

2. Jonah - Learning the Hard Way: How the Lord deals with His Runaways

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[0 : 00] Well, perhaps you'd turn with me again to Jonah, page 774. I imagine there may be one or two of you who have witnessed a burial at sea.

I never have myself, but I've read accounts of them. I think I may have seen them on films. A burial, in the ordinary way, on the land is a very moving experience, but I can only imagine that at sea it would produce an even greater sense of awe and solemnity, especially that moment when the coffin is finally lowered over the side of the ship and then sinks down beneath the waves with a great sense of finality.

A human life is ended. From one point of view, to quote Hamlet's last words, the rest is silent. Now, Jonah was buried at sea.

The difference is that he was buried alive. He says to the sailors here in chapter 1, verse 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. And in due course, a little bit later, they do indeed pick Jonah up and hurl him into the sea.

[1 : 25] And the sea becomes calm. And Jonah sinks down below the surface. As far as the sailors are concerned, although they have in some very important way met the Lord, as far as they're concerned, that's the end of Jonah.

They have conducted a funeral at sea. Down Jonah goes to Davy Jones' locker to become food for the crabs and dogfish of the Mediterranean sea floor.

Now, the question I want to look at this evening is this question. Why did God put Jonah through this experience, this severe experience?

Why did Jonah, by God's decision, have to spend three days and three nights in the belly of a great sea monster and then be brought up again onto the seashore?

If the Lord was wanting to teach Jonah an important lesson, couldn't he have done it a bit more gently? Weren't there other methods that he might have used?

[2 : 29] I mean, for example, Jonah, he was fleeing from the Lord, wasn't he? Down to the port of Joppa to find a ship to go onto. And as he got onto the quayside there, the Lord might have sent another prophet to tap him on the shoulder and say, Brother Jonah, I've got a very important message for you from the Lord.

And that is, forget this idea of fleeing. You turn straight round and go back to Nineveh and do your preaching there. And Jonah might have responded by saying, Of course, of course, of course. Silly me. What a sinful man I am.

I've been so wrong to flee the Lord's commission. Yes, I'll do just as you say, my brother. I'll go straight back to Nineveh. Now, that would have been a gentler way of dealing with Jonah, wouldn't it?

It would have had the same effect without putting Jonah through this unbelievably horrifying experience. But the fact is that the Lord did decide to deal with Jonah like this.

It was no accident, as the text makes clear. Look at chapter 1, verse 17. This great fish didn't just happen along. It wasn't like one of those poor whales that we sometimes hear of swimming up the Firth of Forth or the Firth of Clyde and having to be rescued by the RSPCA.

[3 : 42] It wasn't that kind of thing at all. This great sea creature, as verse 17 puts it, was appointed by the Lord to swallow up Jonah. And then three days later, if you look to chapter 2, verse 10, it was again the Lord who spoke to the fish and the fish brought Jonah up at the Lord's command.

So it was the Lord, his express will and purpose that lay behind this whole procedure. So my question is, why did the Lord do it like this?

I think for two main reasons. The first is something we'll look at next week, but I'll just mention it tonight. And that is that the Lord wanted to teach us something about Jesus' experience.

Jonah's ordeal was really a kind of death and resurrection. And the Lord was not only concerned to redirect Jonah back to Nineveh. If that had been his only concern, yes, he might well have done it in a rather kinder and gentler fashion.

Well, gentler. But the Lord was using Jonah's death and resurrection experience to teach us something about Jesus' death and resurrection experience. Because Jesus says in Matthew chapter 12, verse 40, for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

[5 : 06] So there is something about the experience of Jesus that is reflected in Jonah and vice versa. But we'll look at that next time. Now the second reason, this is what I want us to look at tonight, the second reason is that Jonah's death and resurrection experience teaches believers something fundamentally important about what it means to be a believer, to be a Christian.

