

I had a chance to watch bits and pieces of the Academy Awards a couple of weeks ago. I'm always interested in the big winners like best picture, best actors, and best-supporting actors. I was thinking about this as it relates to the book of Jonah, which we started looking at last week. I began to wonder that if the story of Jonah was a movie, who'd be nominated for best actor? Well, the book is called "Jonah" so you'd think it would be Jonah. He's front and center in every scene, from chapter one, where he's running away from God, to chapter four, where he's sitting under the scorching sun, complaining to God and nursing his wounds. Or maybe the best actor wouldn't be Jonah but the huge fish that swallowed him. I know animals don't usually get nominated for best actor, but you must admit, a case could be made for the fish. When you think of Jonah, what do you think of? You think of this whale swallowing Jonah and then vomiting him up onto the shore.

But honestly, I don't think it would be either Jonah or the fish; I believe it would be God himself who'd win the Oscar. It's true that here in chapter two, we see Jonah and the fish trying to steal the show, but the real hero is God. It was the Lord who provided the huge fish to swallow Jonah. And it was the Lord who commanded the fish to spit him onto dry land. But even more importantly, it was the Lord who Jonah turned to in his greatest moment of desperation.

The bulk of chapter two is Jonah's prayer from inside the belly of the fish. It's a prayer of desperation, but it's more than that. It's a prayer that traces Jonah's spiritual journey from the depths of despair to the heights of worship. The whole thing culminates in the final line where Jonah proclaims, "Salvation comes from the Lord." Yes, the Lord gets top billing in this story. He's the One who saves. He's the only one who saves. It's not part me and part him; he doesn't meet me half way; it all comes from him. I get zero credit! He's the One who can raise me up from the deep, dark places and put a new song in my mouth.

I don't know where you're at today. Maybe you're in a good place. Or maybe you're sinking. Maybe your even at rock bottom. What might it look like for you not just to survive but also for you to be lifted up with your own story to say, "Salvation comes from the Lord"?

The Lord Provides a Huge Fish to Swallow Jonah

We saw last week how the Lord called Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, just north of Israel. Assyria was a feared superpower,

known for its atrocious treatment of its enemies, with Israel high on that list. Instead of obeying the Lord, Jonah wanted nothing to do with the assignment and hopped on a ship headed for Tarshish, which was in the opposite direction.

But God sent a great storm and it was discovered Jonah was the problem, and he knew it, so he told the pagan sailors to throw him overboard, which was tantamount to suicide. So, they threw him in. But then we're told God turned to a big fish and said,

"Hey, Mr. Fish."

The fish said, "Yes, God?"

God said, "Go swallow Jonah. But, just one thing—swallow, don't chew. I'll tell you where to spit him out."

The fish says, "Okay, Lord. Got it."

That's not literally how it went. The writer of Jonah just says, "*Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights*" (1:17). Let me say a word about this. Again, the fish gets far too much attention in this story. One writer put it like this: "I was so obsessed with what was going on inside the whale that I missed the drama inside Jonah." Don't make that mistake. Let's just acknowledge what happened with the fish was nothing short of a miracle.

If you believe in a God who is both willing and able to interrupt the natural order, then you can accept this really happened. It's no different from God creating the heavens and the earth, the Red Sea being parted, a baby born of a virgin, or a man raised from the dead. We accept those things because we believe in a God who's sovereign and powerful and occasionally chooses to intervene in history in ways that can't be explained scientifically. I know there have been stories of someone actually being swallowed by a whale and surviving, and perhaps that's true, but I don't believe it matters here. This was a God-thing. If you don't allow for God-things to happen, then this story is either sheer foolishness or, at best, a fable with a spiritual truth attached.

What I want to focus on is what was going on in Jonah. You see, it was while he was in the belly of that fish that he experienced God like never before. It was in that dark, smelly, disgusting place Jonah prays the prayer we see in Jonah 2. But for Jonah, the belly of the fish isn't just a place of prayer; it's the place of his salvation. He didn't wait until he got spat out to declare that it happened right there in the belly of the fish! We're going to trace Jonah's journey from the depths of despair to the heights of worship. It's a very personal journey. Throughout this prayer, he uses the

first person singular, "I." But it's not just Jonah's journey; it's our journey also. It's not just his story, it can be our story. You can be the "I" in this story.

Cry Out to God in Desperation

It starts with a cry. As he sits in the belly of the fish, he reflects on what just happened to him as he was hurled out of the boat. From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. 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." vv. 1-2

Later, he gives more detail.

The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. 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. vv. 5-6

If you've ever had an experience where you thought you might drown, or even if you've had a nightmare of drowning, just reading this sends shivers down your spine. When Jonah is thrown into the water, he starts to sink deeper and deeper. I'm sure the light from the surface of the water began to fade, and it became pitch black. Then his head gets tangled in seaweed. Imagine that! He's sinking deeper and deeper to the point he sees the roots of the mountains barring him in.

