

## The One That Almost Got Away

### Part 2 – Sentence or Salvation

#### Intro

We all have those stories of the *one that got away* – whether it was a fish, a deer, or a relationship. And then there are those moments where a person, an opportunity, or game *almost* got away – but somehow, we held on, stepped, did the right thing, or make the correct decision, and it didn't. We held on just barely with the tips of our fingertips.

During our opening weekend I mentioned that my moments of *the big fish* had nothing to do with fishing, hunting, or sport. Mine centered around relationships.

#### Jonah's Story

The telling of Jonah's story [likely from his own recounting] shows a similar moment in his life. One that he almost let slip away, but one in which God would not let him go so easily.

God specifically and uniquely called on Jonah to travel to the city of Nineveh and share the truth of God with the people there. Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. She was the shining example of human endeavor. However, for all of her structural beauty and thriving commerce, the people of Nineveh were equally as wicked.

Instead of following God's call in his life, Jonah ran [literally] the opposite direction. He wanted no part in taking the love of God to such a dreadful group of people. He boarded a ship and attempted to sail as far from Nineveh and God as possible.

Not long after setting sail, a great wind arose upon the sea and attempted to tear the boat in half. After discovering that the chaotic storm was the fault of Jonah's disobedience, the sailors ask him what they should do to cause the storm to stop.

#### Jonah 1:12

**Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.**

Jonah's response [to toss him into the sea] was a recognition of his defiance toward God.

#### 1:13

**Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.**

And isn't this what we do when we find ourselves in a difficult situation or position, that we likely put ourselves in – *oh, I'll just try harder and I'll get myself out of this mess...let me just change this, fix that, and make it all better.*

But the problem wasn't with the rage of the storm. The problem was with the heart of Jonah. God could have stopped the storm anytime He wished. Instead, He desired for Jonah's heart to change.

**God will do, and use, whatever it takes to align our hearts with His.**

### 1:14-16

The sailors began to pray and plead with God – begging Him to stop the storm. But since Jonah had given God and the sailors no other choice, the men finally gave way to Jonah’s request and tossed him overboard. Immediately the winds and the waves ceased.

At that point we would expect Jonah to be rescued from waters and everything put back in its rightful place. Unfortunately, Jonah’s request to be thrown in the sea was not a change of heart. It was just an explanation of the facts.

### Head vs Heart

Jonah knew [with his head] what was taking place and how it could be fixed. But Jonah didn’t change [in his heart], nor desire to be obedient to God or go to the people of Nineveh. He knew, but he didn’t care.

Haven’t we all been in that place at one time or another?!? We knew the right thing to do. We could explain and dissect the choices available. What made one right and caused the other to be wrong. Intellectually, we got it. We just didn’t care. We still wanted to do what we wanted to do.

And sometimes that’s most dangerous place to be. We think we’ve got it all right, and we feel justified about that feeling, but don’t want to admit to ourselves that we have it all wrong.

Getting Jonah out of the boat was about rescuing the sailors. What happens next is about rescuing Jonah.

### 1:17

**And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.**

Over the course of Jonah’s story, the word *appoint* will be used 4 different times – to reveal God’s sovereignty [supreme control] over all of creation. It is not just used about God, but was also affirmed by Jonah himself. Back in vs 9 Jonah confirmed his belief that God was in command of all the sea and the land.

So, God, *appoints* [sends, brings, plans] for this fish swallow Jonah into his belly, where Jonah would spend the next 3 days of his life – what must have felt like an eternity.

### Similar Experiences

You have similar experiences. Some storm came up in your life – seemingly out of nowhere. Everywhere you turned, it felt as though you were being pelted with winds and waves, bills and pressures, disappointments and loss.

For most of us, our natural response is: *Why me?!? What have you done to me, God?*

Sometimes these typhoons come into our lives because [like Jonah] we are running in direct opposition to what God desires from and for our lives. Other times, however, we feel betrayed by them. In our minds, we’ve done nothing to warrant such violent turbulence and upheaval in our lives. We begin to question.

## **2:1**

**Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish.**

*Then Jonah prayed* – possibly the 3 greatest words in all of Jonah’s story. Notice that this is the very first time Jonah has had honest conversation with God, the first time he has acknowledged and submitted to the Lord in this situation.

How many of us question God’s goodness, or His control of the sea and the land, but have never stopped to pray and ask Him about His desire or plan for our lives? Instead, just heading off in our own direction – fully expecting Him to *get on board* with whatever we desire or dream up for ourselves.

God finally has Jonah’s full attention.

