

“What’s The Whale In Your Life”

Jonah 1:17 – 3:3

17 Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. 2:1 From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. 2 He said: “In my distress I called to the Lord and He answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and You listened to my cry. 3 You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. 4 I said, ‘I have been banished from Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.’ 5 The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. 6 To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, Lord My God, brought my life up from the pit. 7 “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered You, Lord, and my prayer rose to You, to Your holy temple. 8 “Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit God’s love for them. 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.’” 10 and the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

3:1 Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” 3 Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.

I want to start off this morning with an old riddle. How many of each animal did Jonah put in ark? The answer is ZERO, Jonah never built an ark, Noah did. [NOTE 1] The names sound a lot alike. Jonah, Noah ... Anyway, Jonah and the whale is one of those stories that is very popular. After the creation of Adam and Eve, the story of Abraham, the story of Moses, David and Goliath, and perhaps Daniel in the Lions den, Jonah is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible. Just as a quick overview and refresher, Jonah was a prophet. God called him to tell the Ninevites in the great city of Nineveh of course, that they should repent. Yes, this is the same Ninevah that Nahum prophesies to, refuses to repent and is destroyed. Jonah didn’t like the people of Nineveh and he knew what would happen if they repented ... God would have mercy on them. Jonah didn’t want that to happen so he ran away from God. He got on a ship that was heading out to sea and he hid below deck. Surely God wouldn’t find him in the bottom of a sailing ship right? Well, God found him and caused a terrible storm. The sailor’s knew it was God’s doing and they finally figured out that it was “Noah” who had angered God so they reluctantly threw him overboard. As soon as they did the sea

calmed down. God then provided a huge fish that swallowed Jonah. From inside the fish Jonah prayed. Three days later God made the fish spit Jonah out onto dry land. God called Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh and this time he obeyed. As Jonah feared the Ninevites repented and God spared them and Jonah sulked. God caused a nice plant to grow up and give Jonah shade and then made it wither. When Jonah complained about losing the plant, God used it to illustrate that if Jonah could mourn the loss of a plant after only one day, how much more should be the mourning for the loss of a people, how much more tragic would be the loss of a whole city of people. Jonah understood and so ends the book of Jonah. Or was it Noah? Just kidding. IT WAS JONAH! [NOTE 2]

Today, I want to focus in on the first part of the passage that we read. Verse 17 says, “Now God provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.” Then at the beginning of chapter 2 we read, “From inside the fish, Jonah prayed.”

Now there have been thousands of hours spent in research by people trying to prove or disprove whether it is possible to be swallowed by a great fish and survive three days and three nights in its belly. You see, some people figure if they can prove that one of the stories in the Bible could never happen, then that makes the Bible a nice storybook instead of THE Guide for one’s life. At the very least, disproving the story of Jonah would make the Bible inaccurate and that opens the door for many people to make much of the Bible an allegory or a story that represents something else or a story to make a point. Through the research we learn that the largest stomach that scientists know about belongs to the Sperm Whale. Most of the larger whales have baleen in their mouths that no man could fit through. It actually strains the sea water and tiny organisms called plankton are caught and digested. So it has to be a toothed fish or whale. Enough research has been done to say that it is possible for a human being to be swallowed whole by a very large Sperm whale and remain in its stomach for three days and three nights. The big question that has yet to be answered is whether it is possible for a human being to survive that long with a limited supply of oxygen and a large amount of stomach acid. For some reason it seems that nobody has been willing to volunteer for the assignment to prove. [NOTE 3]

No really, all kidding aside, it doesn’t really matter to me. If God can keep three guys from even being singed in a fire so hot that it kills the people who are throwing the guys into the fire in the first place, he certainly can keep a body unharmed from stomach acid for three days. You see, even if scientists proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that a full grown human being could not survive in the stomach of a Sperm whale for more than 24 hours it wouldn’t bother me a bit and I am telling you this morning that I don’t

think it should hurt your faith either. Please don't get me wrong, I am not proposing to tell you what to think. That is not my intention. But look, the text simply says that God provided a huge fish. Who is to say that God didn't create a special fish just for the occasion? Why couldn't God have had a prehistoric fish survive down through the ages just for this event? If you accept, as I accept as fact, that God created the universe, the earth, and all that is on it, in it, and above it, then nothing is impossible for God. God could simply have resurrected Noah, I mean Jonah, just making sure you are awake; after the fish spit him out onto the land if He wanted to. The most important thing about our text for this morning, is that God intervened and delivered Jonah. The miracle would only have been slightly less astounding if Jonah was rescued by a large board floating by that served as a life-raft to get the prophet close to shore. I'm sure that scientists would then be arguing whether the currents in that part of the sea would make it possible for the board to float in that area and whether or not it would float toward shore. The basic thrust, the main idea of verse 17 would have no less impact if the Lord had given Jonah super-natural strength to swim two miles to shore. In verse 13 the story tells us that the sailors try to row to land first, indicating that perhaps they weren't that far from land, but if Jonah had made it to land by swimming it still would have been a miracle of God. Any way you slice it, it is God's miracle!! [NOTE 4]