And that's what I want us to look at tonight. Jonah is not only a forerunner of Jesus, his experience doesn't only anticipate the experience of the Lord Jesus, he also shows us the pattern of how the Lord deals with every man and every woman.

So let's try and trace this through in three stages. First, Jonah is man on the run, but the Lord stops him in his tracks.

Now at the beginning of the story, Jonah is a believer, a believer of sorts. Well, he's recognized in Israel as a prophet. He's described as Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-Hepai, in 2 Kings chapter 14 verse 25.

But when the Lord speaks to him here in the book of Jonah, chapter 1 verse 2, and commissions him to go and preach to the horrible people in the terrible city of Nineveh, in the gruesome land of Assyria, he reacts so violently against the Lord's will for his life that he becomes in effect just like an unbeliever.

[6 : 36] He says no to God. That's what unbelievers do, isn't it? The Lord says, do this thing, and Jonah says, I will not do this thing. But more than that, he doesn't just say no.

He runs away from the Lord. He doesn't just sit stubbornly at home, carrying on with rearing his family, paying his taxes, earning his bread and so on. He flees, as verse 3 tells us, to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

Now I said last week that Tarshish may well have been the land of Spain, which would have felt like the back of beyond to somebody living in Israel. It was the other end of the Mediterranean Ocean. But the word Tarshish can also mean nowhere.

And it may be in that sense that the word is used here, that Jonah, in running from the Lord, is running to nowhere. Now that makes sense, doesn't it?

If you're running from the Lord, you're going nowhere fast. You're heading for no place. You're heading almost for non-existence. And in Jonah's case, his headlong flight to nowhere, away from the presence of the Lord, ended him up in the sea and in a storm at sea.

[7 : 52] And in Hebrew thought, in Old Testament thought, although the sea was created by God, the sea always also represented chaos and destruction, the forces of darkness. That's why the book of Revelation tells us that in the new creation, there will be no more sea, no more forces of chaos in the presence of God.

But the one who runs away from God ends up in Tarshish, nowhere, and at the mercy of the forces of destruction. Now I want you just to picture in your mind's eye the moment when Jonah has just left the hands of the sailors who are chucking him overboard.

Have you got him in your mind's eye there? He's just been, he's still on his way up, but you know he's on his way down in just a moment. Snap him, so to speak, with your mental camera. Have you got the shot there of him?

There is Jonah. In mid-air, the angry tempest is raging above him and the awful waters of the sea are below him. And there he is, just about to fall.

He is utterly powerless. He's at the mercy of the forces of destruction, so it seems. So that is man running away from God. He is going nowhere.

[9 : 06] In fact, he is falling into the jaws of destruction. Back in Genesis chapter 3, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's commandment, they too did their level best to avoid God.

They ran away, didn't they? They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the cool of the day in the Garden of Eden. And far from rushing towards him in the joy of friendship and saying, Our Father, how lovely to see you, they hid amongst the trees of the garden.

And the Lord called out to this man, this man whom he loved, this man whom he'd created in his own image. He said, Where are you? That's the heartbreaking question, isn't it?

Where are you? But this is what people do. This is our nature. There is something in us that wants to run from God. About a hundred years or so in England, there was a poet called Francis Thompson.

And Francis Thompson wrote a poem, a well-known poem called The Hound of Heaven. And he pictures the Lord as being like a hound who is in pursuit of him. And he's describing the experience here of running away from the Lord.

[10:15] And he writes these lines. I fled him down the nights and down the days. I fled him down the arches of the years. I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind.

And in the midst of tears, I hid from him. Isn't that the experience of every man and every woman? It's certainly the experience of all of us before we come to Christ.

And Jonah's example shows that it can also happen to somebody who is already known as a believer, known as a man of God. And this little Old Testament book of Jonah shows us how the Lord will deal with a person who is heading for Tarshish at high speed.

So the Lord stops Jonah in his tracks. He is not content to allow this man to run away from him. Jonah belongs to him.

