

Jonah: Praying for God's Deliverance

DARRELL DELANEY

The older we get, the more we reflect on decisions we have made and will make. When we look back, we often learn from the experiences that happen because of decisions. Sometimes we did what was good and right; other times, we didn't because we wanted our way. Unfortunately, when we got our way, it wasn't exactly what we wanted either. The contentment we thought we would find ultimately could not be found there. In that moment, we needed God's mercy to set us straight and give us another chance. In this episode of *Groundwork*, we will learn from Jonah, who made a decision that put him in a tough situation, and a merciful God who spared him from the consequences he deserved. We will also look at how Christ shows up...yes, Christ...in this passage. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in a series on the book of Jonah. This is the second of a four-part series, and we have found that Jonah has been a very interesting book thus far. There is nothing that has been left to the stretch of the imagination, and we have found Jonah getting himself into a little bit of trouble.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We noted in the first program, Darrell, that of the twelve minor prophets, as we call them...minor just because they are shorter than Isaiah and Jeremiah...Jonah stands out because it is a story and not just a series of prophecies like you would find in Amos; and Jonah also stands out because his words were not addressed to Israel, but he was told to go to Nineveh, a city...maybe a Babylonian city...but it wasn't Israel; and so, we said that was unusual; but then the other thing we noted that was unusual was that basically in the other prophetic books, when God tells a prophet: Go; they go. When God tells a prophet: Speak; they speak. But God tells Jonah to go and to speak, and Jonah says: No.

DARRELL DELANEY

No.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; he literally goes the opposite direction and tries to run away from God. So, we saw that in Chapter 1. He tries to run away from God on a ship, but God sends a storm, and the sailors eventually figure out that Jonah is the problem, and Jonah says: If you want to save your lives, you have to toss me in the drink. So, they do—they toss him overboard. They don't want to...the sailors, they weren't godly, God-fearing, Yahweh worshippers, but they were good men. So, they did...they threw him into the sea; and the last thing we read from the end of Chapter 1 was that God sent a great fish to swallow Jonah.

DARRELL DELANEY

If you think about this, it is kind of strange to think: Okay, a grown man was swallowed by a giant fish. Every Sunday school lesson just kind of moves on from that point, but we need to think about that, because I don't think anybody could live for three days in the belly of a fish.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I don't think you could live for five minutes in the belly of a fish. There is no air. So, I think what we can say is, we very much believe that Jonah is a true historical story. We very much believe he did go and preach to the Ninevites, and everything that we have read...he tried to run away; but here, in Jonah 2, we get a little bit of a fanciful element thrown in...

DARRELL DELANEY

Fantastical, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, a little fantastical element, which allows the narrative to do what it is going to do, which is a psalm that Jonah somehow composes while he is sinking into the sea; and so, it is a good literary device to have Jonah hit the pause button long enough to, you know, talk to God now, now that God has...he has not escaped God, so now he has to talk to God.

DARRELL DELANEY

And in this situation, it pretty much seems like Jonah has hit rock bottom. So, as we pick up in Chapter 2, we read the whole chapter...there are only ten verses in it...it says: From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. ²He 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. ³You 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. ⁴I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' ⁵The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep [waters] surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. ⁶To 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."

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁷"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. ⁸Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. ⁹But 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.'" (And here is the last verse.) ¹⁰And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. So, the great fish, whatever kind of a sea creature this was supposed to be, for Jonah, this wasn't the punishment, this was the salvation. The fish is what saved his life, right? And from the sounds of it, he sank for a while. If he's got seaweed around his head, sinking to the roots of the mountain, the fish is what saved him, so he is grateful for the fish. So, that is the first thing to notice. The fish wasn't part of the punishment; the fish was the salvation.

DARRELL DELANEY

Jonah pretty much got himself into a situation that he could not fix himself; and so, God had to intervene to save Jonah from his own consequences, if you will. This situation should be similar...it should be familiar to us...for someone who comes to their senses and then goes back and makes it right. It reminds me of Luke 15, in the parable of the lost son, where he says: Oh, no; I am going to come to myself. He is out there with the pigs. He squandered his life inheritance. He is out in the situation, far from home, and he comes to himself and says: I have to come back. I have to go back to my father. I have to repent. And that is exactly what was happening in the belly of the fish with Jonah.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and you know, it is interesting...I mean, you wouldn't expect the sinking in the sea or being in a fish to be a place where you would write a poem, but...

