

## The Miraculous Mercy of God

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In this chapter we have an account of Jonah praying *while in the belly of a big fish*. Verse 17 says God appointed a big fish to swallow Jonah, and that he somehow survived in its *belly* for three days and three nights. This sounds utterly implausible to modern ears, which has led some to suggest this miraculous element is invented for rhetorical effect, to heighten our attention to the moral lesson of the story. Let's consider that. If this is a tall tale told for effect, the author uses it very poorly. We would expect him to embellish. Tell us what it was like getting past the jaws, sliding down the mouth. Perhaps a few details on what it was like in the belly, the stench, the darkness, how he stayed alive. But we have none of that. Instead, the event is simply stated. Most of the chapter is about drowning, and the *fish* is barely mentioned. In fact, the author *plays the whole thing down!* It's not sensational; it just is, which makes the story more plausible. Why risk discrediting yourself if you're not going to use the miraculous? He actually does, but with another, more subtle miracle. The rest of the chapter tells us how Jonah copes in his watery trial. What gets you through trials? How do you cope? As Jonah relies on 3 things: 1) having the right thoughts about God, *theology* 2) saying the right words to God, *prayer* 3) having the right experience of God, the miracle.

### Right Thoughts about God

With waves crashing over him, gasping for air, Jonah begins to drown sinking into the heart of the sea. If you've ever been caught in waves for any amount of time, you now know how terrifying this can be. Jonah plummets down past the waves, the waters closing in over him, until his head is wrapped in seaweed, his body encased by the watery bars of the deep. He calls Sheol, the realm of the dead. In the ancient mind, the earth was surrounded by cosmic seas, encased in a dome. The waters below separated them from the realm of the dead, so to enter them was to cross into death. How does he respond? He cries out *to God*. This is instructive. So often when we get bad news, we cry out to other things (friends, online, or cry out inside). But we need to *include* God in our sorrow. Tell him how you feel. This is one of my first bits of counsel to sufferers. Are you including God in your suffering? What does Jonah say? He says, *You cast me into the deep. You appointed the fish. Your waves and billows passed over me*. Is he blaming God? If that were true we would expect some anger. Instead, he's recognizing something about God. That God is in charge of his trial, *sovereign*. Facing death, Jonah doesn't have a problem affirming the sovereignty of God over the events of his life. *Jonah has right thoughts about God, a right view of his sovereignty*. But modern individuals don't affirm the sovereignty of God; we chaff at it. If God is all-powerful, then why doesn't he do something about my suffering? It is a valid question, but have you ever thought about how self-focused it is? Given the disparity between me and God, shouldn't there be a little more reverence, even deference to the idea that God might be accomplishing something greater than I can appreciate? What about what *God* wants in your trial? Keeping him at arms length, outside your pain, doesn't allow him in to work through it. Include God in your sorrow. Does God really owe each 7.2 billion of us a finely tuned answer to our sorrow? Could it be that what seems evil to us now, is part of some greater good we cannot yet imagine? To reject the sovereignty of God is to reject the possibility of greater good altogether. It's a stroke of arrogance to enthrone *our* perspective. Jonah demands no answers. Maybe you say, Jonah deserved it. Don't we? Haven't we all fled

the face of God? Bill Stuntz one of the most famous criminal law scholars to date discovered he had colon cancer, when he was already dealing with chronic pain from a spinal injury. When asked whether or not he *deserved* the cancer he said, “**Though I deserve every bad thing that happened to me, those things didn’t happen because I deserved them.**” Did Jonah deserve it, yes. Do we, yes. *But not every pain is a penalty.* Some pains serve a purpose of evoking more awe over the Sacred (Job), to bend the knee of blame-shifting individuals *before a sovereign God.* But are right thoughts, belief in a sovereign God, enough to get us through trial? *Mourning a miscarriage, I’ve heard Christians say, “Don’t worry God is sovereign.” Is it true? Yes. It is wise, probably not.* Right thoughts about God *are not enough to get us through.*