And he has work for Jonah to do in the future. He is not going to let Jonah run away from his presence for long. Now Jonah, of course, had other ideas, didn't he?

[11:23] I've looked on my Bible map and discovered it's 50 or 60 miles from Gath Heffer, Jonah's home, to Joppa. That would have taken him at least two or three days under travel conditions of that time.

So when Jonah finally reached the docks at Joppa and arranged his passage with the ship's captain, he paid his fare, got his ticket, he perhaps thought at that moment, I've done it.

I've escaped. I'm free now from this unbearable, horrible commission to go and preach to Nineveh. In fact, I'm leaving the very borders of the promised land. I'm out of the Lord's presence as soon as this ship up anchors and sails for the west.

I'm a free man. I'm free of the Lord's command. But isn't it a mercy that the Lord stopped him headlong in his tracks and did not let him go?

In chapter 1, just look with me at the join between verse 3 and verse 4. At the end of verse 3, Jonah feels that he's achieved his aim.

[12:25] He's paid his fare, he's on board, he's back in the pagan world. He's watching the shoreline of the land of Israel recede out of sight into the distance. Just as you and I might get on a ferry at Stranra and cross the Irish Sea to Larn and we'd look back and see the hills of Stranra receding into the distance.

Well, Jonah is like that. He sits down on a coil of tari rope, lights his pipe, picks up his copy of the Joppa Evening News and says to himself, at last, I'm a free man.

I'm free of this dreadful commission. Now verse 4. Note the first word. It's one of the most important words in the whole Bible.

So much Bible truth hangs on the howevers and yets and buts of the Bible. And as verse 4 begins, we have the will of the Lord prevailing over the will of his disobedient runaway with this but.

Here is Jonah fleeing but the Lord stops him. And look at the verb there in verse 4. It suggests just how powerfully the Lord is arresting Jonah. He hurls this great wind upon the sea and there is a mighty tempest.

[13:38] Initially, Jonah continues in his runaway mindset. He goes below deck, he finds a hammock in a quiet corner and he falls fast asleep. Now he may just have a nasty feeling that the storm is all about him but at first he tries to escape reality by going to sleep.

I guess he's not the last person in the world to seek refuge from reality by going to bed. Now whether you're a Christian or not yet a Christian, do you recognize that what Jonah did in running away from the Lord is something that you too might want to do?

Any of us? I think of myself. I might say to myself, can I really face another intake of Cornhill students?

Come on Edward Mann, look at yourself. Youth and beauty have deserted you long ago. You could at this stage in life buy a nice little quiet cottage in a beautiful little valley in the Isle of Skye and you could have a potato patch and you could sit on fine days on a canvas chair by your potato patch watching the clouds come up from the west and you could contemplate the autumn of your life with peace and equanimity.

Now the truth is I do love the Cornhill work very much and the truth is that that kind of thought hardly ever assails my mind but it might do a few years down the track when I'm a bit more creaky and crumbly.

[15:04] Certainly when I was a parish minister a few years back I often used to have thoughts of taking off to some Tarshish or another. But friends isn't this what we're like? We can identify with Jonah we know what it can be like to want to flee from the presence of the Lord and to flee from our responsibilities but the Lord stopped Jonah in his tracks and how merciful he was to do so.

So there's the first thing Jonah is man on the run but the Lord stops him. Now second Jonah acknowledges his fault but the Lord subjects him to a kind of death.

Let's notice what happened to Jonah between the beginning of the storm and the end of the storm. The first thing he knows about in his sleep is the captain coming to him and shaking him roughly by the shoulder and commanding him to pray to his God.

There's the storm crashing around the ship at this stage. Haddock and squid are being hurled up against the portholes. The ship is reeling and rocking and groaning as only a wooden built ship can and Jonah is being commanded by this pagan sea captain to pray.

Now there's no evidence that Jonah actually prayed until we get to chapter 2 verse 1. In fact in chapter 1 verse 14 the pagan sailors pray to the Lord God of Israel before Jonah does.