DARRELL DELANEY

Or sing a song.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; but this is what Jonah does; and even though Jonah maybe made this up, he may have also been remembering, because this week, Darrell, as we were getting ready to do this episode, I had occasion to study Psalm 116, and Psalm 116 sounds a lot like Jonah, too. Psalm 116 begins: I love the Lord, for he heard my cry...

DARRELL DELANEY

My cry...

SCOTT HOEZEE

He heard my cry for mercy. ³The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overwhelmed... ⁴Then I called on the name of the Lord: "Lord, save me!"

So, there is a lot of resemblance to Psalm 116 here and to other psalms as well; but the point is, Jonah really doesn't deserve the mercy of God. I mean, he deserved to be punished. He disobeyed God. He tried to run away from God. He ignored God's command on his life; and yet, God has been merciful by sending this fish; and again, the fish is the source of his deliverance. We should also note, Darrell, that Jonah 2:9, the last part, is the dead center of the book of Jonah. This is the exact midpoint in terms of words and verses, and it is where Jonah says: Salvation comes from the Lord. That is the dead, literary center of Jonah, and it is the dead theological center of Jonah. That is the message of this book: Salvation comes from the Lord.

DARRELL DELANEY

And because salvation comes from the Lord, we too can cry out to God in our deep places as well...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

Metaphorically speaking. If we feel that we are hitting a rock-bottom place, even if it is a situation of our own demise...of our own doing...we still have a God who wants to hear from us; and if that pain is inflicted, he still wants to know, and he wants us to pray to him and talk to him; and we want to talk about where mercy comes in when we get into this next segment, so stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are in a series...a four-part series corresponding to the four chapters of the book of Jonah, and we are in the second chapter here; and by the time we get to the end of the second chapter, we are, Darrell, at the exact midpoint of the story...the midpoint of the book...and so, we have talked about Jonah sinking down, and despairing of his life...seaweed wrapped around his head, sinking down to the roots of the mountains; and how the fish is actually what delivers him. He is thankful for the fish. The fish isn't the punishment, the fish is the vehicle, literally, of salvation; but there is some other stuff that we can think about here, too.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, I was thinking about how the deep sea in Old Testament culture...in Hebrew culture...represents the dead place. It is Sheol...it is hell...it is the grave; and the last place you want to go is deep down in the sea, where the sea creatures live; and so, that is why this book, when it talks about his descent, he literally goes from wherever God called him from, he is fleeing to Tarshish...he is going to Joppa...he is going down, down, down, and he literally goes further down...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

Down into the depths; and the ones who did not believe in God, did not even want to throw him over because they realized: Oh, no one comes back from that. And so, the fact that he is literally in the descent in this situation where he is moving away from God, and the fact that that is the dead place is a real desolate situation for Jonah.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; we need to remember the cosmology, if you will, the worldview of the ancient Israelites. They pretty much believed the earth is flat, and that there is this dome of the firmament over the top of it. That is where the sky was and the stars; and that was in the realm of God. So, there were waters over the earth...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That was the firmament kept out, and there were the waters *under* the earth; and that was the place of death. That is where God wasn't, right? So, when you sank down, you were moving farther away from God...farther away from the firmament above, into the waters below—the waters beneath the earth; and as you said, Darrell, that is the place of Sheol. Some while ago on *Groundwork*, we did a series in which we touched on how views of the afterlife changed in different parts of the Bible. We tend to think of heaven or hell, but the Israelites believed that everybody kind of went to Sheol. It was sort of this grim holding tank...

DARRELL DELANEY

Holding pattern...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it wasn't a pleasant place. It wasn't hell, but it wasn't a pleasant place, and it was not a place from which they thought they could praise God. Anyway, Jonah feels like he is sinking down to that, and the only way he is going to get out of that...and not to get too far ahead of ourselves in this episode, but when you were talking just a minute ago, Darrell, this is kind of a resurrection story.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jonah is, by all rights, dead...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, if he is going to live, it is only because of the mercy of God; not the *grace* of God in this case, but the *mercy* of God.

DARRELL DELANEY

And mercy is the theme, I believe, that shines brightly in this book, Scott. Mercy is when you don't get what you do deserve. Grace is when you get what you don't deserve, which is good; but mercy is when you don't get what you do deserve, because he did everything the opposite of what God wanted him to do...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

And yet, God still intervenes in this situation to literally bring him back from the dead; and so, I think there are New Testament...there are echoes of this all over the place, but in the New Testament, this specific passage in Ephesians Chapter 2 talks about this when Paul is writing to Timothy at the church at Ephesus. He says:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ²in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴But, because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in our transgressions... ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.