### Right Prayers to God

How else does Jonah try to cope? Prayer. Did you notice how eloquent his prayer is *in belly of the whale!* Did he really pray like this? As a prophet of God, he would have been immersed in the Scriptures, able to recite it in an oral culture. So its no surprise his prayers are laced with Israel’s prayer book, the Psalms (3, 31, 88, 120). *He tries to pray the right things.* He prays Scripture, this too is instructive. God answers the promises he’s already given. *1 Cor 1 God of comfort and Father of all mercies. Walk by faith not by sight.* There’s a helpful Latin phrase, *lex credendi, lex orandi*, which means the law of belief is the law of prayer. What does it mean? It means your real, hidden beliefs come out in your prayers. Praying in a group you may pray to impress rather than simply tell God whats on your heart. Your belief in being spiritually approved of is greater than your belief in the sufficiency of God OR you may not pray much or at all; your belief in yourself, your own sufficiency is greater than belief in God’s. And while Jonah was giving lip service to God’s sovereignty, it turns out his prayers reveal a deeper belief. It starts in verse 7, “**When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord.**” Really, when you’re drowning to death you’re going to say, *I remembered the Lord?* In another watery trial, we’re told *the Lord* remembered Noah. God, not Noah, is the hero of that story, but Jonah wants to paint himself into the center. In fact, he doesn’t confess a single sin. That’s a dangerous sign in a person. No confession, no repentance. It continues...mocking the vows and sacrifice made by the sailors, he says, “**But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay**” (9). And we know he’s talking about the sailors because he pronounces, “**Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love**” (8). This is what religion does in us, *compares*. Instead of confessing our own sin to God and asking him for forgiveness; we confess others’ sins. It gets the blame off us and onto others. So we can be the hero, stand on the moral high ground. This is tempting when you’re discussing your own failures with someone else. I’ve seen it in my own heart, the temptation to universalize. You’re talking about *impatience*, and instead of drilling down to confess my specific sins, I want to pull up, Yeah, a lot of parents struggle with impatience. It’s a stage of life thing. There’s a lot of our plate. Before you know it you’ve moved away from God and put yourself in the center. I’m not that bad. I keep my vows. This can intensify in *suffering*. Comparing yourself to others, those people who have no idea what I’m going through; they can’t relate, and there you go comparing, moving to the center like Jonah. But comparison suffering never got anyone through the dark night of the soul. We have to take our eyes off of others, off of our dire circumstances, and look up because salvation belongs to the Lord, not to those who suffer more, or sin less. But isn’t Jonah quoting Scripture in

his prayer, saying the right things? He is, *selectively!* Psalm 31:7, “*I despise those who adhere to useless idols, but as for me I will trust in YHWH; I will rejoice ecstatically over your mercy because you noticed my affliction.*” (Psalm 31:6–7, NKJ) . He leaves out “trust” because in order to trust God, he has to take trust out of his own spiritual façade, his reputation, and admit he’s sinned against the Lord. That is very hard for a self-righteous person to do because they’ve built an identity on having the right thoughts, and saying the right things. He avoids being wrong. The law of belief is the law of prayer. His belief in proving himself right is so strong it comes out in Scripture-distorting prayer. On the surface, he’s praying the right things, but inside he’s rife with pride, inoculated to the mercy of God. He is unable to enjoy mercy because he is unwilling to acknowledge his need for mercy. Will you acknowledge your need?

### Right Character of God

Having the right theology, saying the right prayers are not enough; we need the *right Savior* to get through. There is only one person who has *the* right view of God (no flaws in his theology), always says the right things about God (prays with perfect integrity), always means it. This kind of person should not have to suffer, but rather stand as a shining example of how to endure...but Jesus dives deep, deeper than Jonah, into our hypocrisy and cynicism, our sinful self-reliance and blame-shifting, gets all our sin put on him and becomes what Jonah should have been; what we should be. He becomes dead, the sign of Jonah. Forget three days and nights in a fish; Jesus spends his in stone-cold tomb, encased in death. Why? **To show us the mercy of God.** To give us the one thing Jonah misses entirely. The heart of God, slow to anger, full of mercy, abounding in lovingkindness.

- You see, God shows Jonah mercy even when he knows Jonah’s not praying the right things, when he’s got a prove yourself attitude, God still rescues him.
- God shows *us* mercy, even when we refuse to confess, when we have mixed motives. He’ll let us out of the ordeal.
- Even when we have the wrong view of him, judging him for being the Judge, God shows us mercy.
- God shows us mercy when, like Jonah, he knows we will go and repeat the same sins even after we’re spit out of the trial.

God shows Jonah mercy, but this is the thing he misses most. He receives mercy but fails to enjoy mercy, to come face God with a contrite heart and say I need You. Jonah receives mercy, but he flunks the test. Why? He refuses to enjoy mercy, to say I need you. Don’t flunk your test. Don’t waste your trials. Include God in your sorrow, and look for his mercies; they are new every morning. You see, the story of Jonah is not a miraculous tale of survival, but a tale about the miraculous mercy of God.