace, he has not yet fully grasped how God's grace should change the way he relates to others. But God is patient and that is enough for now. Jonah has completed his time in God's rehab clinic.

⁵ Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart*, 138.

- And so we read that Jonah is quite literally thrown out from his room in rehab - the fish vomits him up onto dry land.
 - Take hope when God's rehabilitation of your sin overwhelms you because he is lovingly working for your good.