So, you see, Scott, like the fact that God is rich in mercy is the reason why he rescues Jonah, and why he sends the fish in the first place, because he has a plan that he wants to save these Ninevites, for whatever reason in his good purpose, but he wants to show mercy to Nineveh, and he also wants to show mercy to Jonah, but he also wants to show it to us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; you were dead, Paul wrote to the Ephesians; and you could say the same thing to Jonah: You were dead...

DARRELL DELANEY

Exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You were as good as dead...you were sinking down to the grave—to Sheol—to the depths, the roots of the mountains. Now, though, if you are going to be alive, it is because God is merciful; and again, verse 9, the dead center of the book: Salvation comes from the Lord. And that is going to be true for Jonah now. Ironical that Jonah, who didn't want to preach a message of salvation to the Ninevites, now that he needs it, he is perfectly willing to call out to God and say: Hey, help me. Hello. Help!

As you said, Darrell, God could have very well said: No.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sink on down, pal.

DARRELL DELANEY

This is what you deserve.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You got yourself into this jam. I don't really have to get you out of it, but I am going to anyway because I am merciful; and so, God did that and sent the fish, saved Jonah, you know; and then, of course, we are going to see in the next chapter that he reboots...he reboots the story and starts it over and sends him back to preach. You know, it is sort of a reminder of another verse in the New Testament: Romans 10:11: "Anyone who believes in God will never be put to shame." ¹²For there is no difference between the Jew and the Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³for, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Verse 13, that is what Jonah did...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then, this part also applies to Jonah: ¹⁴How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one they have not heard? And how can they hear unless someone preaches to them? ¹⁵ And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" For Nineveh, as we are going to see in the next program of this series, Jonah is going to be those beautiful feet, to bring a message of salvation to Nineveh.

DARRELL DELANEY

That is a wonderful point, because no matter how many faults and flaws Jonah has, God still wants to use him to be those beautiful feet, to bring the message of salvation that he just sang about in the belly of this fish; and I love the fact that God does not just want to use Jonah, and he doesn't want to cast aside those who have faults and flaws, but he uses a liar named Abraham, he uses a murderer named Moses, he uses a prostitute named Rahab; anybody who has these faults and flaws, they do not necessarily have to disqualify you from God's merciful plans to save and deliver people; and so, it is really exciting to see what God would do in his mercy if we obey his promptings...that is one thing...but when we don't obey his promptings, we are in desperate need of his mercy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is exactly right; and you know, one of the things I think...you just sort of went through a list of some biblical characters...the Bible is always honest about its main characters. They are people with flaws...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are going to talk about that with Jonah a little bit in the next program, too; but the one thing that we always need to remember, and the one thing Jonah needed to remember...you know, Jonah, we are going to find out, didn't think the Ninevites deserved salvation...

DARRELL DELANEY

Ah, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, Jonah, guess what; neither did you. Right? I mean, look in the mirror...look in the mirror. You don't deserve it either. I don't deserve it; you don't deserve it, Darrell. None of us deserve it. We only get it because God is rich in mercy; and again, salvation comes from the Lord. So, that is the action here in Jonah 2, but as we close out this program, we are going to talk a little bit about what that means for our lives today. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are in the second chapter of Jonah, a four-part series for the four chapters. So, Darrell, we kind of get to the so-what part of this. So, we have seen that Jonah got what he...mercy he didn't deserve, but he did ask for once he was in extremis...once he was sinking down into the grave. By all rights, he was dead. God saves him anyway; and this is the message of this second chapter of Jonah, and we can kind of think about how it applies to us today as well.