[16:30] It's an odd fact that the believer here is reminded of the true God by unbelievers. Such things can still happen today. So Jonah is rudely woken up.

The sailors following a strong custom in the ancient world that you can cast lots to obtain guidance they cast lots and when the lot falls on Jonah the sailors naturally fire a whole lot of questions at him in verse 8.

So they say tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. Well I guess they know it's him don't they? But then they say what is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?

Which is just the kind of questions that we still ask each other today aren't they? Who are you?

What's your work? Where do you come from? And you reply I'm Ricky McTaggart from Knits Hill.

I work for the City Council Parks Department. You know that sort of thing. The kind of thing that you say at your Auntie Dora's Ruby Wedding Party isn't it? When you meet strangers. Who are you and where do you come from? Now here in Jonah 1 it's exactly the same questions but there's no Ruby Wedding Party.

[17:37] This is a dire emergency and everybody's life is hanging by a thread and they know it. And in this extreme circumstance Jonah despite himself despite his runaway activity tells the truth.

The runaway believer despite what he's doing knows deep within himself just who he really is and he comes out with it in verse 9. He says I'm a Hebrew a Jew a pretty risky thing to say in those days.

It's been a pretty risky thing to say in recent centuries too hasn't it? I'm a Hebrew and I fear the Lord which means I trust him I stand in awe of him as my judge and deep inside me I want despite my recent behavior to serve him and obey him.

And who is the Lord? According to Jonah in verse 9 he's the God of heaven who made the sea.

What an interesting thing to point out in a force 11 gale he's the one who made the sea and the dry land.

In other words my God is the real God the only God. He's not like your pagan gods who you think have a little bit of influence in a small part of the world. He is the God of heaven who made all of everything.

[18:55] Jonah is almost quoting Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 here isn't he? In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. It's a great profession of faith in the Old Testament and yet the man who is asserting this great truth about God is the very man who is denying God and running away from his presence.

But it may be that this ninth verse is the turning point. It may be the moment when Jonah begins as it were to retrace his steps to return to the truth about God and the truth about his own identity. I'm a Hebrew and the real truth about me is that I fear Jehovah and I know who he is. He is the God of heaven who has made everything. And it's from that moment onwards that Jonah begins to acknowledge his waywardness.

Look at what happens. Immediately after he acknowledges the Lord in verse 9 the sailors ask him in verse 10 what is this that you have done? Exactly the same question word for word that the Lord asks Eve in Genesis 3.13 after her disobedience.

What is this that you have done? Now the sailors already know that Jonah is fleeing from the Lord's presence because as verse 10 puts it he had told them. So before he acknowledges his fault directly even to the Lord he acknowledges it to these pagan seamen.

[20 : 19] So they begin to put two and two together and they make four. They begin to see that there is a direct connection between Jonah's behavior and this life-threatening storm.

So they say to him in verse 11 what shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us? And he replied acknowledging the full extent of his guilt before them.

He said 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.

So he fully acknowledges that his disobedience is the cause of the storm and with a remarkable disregard for his own safety he lays down his life in order to save their lives.

Cast me away and then you'll be safe. It's a great flash of Christ-likeness isn't it? I'll lay down my life in order to save your lives. Now the sailors are very noble pagans and they do their best to avoid that having to happen so they try to get back to land by rowing hard.

[21 : 30] They're trying to avoid the horror of having to throw this man overboard but in the end there is nothing for it. And so with real prayerfulness and it really seems that they engage with the Lord they throw Jonah overboard and they conduct this unforgettable funeral at sea.

Over he goes and as the waves close over the man who is forfeit the storm ceases. The sailors are saved. So the death of one man secures the salvation of many others.

Now you would think wouldn't you that Jonah by now had done enough to be restored. I mean look at the man he's humbled himself before these pagans.