Jonah is sure it's all over for him. When he says in verse 1 that he called for help in "the realm of the dead," he literally says he was in the "womb" or the "belly" of Sheol. That's the Old Testament word for where dead people go. He's basically saying, "I was as good as dead."

But it was then, at the lowest point, he cried out to God for help. This is the first time in the book Jonah prays. When God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, he said nothing. When the storm raged on while on the ship headed for Tarshish, he didn't pray. No, he was asleep in the bottom of the boat! But finally, as he sinks to the bottom of the sea and as his life is ebbing away, he cries out to God for help.

And Jonah simply says, "He answered me..." In the next line, he gets more personal. He speaks directly to God and says, "You listened to my cry." God doesn't scold him for not turning to him earlier. God saves him by providing a fish. God saves Jonah because that's what God does. He saves those who cry out to him. He wants to save. It's in his nature to save. It's His thing! He waits for us to cry out to him so he can save us. You can cry out to God! He listens; he answers.

Most of us try to manage our lives to avoid desperate situations. Some of us even live in denial that we really are desperate for God's help. As a pastor, I've been with people in some of their most desperate moments: I recall being with Pastor Steve Aurell

when he came out of surgery, and they told him the cancer in his pancreas was inoperable. It was a moment of deep anguish for him and us. We cried out to the Lord. I've sat with men who've ruined their marriage and family through infidelity. I knelt with them in my office as they cried out to the Lord. When my wife, Lynn, was diagnosed with melanoma, I researched all the possible outcomes and tried to manage the situation. But as we waited for test results and more test results, all we could do was cry out to the Lord. God wants us to cry out to him. When we do that, he listens, and he answers. It may not always turn out as we hoped, but he's there, and he provides what we need. He listens, and he answers our cry.

Where's your place of desperation? Is it a relationship you've completely botched? Is it your career? Your marriage? A child? Maybe the pandemic brought you to a desperate place. Today is Mother's Day, and perhaps as a mom, you feel overwhelmed. Whatever it is that makes you desperate, cry out to God. Even if it's your last resort, he won't lecture you. He won't turn you away. He won't scold you. Even if you've never prayed before, cry out to God, and watch as he comes to your rescue. That's what he does. Salvation comes from the Lord!

Repent and Turn to His Holy Temple

But Jonah's prayer doesn't end with a cry for help. He goes on. In his desperation, he says,

You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' vv. 3-4

In verse 7, he says something similar. "*When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.*"

Notice Jonah recognized it was God himself who hurled him into the sea. Remember, Jonah was running from the Lord. He's God's prophet. He knows God. He's spoken for God. He's seen God work. But when God said go to Nineveh, he ran the other way. Now he's sinking fast, and even though the sailors threw him overboard, he knows this is God's doing.

Someone said to me this week that God is like a spiritual chiropractor. We go to a chiropractor to be adjusted, to get realigned. It's painful, but when it's all over, you feel so much better. As Jonah sinks, he's feeling the pain, but he is getting realigned!

He says to God, "*I have been banished from your sight.*" Another translation says, "I have been expelled from your sight." In one sense, Jonah is right, and in another, he's wrong. He's right to see his actions have put him at odds with his Lord. That sense of his presence, that partnership, and fellowship he once enjoyed with God is gone. You see, sin brings a sense of alienation from God. In a way, sin does banish us from his sight. It does shut us out from his presence. He's right to feel that.

But he's also wrong because God is using this experience not to push Jonah away but to turn him back. The pain has a purpose! He's saving Jonah from himself. He's bringing Jonah to a place of helplessness, a place of desperation, in hopes Jonah will repent and turn back to him. It's all about realignment! And it worked! He says, "I have been banished from your sight," but in the next breath, he says, "yet I will look again toward your holy temple." Then he repeats himself, "I remembered you Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple." Repentance is turning away from our sin and turning towards God. It's remembering God after forgetting him.

Notice twice he says he turns toward God's holy temple. What does that mean? Of course, the temple was in Jerusalem. It was the place where God dwelt. Remember, inside the most holy place in the temple was the ark of the covenant. Inside were the Ten Commandments, and on top of the ark was a lid called the mercy seat. When the blood of a sacrifice was sprinkled there, God would dispense mercy to his people for breaking his commandments. Each year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered that holy place and sprinkled blood on the mercy seat to atone for the sins of God's people.

This is why Jonah turns towards the holy temple. He knows this is the place he'd find mercy because blood was shed there. Today, when we turn to Jesus in our sin and brokenness, we're turning to his holy temple. Romans 3:25 even says God made Jesus our "mercy seat" through the shedding of his blood. Repentance means we turn away from our sin and turn towards Jesus.

Former pro soccer player Gavin Peacock tells the story of how his dad would take him into the backyard and teach him how to quickly switch the direction of the soccer ball with his feet. For hours he'd practice turning to the left and right, dribbling in and out of cones. His dad was right: the art of turning served him well. At 16, he signed a professional contract with the English Premier League.

