SALVATION COMES FROM THE LORD

Jonah 1:1–2:10

Key Verse: 2:9

“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.’’

Has anyone ever asked you to do something you really didn’t want to do? Did you ever just run away? Sometimes we react so emotionally that we don’t stop to think about why we don’t want to do whatever it is. The prophet Jonah was just like that. Though he’s a prophet of God, he runs away from what God asks him to do. What a strange prophet! What people mostly remember about this Bible story is that Jonah gets swallowed by a whale, then gets spit out. But why it happened most people don’t know. In chapters 1 and 2 we want to think about several questions. Why did Jonah try to run away from God’s assignment? Why did God stop him? Why did God save him? And what does it mean to us? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at verse 1. This expression is used a lot in the Old Testament. God’s word “came” to his servants the prophets. It also “came” to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. It means that these people were not just coming up with their own ideas; God spoke to his servants in a very vivid, personal and powerful way. What did God say to Jonah? Read verse 2. The word “Go” in Hebrew is literally “Get up and go right now.” It means God was very urgent. Where was Nineveh? It was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, on the east side of the Tigris River. It was basically the modern-day city of Mosul, over 200 miles north of Bagdad in Iraq. In it’s heyday it was the largest city in the world. The Assyrians ruled three times in history. The first time was from 2025–1378 BC; the second time was from 1365-934 BC.; but the third time, from 911-609 BC it was the largest, and historians consider it the first real empire in the world. During this third and last empire, the Assyrians used iron weapons and conquered many neighboring rivals, such as the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, the Arabs, the Egyptians, and Israel. Their language, Aramaic, became the dominant language of the area. Basically, the Israelites thought of Nineveh as the place where human beings exalted themselves and ignored God.

In verse 2 the expression “their wickedness has come up before me” is interesting. God is fully aware of everything going on in this world. But this expression suggests that the people’s wickedness had gotten really bad. It was like the smell of rotten food, which, as we used to say, gets so bad that it “stinks to high heaven.” Human corruption can get so bad that God, who is slow to anger and so patient, finally has to take action. God was telling Jonah he was about to punish the people of Nineveh for their wickedness, and God wanted Jonah to go and warn them about it. Why did God want Jonah to go and warn those people? God was giving them one final chance to repent. It may sound judgmental to go and tell people they’re so wicked that God is about to punish them, but actually, it’s God’s mercy, to get people to realize their wicked ways and turn back to God to be forgiven.

How did Jonah respond? Read verse 3. The words “ran away” in Hebrew are the opposite of God’s command “Go.” Jonah was a total rebel to God. Why? His behavior can lead us to ask many questions. Didn’t God know Jonah wouldn’t do what he asked? Why would God bother with such a person? We can come back to those questions later. But for now, let’s think about it from a different point of view: why Jonah didn’t want to do what God was asking. What could be Jonah’s reasons for running away? Was he tired of serving God? Was he scared of those people? By trying to run away, Jonah may seem dumb, but actually he was a very smart person. He explains his reason later in 4:2: “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” In other words, Jonah didn’t want to give the Ninevites the chance to repent; he wanted to see them get destroyed by God. Why did he think of the Ninevites like that? He probably thought they didn’t deserve to be forgiven; they were so wicked, Jonah thought, that they really needed to be punished. Jonah thought he knew better than God what to do with them. Jonah was basically a man who had a problem with God’s grace. He was kind of like the older brother in Jesus’ famous parable of the prodigal son, who thought his younger brother should be punished for what he did, not forgiven (Lk15).

So Jonah went to the port city of Joppa and bought a boat ticket to Tarshish. Tarshish was likely modern-day Spain. Jonah was basically going in the opposite direction of where God wanted him to go. He was trying to get as far away from God as possible. In Hebrew it literally says he was trying to get away “from the presence of the Lord.” But how can anyone get away from God’s presence? David wrote: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea; even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you” (Ps139:7–12). In other words, it’s futile to try to get away from God because he’s everywhere.

In the rest of chapter 1 we see this truth played out. Read verse 4. Here the word “sent” in Hebrew is literally “hurled” or threw. This word is repeated in verses 5 and 15, when the sailors threw their cargo into the sea, and when they finally threw Jonah overboard, too. It tells us that people can make their best, strongest efforts to deal with situations, but God’s efforts always win out in the end. It may not seem so in our day-to-day lives, but actually God is controlling everything. He can change our life’s situations in an instant. God can suddenly give us unimaginable blessings, or suddenly take them all away. Why do we experience sudden storms of life? We may not know it immediately at the time, but God is doing something. God is directing our lives to go according to *his* will, not ours. Proverbs 19:21 says, “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails.”