He's freely confessed before them the wrong that he has done and he's not only confessed his sinfulness he's honoured the Lord by making this bold public profession of faith in verse 9.

You would think wouldn't you that these bold public acknowledgements of the glorious truth about God and the shameful truth about himself that would be all that was necessary for his restoration.

[22 : 40] But he now has to be subjected to a kind of death before he's in a fit state to serve the Lord's purposes. So verse 17 the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

It was the Lord who did it. It was the Lord who after a fashion put him to death. So there he is swallowed hundreds of feet below the surface of the sea sitting inside the indescribable darkness and foulness of the belly of the great fish.

Is that belly a tomb or a womb? It's both isn't it in the end but at this stage at the start it's a tomb.

Jonah is at the end of everything. Now Jonah serves as an example of the way that God deals with those who are being fitted for useful service.

Jonah comes to the point in his extremity where he's prepared to lay down his life for other people and then the Lord God confirms his self-denial not by liberating him but by denying him his life his freedom and his ability to choose his path.

[24 : 08] Nobody is less free than Jonah in the great fish's belly. Nobody is less able to rule his own life than Jonah was for those three days and three nights.

Just think how this is illustrated in the teaching of Jesus. Remember his words to his would-be followers in Luke chapter 9. He said to all if anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily take up his cross means be prepared to die and follow me.

And he unpacks the meaning of that in the very next verse for whoever would save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.

To be a follower of Jesus involves a fundamental a radical self-denial which is a kind of death. It's a dethroning of self so that we set ourselves at loggerheads with the world.

The world will always tell us to indulge ourselves to preen ourselves to gratify ourselves and to cause our whole life to revolve around ourselves and our pleasures. But Jesus says any follower of mine must learn to deny himself to take up his cross day after day and follow me.

[25 : 26] Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said when Christ calls a man he bids him come and die. And yet it is a glorious thing to be a Christian.

I can still remember when I was 19 years old just beginning to get going as a Christian and an older Christian friend friend of mine came to me one day and he said to me Edward you must die.

I was 19. Now those words sent an electric shock through my soul because I knew exactly what my friend meant. I knew that he meant exactly what Jesus meant when he said if anyone would come after me he must deny himself take up his cross daily and follow me.

I knew that what was required was the end of self-serving. That's why I found it so appalling to hear those words. Now in Jonah's case the Lord mercifully forced this death upon him.

The Lord appointed the great fish to swallow him and there he was dead but not dead. Certainly he would be dead unless the Lord were to open up the grim tomb in which he found himself.

[26 : 39] There was no way out of that living death by his own volition and power. So when we picture Jonah in the belly of the great fish we have a picture of what disobedient man must go through before he's restored to a new life of usefulness.

In the belly so to speak he's trapped and powerless. To whom can he turn? Well we very soon find out. Chapter 2 verse 1 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish.

That's what he says. So here is Jonah praying not from the comfort of a padded seat in a church hall with a near prospect of a cup of hot tea but rather from the belly of the fish which he describes in verse 2 as the belly of shale the heart of the land of the dead.

So let me read this prayer. Here is this man at his extremity. I called out to the Lord out of my distress and he answered me.

Out of the belly of shale 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.

[27 : 58] 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. 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 in your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain the Lord will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord. And the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

So here's our third point, third and last point. Jonah turns to the Lord in his great distress and he discovers that the Lord is able and willing to save him.

[29 : 04] Now you may notice a slightly odd thing about the tenses of the verbs in this prayer. He says I called to the Lord in verse 2 and I said in verse 4.

Well let's not allow that to worry us for a moment. The tenses of Hebrew verbs can be tricky to establish. And even if this prayer is set largely in the past tense the way to read it is as Jonah's reminiscence when he's looking back after the event.

He's telling the story possibly years later either writing the book himself or dictating it to a secretary and he's saying when I was in the belly of the fish I called to the Lord and I said this and he did that and so on.