DARRELL DELANEY

One of the things that is important, Scott, is that no matter what is going on in your life, it is always a convenient time to pray and ask God for help in any circumstance. I mean, Jonah does his prayer in the belly of a fish. Maybe you don't want to wait until the situation gets dire or emergent for you; but whether you are on a mountain high or a valley low, please continue your conversation and prayer with God. I mean, the book of James reminds us of this: ^{5:13} paraphrased If any one of you is in trouble, he or she should pray; and the Bible specifically says in Psalm 46 that God is our ever-present help, especially in times of trouble. So, we should remember that it is okay to talk to God in any circumstance. Prayer, praise, singing...it should apply to the everyday life of a Christian.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if there is one thing the Bible makes clear, times of suffering, times of crisis, times when we feel like, as Jonah says in Chapter 2 here that the cords of death are entangling us, you know, that we feel like we are sinking down. In Jonah's case, it was his own fault. It isn't always our fault, but those times don't mean God is absent, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is why the psalms of lament are there. If God feels absent, tell God that you feel like he is not there. You can yell at him a little bit, even, you know, and just, you know, beg for mercy, and he will give it; because, as we have been pointing out, mercy is God's thing, right? Mercy is God's specialty. It is a gift we don't deserve, but it is a gift God seems eager to give to us again and again, whenever we need it, and whenever we ask for it.

DARRELL DELANEY

Because of our flaws, faults, and imperfections, we desperately need his mercy. There is no way we could get his mission done, there is no way we could serve God with any level of consistency without his mercy to give us another chance, because we readily deserve those things when we sin; when we mess up, we deserve the consequences that we are supposed to get. As a good judge, he is holy; we deserve it; but because he is merciful, he gives us another chance.

I think it is also important to remember that God's character is something that can help encourage in times of trouble. The fact that God has never changed, that he is not going to change. The consistency of his character should definitely encourage us. We sing this old song: We come this far by faith; leaning on the Lord; trusting in his holy Word; he has never failed me yet.

The fact that God is who he says he is, that he changes not, his compassions fail not, and he is who he says he is all the time, can encourage us when we feel wavery...when we feel like we are not sure, when we don't think we are going to make it. Having enough time to remember and count those blessings I think would be an encouragement.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one other thing we can point out, a note of realism: Actions have consequences...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And for us, too. I mean, Jonah's actions are what led to the situation he was in. Our choices, even as Christians, can have repercussions. Actions have consequences. If we ignore our prayer life, if we ignore God's Word, we don't immerse ourselves in the Word of God, we allow ourselves to wander in some areas of our lives, sort of bracket them out from our faith; well, that is going to catch up with us eventually. That doesn't mean that God is going to, you know, cut you off. It doesn't mean you are going to hell—not ultimate consequences. God will come back, but you know, when we...as Jonah did...when we choose to turn away from God...and it may not be as active and obvious a choice as Jonah...but, you know, when we know the right thing to do and consistently don't do it...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the same situation over and over, it is going to catch up with us. You know, it reminds me of that old story : *Rip Van Winkle*. In the early part of the story, he would drink too much, and every time he would down a shot of whiskey or drink a beer, he would say: We won't count this one; but the narrator basically says: Somebody is always counting...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They all count, right? You know, we have to recognize that God won't leave us just because we have made bad choices, but we need to come back to God; and if we want his mercy, then we need to respond to that mercy in an appropriate way, too.

DARRELL DELANEY

That is a very good point, Scott. I think that another point that I had is that Jesus Christ specifically alluded to this passage when he was talking about himself in Matthew Chapter 12, reading verse 38, it says: Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." ³⁹He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (There are those threes again.)

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

⁴¹The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.

So, you see in this verse...specifically in verse 40...Jesus references how long he was...Jonah was in the fish three days and three nights. We didn't get that in the book of Jonah. We got it from Jesus' interpretation of what happened. He also references it as proof of his death, burial and resurrection. So, now it is a redemptive, Messianic text. It wasn't normally that before. When Jesus redacts it, it now helps us remember what his Person and work are like.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; that is what we said earlier. I never...for a long time I didn't understand Jesus' reply here. Like, the sign of Jonah. What is that? But now, I think I do have an understanding. We said earlier in this episode, Darrell, this is a resurrection story. Jonah was dead; by all rights he was dead, and he was sinking to the dead; and if he was going to live, it was only going to be because of the mercy and the power of God; and so also Jesus. He died—he really, truly died—he died for our sins in this case—and if Jesus was going to have a future after three days in the tomb, then it was only going to be because of the mercy and the power of God, who raised him to new life; not just for Jesus, but of course, now for all of us; again, tying back to that salvation comes from the Lord line, which is the center of the book.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we see that it is redemptive and it is Messianic and it is a merciful God who continues to intervene in our lives, again and again, even though we sometimes make mistakes. We learned that from the book of Jonah, and we see an encouragement, thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we study Jonah's message and the Ninevites' response in Jonah Chapter 3.

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DARRELL DELANEY

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