

Hope And A Great Big Fish 2018

I hope you can handle one more message on hope! I want to look at a couple of lessons about hope that we learn from the Old Testament book of Jonah. Most everyone has heard of Jonah. Even if you've never read the bible, most people have heard about the man who was swallowed by a whale. That's Jonah. The book of Jonah opens with this: **“The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.”**

Jonah 1:1-3

What was Jonah thinking? All in all, not a good plan. Just a quick reminder of what was going on. Jonah was a prophet in the northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jereboam II. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, a pagan city in what is now modern Iraq, near Mosul. The Assyrians were dreaded enemies of Israel and within about 30 years they would actually conquer Israel and carry off its inhabitants into exile. Jonah is instructed to go to Nineveh and tell the people that God is going to destroy them. Why did Jonah disobey God and run away to Tarshish? Perhaps because he suspected that if the people repented, God was so compassionate and merciful that he would forgive them and let them live and Jonah hated the Assyrians. He wanted them all dead. He rightly suspected that in the future they would be conquerors of Israel! He didn't want them to repent or to be shown mercy.

Can you dare to see something of yourself in Jonah? Can you think of a group of people that you dislike or hate or despise and yet God is calling you to love them, to show them mercy? Anyone God is telling you to love or help, or anything God is telling you to do and you are running the opposite direction? Maybe you can relate to Jonah.

Jonah decides to try to run from the presence of God and books passage on a ship that is sailing in the opposite direction from Nineveh. But God sends a terrible storm and finally, through a series of interesting events, Jonah tells the men on board that he is the cause for the storm and that if they will throw him overboard, the seas will calm and their problems will be solved. That is exactly what happens. They throw Jonah overboard and the bible says “the raging sea grew calm.” It sounds like curtains for Jonah as they used to say. Things had gone from bad to worse to hopeless as Jonah is thrown into the sea. But this is where our story begins

this morning. I want to show you a couple of important lessons that Jonah discovers in the midst of what appears to be a hopeless situation.

First of all, **There is hope for people in impossible situations!** The sailors threw Jonah overboard into a raging sea. Jonah expected to die. The sailors expected he would die. It looks and sounds like an impossible situation to me, but the Lord had something else planned. The bible says, **“But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.” Jonah 1:17**

Have you ever had one of those days? Jonah is on board ship in a terrible storm, then the sailors cast lots and it points to him, then he is thrown overboard, bobbing in the open sea, thinking well, I guess it can't get any worse than this. I'll just relax and drown when suddenly he sees a giant fish, a whale or something headed towards him with its mouth wide open and the next thing he knows, Jonah is swallowed up and is inside the fish.

We get a glimpse of what is going on inside the fish and inside the mind of Jonah and in his heart as we listen to him pray in chapter 2. Chapter two opens with this extraordinary statement **“From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God.”** Good plan Jonah. Now is a good time to pray. Jonah says, **“In my distress I called to the Lord.”** In my distress. You think? There's an understatement for you. In the open sea and now he's been swallowed by a whale. He's inside the belly of a fish! I think that would qualify as being in distress. **“From the depths of the grave I called for help.”** Jonah thought this would be his final resting place. It was a watery, smelly, fishy grave for him. It literally reads, “from the belly of sheol (the place of the dead) I called for help. Jonah says, I'm buried alive, just waiting for the end to come. It seemed utterly, completely hopeless. No way out. No way to be rescued. It looked hopeless.

Some of us can relate. Verse 3 he says, **“You hurled me into the deep...all your waves and breakers swept over me.”** Some of you know that feeling. You've been overwhelmed. Life has come at you like waves and breakers sweeping over you and you're drowning in it all. You know about unrelenting waves and breakers. You can't keep your head above water.

Jonah had fled from the presence of the Lord and now he feels the consequence of it all. Alone, inside the belly of this fish he says, **“I have been banished from your sight...”** There is nothing more hopeless than feeling you've been banished from God's sight, from his presence, from his mercy... Jonah says in verse 7 that he felt his life ebbing away. All hope was lost. You get the picture don't you? Hopeless. Trapped. Jonah uses words like “surrounded, threatened,

barred in, banished, engulfed.” I know some of those feelings. Frightened, alone, overwhelmed, feeling like life and the last bit of hope is slipping away, but in the midst of all of this Jonah remembered the Lord and his mercy and he doesn’t give up hope.