So even if you've got a rather precise and pedantic mind when it comes to language just stick your precisions under your seat for a few minutes and we'll concentrate on the substance of Jonah's prayer just briefly now.

Let's notice how Jonah places together two elements two great elements of the believer's life. First his utter sense of frailty and helplessness and despair and second his knowledge that the Lord and only the Lord can rescue him.

[30 : 19] Just look at the expressions of frailty and helplessness. Verse 2 out of my distress my affliction. Still verse 2 out of the belly of shale authorised version the belly of hell.

Verse 3 you cast me into the deep. Well yes at one level it was the sailors who threw him in but it was God who really caused it to happen and he is now in the deep.

The flood he says surrounded me and then this evocative phrase all your waves and billows passed over me. A quotation straight from Psalm 42 which describes a sense of being overwhelmed by awfulness and God forsakenness.

Then verse 5 weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars like prison bars closed upon me seemingly forever.

So here is this man reduced. He's driven to the very borders of death. He's having to face the truth about himself about his frailty and powerlessness and about the fact that it's God who has done this thing to him.

[31 : 36] You cast me into the deep he says. It wasn't really the sailors it was you. Your hand was heavy upon me. your anger threatened to send me to the belly of Sheol.

But the very one who chastised Jonah and reduced him and sent him to the bottom of the sea was the one who then rescued him.

And that's the way the Lord deals with his servants. He puts us through a kind of death because he wants us for himself.

He's determined to squeeze every drop of headstrong self-reliance and self-determination and self-centeredness out of us. And if necessary he will take us as it were to the roots of the mountains and he'll wrap the seaweed around our heads and give us a sense that we're in a pit or a prison whose bars have closed upon us forever.

So that when eventually we humble ourselves and call upon him and beg him to bring us out of this awful situation we know that it's he and only he who has done it and we'll say with real conviction as Jonah did at the end of verse nine salvation belongs to the Lord Jonah realized it could come from nowhere else who else could rescue him from his predicament and friends who else can rescue us rescue us in this life from the claims of self centeredness and rescue us on the day of judgment from the power of death salvation belongs to the Lord and when Jonah came to realize that stupendous truth in the belly of shale and he cried those words out in the darkness it was then that the Lord spoke to the fish and it brought up Jonah onto the dry land it's a kind of rebirth the resurrection and there is

[33 : 41] Jonah back in the land of the living and he will never be the same again not that his experience of death and resurrection makes him perfect we're going to see over the next couple of weeks that he still has a lot to learn about God and many of us here are born again and yet we know that we still have much to learn about the Lord but although Jonah was far from perfect he was now a changed man at the beginning of chapter one the Lord said to him go to Nineveh and preach against it and he said no he fled but now in chapter three the Lord speaks again to him with the same message and this time he says yes I will he gets up he sets his face to Nineveh and he goes and preaches the word of the Lord there well friends it's perhaps a relief to us that the Lord doesn't usually deal with people today in exactly the same way that he dealt with Jonah I'd be surprised if anybody here tonight has been in the belly of a great fish but if you have do let me know afterwards and

I'll rejoice with you that you're back out but in principle and in actual fact anyone who is going to serve the Lord must die and then be born again and if it should be that there are some here who feel that they're right now in the belly of shale feeling that all the waves and billows of the world are drowning you I hope that you'll get comfort from this book of Jonah who can you turn to in your distress there is one he's the only one but he's able to bring rescue and he will bring it to those who cry to him salvation says Jonah belongs to the Lord well let's bow our heads and we'll pray dear God our father in a sense our hearts quail before us as we think of what

Jonah had to go through in order to be remade and equipped for useful service but we pray indeed we dare to pray dear father that whatever you might require of us you will do for us and to us we long to be useful in your service and we pray that you will enable each of us to know what it is to die to self and then to be born again so that we should serve you and be part of your great purpose and plan and these things we ask in Jesus name Amen Amen