Listen closely, read my lips, GOD PROVIDED!! Period! What matters is ... that God provided! The miracle of Jonah's rescue was not just to save the prophet before he drowned but to save Nineveh from drowning ... in sin. God's miracles in our lives are for a greater purpose than just our personal comfort or survival. Despite what we tend to think, it is usually not all about us! God's interventions are used by God to turn us back to Him. They are used to get us to focus on His agenda, His will, His ways, serving Him, and pressing on toward more effective evangelism and mission.

[NOTE 5] Jonah ran away from God, God put a whale in his life, and Jonah turned and ran back to God. The illustration of this is the second chapter, which records Jonah's prayer. From inside the fish, Jonah prays...Jonah cries out to God. You would expect an impassioned cry for mercy a "get me out of this" prayer. Something like, "Lord if you get me out of this, I will never smoke or do drugs or get drunk again." But instead, Jonah sings a song. The Psalm he prays is a mixture of Psalms 18, 42, 88, and 120. It expresses Jonah's **rediscovery** of Yahweh's omnipresence and grace.

Omnipresent means that God is everywhere present. Jonah has gone from thinking that he can hide from God in the bottom of a ship to knowing that God will hear his prayer from inside a fish! How is that for a shift in someone's thinking? We have all known those "God please help me," times when we have tripped and fallen flat on our faces while running away from God. Now this running ... may not always be a physical

running. Maybe you have run away from God emotionally or spiritually. We make a mess of things and then just about the time we hit rock-bottom we realize that the Lord from whom we've been running is our only hope. We don't deserve God's intervention, we don't even deserve to be listened to. It is hard to pray at times like this because our own self-condemnation makes us think that either we have no right to call on God or we think if we did pray that He wouldn't listen ... because **we** wouldn't listen. But thank God we are not God and we know God listens! **[NOTE 6]**

Jonah is an example to us. If Jonah could cry out to God after directly disobeying Him, then so can we. God hears your prayer! God listens to you, even if you don't deserve it. Jonah gives us a great example of how to pray in the midst of failure, when our distress has been caused by our own disobedience.

Jonah prays a psalm. He doesn't beg God to get him out of that fish. He prays a song that is a combination of several psalms. When we are down, when we are hurting, it can be very helpful to simply kneel and pray a psalm to God. When we hear ourselves rejoicing, thanking, being confident of God's love, faithfulness, mercy and grace, lamenting our pain and frustration ... it is therapeutic and more importantly ... it honors God. He wants us to depend on Him.

The Second thing to learn from Jonah's prayer/psalm is that it is important to **THANK** God for confronting us with our disobedience. The storm at sea convinced Jonah that he could not escape God. God cares enough to catch us when we run from Him. He doesn't just sit back and say to Himself, "Let them go, they'll come crawling back in due time." God pursues us. And if you read the text carefully, this fish saved Jonah's life, he was about to drown: "the engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head." I know people who freak out if there foot touches a weed, much less having it wrapped around their head.

There is a story told about a young man who asked the Buddha how to find God. Buddha led the young man to a river and waded out into the middle of it. The young man thought the teacher was going to perform some kind of ritual cleansing or something. Instead, Buddha grabbed the young man and held his head under water for a dangerously long time while the young man thrashed around in the water. When he finally let the man up coughing and sputtering, he asked him, "What were you thinking about while I held your head under water?" The young man replied, "Air, Air!" Buddha replied, "When you want God as much as you wanted air, you will find Him. Now I am no proponent of Buddhism but that makes a lot of sense to me. But wait, does everything depend on us wanting God bad enough? No, in fact, what Jonah did and how God reacted disproves that.

[NOTE 7] Our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and His Son Jesus Christ are very different than Buddha. Our God finds us and we only search for Him because He has already found us. Only Yahweh searches and finds His people. In every religion other than Christianity, it is up to them to search out and find god. Yahweh searches and finds us! God brings us to the place where we admit that we have no other hope but Him; no possibility of making it to heaven unless He intervenes! God allows us to discover the gift of darkness. It is only when we know darkness that we can truly appreciate the Light! God tracks us down, stops us in our run-away path, confronts us, and allows us to go through a time of death to our self-willfulness. As we pray we are aware of the hopelessness of changing ourselves or the problems we have created. This moment of hopelessness puts us through a death to self and in a good sense we give up trying to run away. We hit rock-bottom and when we do, our surrender to God and His mercy is more than a few empty words. In the “huge fish” Jonah received the very mercy that he refused to preach about in Nineveh. So thank God for loving you enough to do whatever is necessary to make you face what you have been doing so that you may turn, confess, and move toward obedience.