Look at verse 5. Here we see a contrast between the sailors on deck of the boat, frantically throwing things overboard, and Jonah below deck, sleeping deeply. What does it mean? It shows that Jonah just doesn’t care. His heart has become that hard. He seems like a person that even God can’t help. Look at verse 6. Even the ship’s captain, a non-believer, tries to get Jonah to pray, but there’s no record that Jonah prays at this point. Look at verse 7. The sailors are again contrasted with Jonah. They care about what’s happening, and they want to know why. They even resort to casting lots to find out if there’s a trouble-maker on board their ship. God, who’s in control of everything, even of their dice, in his mercy lets it be known that the culprit is Jonah. They’re in a storm because Jonah is on board, and God is not pleased with what Jonah is trying to do. Look at verse 8. These sailors are really trying to figure out what’s going on in Jonah’s life. Read verse 9. It’s funny because at this moment, Jonah isn’t worshiping God at all; he’s running away from him! Yet he still identifies himself as a God-worshiper. In Hebrew it says he “fears” God. This word is repeated in verses 5,10 and 16. The sailors are very afraid of the storm or of God. But Jonah doesn’t seem afraid at all. His rebellious spirit has taken away his fear of God. Even though people like Jonah don’t seem to get struck down right away, we should not think we can get away with hardening our hearts towards God. Psalm 96:9 tells us to keep it real. It says: “Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.”

When the sailors heard that Jonah worshiped the Creator God, they basically freaked out. Look at verse 10. It tells us that these men are gradually beginning to realize who God is, putting two and two together. The God that Jonah believes in is actually the God of all the earth, the God who rules even all of nature, including the weather. It’s kind of a preview of what may happen to the people of Nineveh if they hear about God, too; they may realize who he is and repent. Though people generally may seem too hardened to know God, anyone can come to know God if God reveals himself to them. We shouldn’t write anyone off.

So what happens? Read verses 11,12. These sailors are desperate and want to know how to get Jonah’s God to stop the storm from destroying them. And Jonah knows everything. He sort of apologies for the disaster he’s gotten them into, though it doesn’t seem like real repentance yet. How do the sailors respond? Read verse 13. It shows how they really don’t want to bring harm to Jonah. Unlike Jonah’s attitude toward them and toward the Ninevites, they actually *care* about what happens to Jonah. It tells us that sometimes even non-believers are more caring than so-called believers (e.g. Ro2:14). But God who is ruling the storm makes it even wilder than before. Finally, the sailors actually pray to God. Read verse 14. They sincerely fear God and respect Jonah’s life but throw him over because they somehow realize it’s God’s will for them to do so. What happens when they do? Read verses 15,16. Again, it shows that God is using these events to really bring these people to himself. And again, they were reacting to the situation way better than Jonah was at this point.

It actually seems that in his rebellion Jonah kind of wants to just die in the wild and raging sea. But God has a different plan. Read verse 17. It’s interesting that it says “the LORD provided” a huge fish to swallow Jonah. What does it mean? It tells us that God isn’t punishing Jonah for his rebellion; he’s actually *saving* him from the raging sea by letting him live in the huge fish. But it’s more than just saving his life physically. God lets Jonah stay in that fish for three days and three nights. God could have calmed the sea instantly and had Jonah spit out right away. But God leaves him in that huge fish for three days and nights. Why? God wants to give Jonah some time to think about things. It’s kind of like a time out that parents give their kids.

Inside that huge fish for three days and three nights, what is Jonah thinking about, and what is he doing? Read 2:1–9. Basically, Jonah repents. What does he repent of? He repents of running away from God. He repents of trying to ignore God. How could Jonah change? It was through suffering. Being swallowed by a fish was like getting really close to death. Jonah says he was in distress, “banished” from God’s sight, threatened, surrounded, barred in, in a pit, and his life was ebbing away. Clearly, God allowed all these sufferings in Jonah’s life to help him really cry out to him. In these sufferings it says Jonah “remembered” the Lord personally (2:7). And Jonah experienced that even while he was inside that fish God heard his prayer. There are many kinds of prayer: sleepy prayers, dutiful prayers, prayers using all kinds of flowery words, prayers to impress people, and even prayers said to teach others who are listening. But Jonah’s prayer was directed only to God; it was real, simple and right to the point: he wanted God to save him. Why did God hear Jonah’s prayer? Wasn’t Jonah rebelling? Wasn’t he running away from God? Why should God listen to him? God was trying to help Jonah, who was angry with wicked people, to experience his grace personally. Likewise, when we experience God’s grace personally, we’re more equipped to help people who are far away from God. That God answers prayer may seem like a pretty basic thing, but it is such an important life lesson to learn. Even if we’ve rebelled against him, we can turn to God and ask his mercy to help us.

Let’s read 2:9. Jonah wasn’t just trying to get out of a desperate situation, making use of God. He was ready to praise God with all his heart. He was ready to commit to God. He was ready to keep his promises to God. He was ready to serve God with whatever he had. He was spiritually restored. Jonah also had a clear testimony: “Salvation comes from the Lord.” The people of the world, like the sailors, use many means to save themselves. Some rely on their cargo, their many possessions. Some play the lottery, hoping to strike it rich. Some try hard with their own tenacity in their life storms to get to land, to reach their goals. Some resort to desperate means like seeking the advice of fortune tellers. But salvation comes from the Lord. It means God can save us out of the worst of situations, if we only turn to him. God wants to save not just his servants, but all people of the world. God wants us to be his instruments through which he can bring his salvation to other people.

In light of this passage we should ask ourselves, “Am I trying to run away from God in some way? And if so, why am I doing that?” Also, we need to see that God is everywhere, in control of everything, and he can help even the most rebellious, hardened people turn back to him. Finally, we need to remember God and realize that he answers prayer. May God help us experience his saving grace and use us to bring his saving grace to others.