But he says, "I'd achieved the goal—and I wasn't really happy... I was an insecure young man in the cutthroat world of professional sport. Soccer was my god. If I played well on a Saturday, I was high; if I played poorly, I was low. My sense of well-being depended entirely on my performance. I soon realized achieving the goal wasn't all it was cracked up to be."

When he was 18, he was still struggling to find purpose, so he decided to attend a local church. Afterward, the pastor invited him to his house for a Bible study. He says, "When they spoke about Jesus, they displayed a life and joy I didn't have. They talked about sin as if it had consequences and about God as if they knew him."

So, little by little, he began to understand the gospel. He says, "I realized my biggest problem wasn't whether I met the disapproval of a 20,000-strong crowd on Saturday; my biggest

problem was my sin and the disapproval of almighty God. I realized the biggest obstacle to happiness was soccer was king instead of Jesus, who provided a perfect righteousness for me. Over time, my eyes were opened through that Sunday meeting, and I turned, repented, and believed the gospel. My heart still burned for soccer, but it burned for Christ more.

At age 35, Gavin retired. He now serves as a pastor in Canada. He says, "All those years ago, my earthly father taught me the art of turning, but it was my heavenly Father who turned me first to Christ and then helped me turn others to Christ by preaching his gospel."

You see, it's all about turning. It sounds so simple, but turning is a skill we must practice. That's what Jonah did, as he was sinking into the abyss. And that's what we must do when we see we're sinking because we've turned away from God. In our desperation, we can turn back to him, to Jesus, our mercy seat. Let me ask you, how is God using this moment of desperation as an invitation for you to turn?

Commit to Worship Him Alone

But Jonah isn't finished yet. In the last part of this prayer, he re-commits himself to worshipping God.

Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. 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.' vv. 8-9

He's cried out to God in desperation, he's turned toward God in repentance, and now he's worshipping with "*shouts of grateful praise.*"

He starts with a statement: "*Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.*" This is a profound statement. Who's he pointing to when he speaks of those who cling to worthless idols? We know the Ninevites clung to worthless idols. The sailors who threw him into the water did as well, at least until they met Jonah. But I believe Jonah is thinking of himself. Jonah never worshipped idols of wood and stone, but he certainly made an idol out of his own religion.

We saw last week that he thought the Ninevites were beyond the grace of God. He was a law-keeping Jew. He wanted nothing to do with a God who'd pour his grace and mercy out on people as rotten as them. What is that? That's idolatry. What is idolatry if not worshipping an image WE make of God? We do this all time. We want God to fit into our own little box. We want him to conform to our own opinions of who's deserving of his mercy and grace. We want to create our own religion that makes us good and everyone else bad.

But look at what Jonah learned. He says when we do that, we actually turn away from God's love for us. He uses the Hebrew word for love that means God's steadfast, covenantal love. When

we worship idols, we trade in that love for lesser love. You can't have both. Idolatry is really all about what we love; it's about what we look to for love. We take the good things God gives, and we make them ultimate things we can't live without; things, ideas, and people we love and cling to. For Gavin Peacock, it was soccer and the recognition it brought him. It might be our career, our spouse or partner, our children, our money, our reputation, even our religion can become an idol if, like Jonah, we worship a god that has to play by our rules. Listen, you can be a church-going, Bible-reading, K-LOVE listening person and still worship idols! I can even be a faithful pastor, and deep down, it's still all about me.

I drive a Honda Accord. I like my car. It's kind of boring, but it's dependable. I don't know why, but lately, I've wanted to get a truck. It's like this idea entered my head, and now every truck that drives by I check out, and some of them I lust after. I mean, first, I wanted a Dodge Ram. Then it was an F150. I see a Toyota Tundra, and I want that. Or maybe I should get a small truck. After all, I really have no need for whatever people put in the back of their truck. Maybe a Ford Ranger or a Nissan Frontier would do. I have to tell you; it's the dumbest thing. I don't need a truck. I have a perfectly good car. But it's like I'm obsessed with trucks!

You see, when we become obsessed with anything besides the true and living God, something's amiss. We need to stop clinging to that and start clinging to God. That's what Jonah is doing. He's letting go of that idol, and he's clinging to God and his steadfast love instead. He commits himself to offer grateful praise to Him.

Notice he says he'll make good on what he's vowed to do. That's part of worship, too. Worship is more than coming here and singing songs. It's laying our entire life on the altar for him to use. It seems while in the belly of the fish, Jonah vowed to do what God called him to do in the first place. "Okay, God. If you say so, I'll go preach to those horrible Ninevites." Why does he make that vow? Because he's learned in the belly of the fish that "Salvation comes from the Lord." He doesn't get to choose who gets saved and who doesn't!

So, let me ask you, are you sinking? If so, consider God's purpose in this is realignment. You can go from the depths of despair to the heights of worship, from going down to going up. Cry out to God. Let go of your idols and turn to his holy temple, to Jesus himself. Commit yourself to worship him and Him alone. When you do that, the place that should have been the place of death will become a place of deliverance and life. And God himself will get the Oscar as you say, "Salvation comes from the Lord!"

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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