By verse 9 of chapter 2, Jonah is a new person. He is ready to listen and obey. A new Jonah confesses loyalty to God. So the fish spits him out. I can just picture Jonah standing on the beach shuddering with awe because of what has just happened. With the stench of whale clinging to his clothes he realizes he is standing on solid ground. He hears the call of God again and this time he does not hesitate but heads toward Nineveh, but not without Yahweh’s power and mercy.

What’s different about Jonah now? In chapter 1 verse 3, Jonah hears God’s call and rises up to flee. In chapter 3 verse 1, Jonah hears God’s call, rises up and **obeys**. His prejudices haven’t changed, he still dislikes the Ninevites very much. First Jonah gets up to run away, God puts a whale in his life, and then Jonah runs toward God. In verse 3 of chapter 2 Jonah is running WITH God. There is only ONE way to do life ... that is God’s Way! Are you running toward God or away from God? Think about it physically, emotionally, and spiritually. What or who ... is the whale in your life? What or who is it, that has turned or is turning ... you from your disobedience? What kind of whale will it take to get you to turn back to obedience? What or who has God used or is God using in your life to get you to get in step with the Holy Spirit ... running **with** God? Maybe you have been running spiritually from God without even realizing it consciously. Think about it.

Take a look at the path you are on. What are the things that are happening in your life? Who is influencing you? Are you on God’s path? It is so easy to just go from one thing to the next throughout the day and finish the day having not thought of God at all,

not having asked for His help, or His advice. It is so easy. Life is so busy that we can go from one thing to the next all day and never think about God!

Some of you have met my friend Lee DeZeeuw. He was an Elder at Voice of Hope Church when I got there in 2011 and we have remained close friends. He was at my installation service I had lunch with him just a month ago and he talked about how falling the 30 feet and breaking both legs has really turned him around spiritually. He had become so busy with family and work that he had let God, the Bible, and church slide until they were no longer a priority. Now he is having daily devotions, reading the Bible with his children every night, and is growing closer to God than He has ever been in the past. He reiterated that the wheelchair, the halo that he wears on his right lower leg and foot has become a great way to start spiritual conversations.

[NOTE 8] Will God need to put a whale in your life to turn you back toward Him? Will it take a whale in your life to convince you of your dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit to impact others for Jesus Christ? The whale for Lee DeZeeuw was two broken legs. So a whale can be a blessing and when it is from God it is **always** a blessing. Technically, the whale saved Jonah's life because his head was wrapped in seaweed, he was going to drown. What will it take before you realize that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for you to have a full and meaningful life? Are you willing to follow Him and live His way? Blessed are you if God doesn't need to put a whale in your life to get you to run With Him, to get in step with the Holy Spirit. May we figure out how to stay in step with the Holy Spirit without needing a whale to change our direction.

Let's pray: ... AMEN

Sermon Notes for “What’s the Whale In Your Life?”

Based on Jonah 1:17 – 3:3 given July 5, 2026 at Doster Community Church

- I. How many of each animal did Jonah put in the ark? (Zero-Noah built the ark)
- II. Jonah was a prophet. God called him to tell the Ninevites to repent. Jonah didn’t like the people of Ninevah and he didn’t want God to have mercy on them. He tried to run away from God. There was a great storm. Sailor’s reluctantly threw him into the sea and a great fish swallowed him. 3 days later the fish spit Jonah out on dry land. This time Jonah listened to God. The Ninevites repented and God spared them. Jonah sulked. God helped Jonah understand.
- III. Today I want to concentrate on Verse 17 of Chapter One. Is it possible? Does it matter?
- IV. God provided! It is God’s miracle! God’s miracles in our lives are for a greater purpose than just our personal comfort or survival. They are used by God to turn us back to Him, focus us on His will, serve Him, and/or get us to press on with outreach and mission.
- V. Jonah ran away from God, God put a whale in his life. Jonah turned back to God.
- VI. There are times in our lives when we run away from God, sometimes physically, sometimes emotionally or spiritually. Turn to prayer.
- VII. It’s important to thank God, even in the bad times. Our God searches for us! We become aware of the hopelessness of fixing things ourselves so we turn to God and He hears us in His mercy. Thank God for His love!
- VIII. We think we can live our own way. Don’t make God put a whale in your life to show you that the only way to know joy, peace, unconditional love, forgiveness and have a full and meaningful life is to do things God’s way! Blessed are you if God doesn’t need to put a whale in your life to get you to keep in step with the Spirit. What are you going to do about it?