## **2:2-6a**

**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. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.**

Jonah sees his life pass before his eyes. This is the end for him. The water is literally closing in on him. There is no way out. While the sailors physically tossed Jonah overboard, he has come to acknowledge that it is God who actually *cast him into the sea*. There was no question about it. God was controlling, and causing, this circumstance in Jonah’s life.

Maybe you’ve found yourself in that place. When you realized it wasn’t the boss, wasn’t the illness, and it wasn’t another person that caused this storm in our life. God allowed, and possibly even planned for, it to overtake you.

## **Feels Like a Sentence [Punishment]**

And in that moment, it feels like a sentence – as if you are receiving specific punishment from God, in direct response to your disobedience.

## **Crohn’s**

I have shared with many of you my history with a terrible disease called Crohn’s. I was hit with it in the months leading up to our wedding. There were days I couldn’t eat, days I couldn’t sit up, and days I couldn’t stay out of the hospital. Some days were fine, others [like a storm coming on the sea out of nowhere] were the worst you could imagine. Several days of our honeymoon were spent with me wrapped in a ball in pain in the hotel room. For nearly a year, we would struggle with the day-to-day battle of – what felt like – punishment and pain.

I felt was though I was being sentenced by God for a crime I had committed. Like Jonah, I could feel the water closing in over my head, not knowing if I would ever recover. I had an anchor attached to my body, with no rescue in sight.

### *Anxiety*

Nearly 20 years later, I was faced with another illness. Only this time it wasn't mine. It was worse. One of my kids, who has struggled with anxiety [specifically separation anxiety] all of their life was rocked to the core by fear in the Fall of this past year. Our kiddo became severely anxious – specifically of being separated from one of us. This little one would NOT go anywhere without us. Fear overcome this child at every turn. Going to school became such an issue that we were at our wits end. We had no clue what to do.

We tried everything conceivable. Finally, I took a day and just stayed in the classroom. That day became another day, which became another, which turned into a week, a month, and finally a semester+. For the past 6 months, 3 days a week, I went to school [literally] with my child. We joked about me being the hall monitor, classroom dad, and even giving me a mail slot, office, and put on the payroll. Over time, I got a chair to sit in out in the hallway. The chair turned into a table. And the hall, eventually, became my office.

Fortunately, we have an amazing staff and team of people [here] who helped work around my schedule. Thankfully, I was able to work from a laptop and cell phone to get all of my work accomplished – while attending elementary school at the same time.

It was one of the hardest seasons of our lives. I was upset, discouraged, hurt and humiliated. Selfishly, I didn't want to be the dad that everyone smiled at and wondered *why is he here all the time?* I didn't want to become the father that other parents questioned, or the guy the other people pitied.

The situation was unrelenting at times. We were drowning. The cold, darkness of the ocean floor was tangible and present. We were sinking fast, with no life preserver nearby.

### *Tempted to Give Up*

When you and I find ourselves in those dreadful places, every stroke toward land seems to push us further into the abyss. At some point, we are tempted to give up and say it's not worth it. *Surely God doesn't care.*

But what if instead of those moments and seasons being punishment, they were something surprisingly different? Our prayer through these seasons is typically that God would rescue us *from* our situation. But what if God was actually rescuing us *by* our situation?

### **2:6b-9**

**Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!**

At some point in this terrible, stinky, awful situation [belly of a fish] Jonah realized that God wasn't trying to punish him, but that God was actually trying to rescue him. Jonah's prayer wasn't that God would save him *from* the fish but was a prayer of thankfulness that God had chosen to rescue [save/sanctify] Jonah *by* the fish.

### **Means of Salvation [Rescue]**

What if, instead of questioning God's goodness and desire to punish us, you saw your situation as a way for Him to grow, change, and shape your direction and more fully capture your heart?

**Your circumstance might not be a sentence of punishment as much as it is a means of salvation.**

God might not be punishing you as much as He might be trying to rescue you.

## **2:10**

**And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.**

Jonah finally understood God's design in using the fish to rescue him from himself.

As I look back over the past 20 years of my life, I can clearly see how God used Crohn's disease to save me from myself. I realized that I am not in control of my life. I cannot do anything to save myself. Only He can. And He will do whatever it takes to lovingly remind me that He is Sovereign in all things. And this is not His sentencing or punishment on my life. It is the means through which He has provided rescue, salvation, and sanctification in my life. I did not need rescuing *from* Crohn's as much as I needed to be changed *by* it.

He has been, and is doing the same, in and through my little one who struggles in ways that I cannot imagine. But yet again, God is using this current storm to shape and change me, to remind me Who is in complete control. And it has caused me to pray [like Jonah] like never before.

### *Your Storm*

So what if your storm isn't God's sentence on your life? What if it is simply His means of rescue?!?