“When my life was ebbing away I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you...” (2:7) Here is the avenue to hope for people in hopeless situations: remember the Lord and call upon him because with the Lord there is no such thing as a hopeless situation. When it looks like all hope is gone, call upon the God of hope! Jonah says, “I thought I was trapped forever, dying.” **“To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God.”** (2:6) Jonah says, “You brought me up from the place of the dead, from sheol, where there is no hope, to a place of hope again. You brought me from death to life. Jonah teaches us it doesn’t matter how hopeless the situation there is hope when you call upon the Lord.

Look at verse 8. Jonah says, **“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”** He says idols are worthless. Clinging to anything besides God is worthless. There is nothing else that can save you. By clinging to anything besides the lord you forfeit the grace that could be yours, but if you call upon the Lord, if you put your hope and trust in the Lord, if you turn to him, if you surrender all to him, regardless of your circumstances, his grace will deliver you and bring you hope.

Maybe you feel like you are drowning in the open sea like Jonah, or maybe you’ve been swallowed up and like Jonah it feels like your life is ebbing away – hear me today – don’t give up hope! It’s too soon to give up hope! God has a plan. It seems like its gone from bad to worse, from the open sea to a watery grave inside a fish, but God has prepared that fish to be a place for hope and deliverance. Without hope it looks and smells like a grave, but with hope it becomes a place of surrender, an ark of safety, a place of new beginnings, a place of victory. From bad to worse to surrender to victory. It seems to be God’s way. Look around. If all you can see and smell is death and darkness, call on the Lord. He can turn that place into a place of victory and salvation. Jonah understood. That’s why at the end of his prayer he declares, **“Salvation comes from the Lord!”** It may have taken a strange pathway to get there, including being swallowed by a great fish, but God will get his salvation to you at just the right time.

There is hope for folks in impossible situations because salvation comes from the Lord. Don’t give up. Call on the Lord of salvation, the Lord of hope. I’ve been in some of those

situations where I thought the Lord had banished me from his sight like Jonah and it turned out he was just getting me in a position where I could surrender completely to him, into a position where I could see that salvation comes from the Lord. Don't curse the fish that swallowed you, he may just be part of God's plan to get you where you need to be. That fish wasn't the end, it was the means of deliverance. That fish was going to carry Jonah to the place of ministry and usefulness and purpose. Salvation is coming from the Lord and he might even use a great fish!

The second lesson of hope we learn from Jonah is – **There is hope for all of us who have failed!** This may be one of the toughest lessons for a lot of us. We've failed God, we've made mistakes, we've run from the Lord, we assume all hope is lost, but it turns out there is still hope. God hasn't given up on us yet!

Jonah was a prophet with some success. He prophesied to king Jeroboam II of Israel's expansion and it came to pass (2 Kings 14:25). But now Jonah rejected God's instruction and disobeyed. Blatantly disobeyed. He did the exact opposite of what God asked him to do. He allowed his racism, his anger, to affect his relationship with God. Actually he even allowed his national pride and love for his country to get in the way of his walk with God. He put Israel and its interest before his relationship with God. I've seen Christians more devoted to America than they are to obeying Jesus and his commands, choosing the flag over the cross. We have to be careful. It was part of Jonah's downfall and it can be part of the church's downfall as well!

The point is the bible says Jonah ran from the presence of God. He wasn't just disobeying, he was trying to get away from God. It was as if he was turning his back on God. Backsliding some would call it. Rejecting the command of the Lord. But the Psalmist has already told us, **“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.” Psalm 139:7-10.** You can run, but you can't hide!

Chapter 1:3 tells us Jonah disobeyed God and tried to run from his presence. 1:6 tells us he had stopped praying. Everyone else on board the ship was praying to their god, but the captain has to wake Jonah up. Jonah was sleeping instead of praying. That is a sermon in itself! It's a sign of separating from God when we stop praying. Jonah was separated from fellowship with God. Jonah knew what he had done and figured there was no hope for himself. He told the

sailors on board that he was running away from the Lord (1:10). He gave up on himself and told them to throw him overboard. “It’s my fault” he told them. There is no hope for me. I’ve failed and there is nothing left to do but to admit it and die.

Jonah figured he had made his last mistake and God would have nothing to do with him anymore. This was it. He had gotten his wish. He was no doubt going to be banished from the presence of the Lord forever.

The sailors throw him into the sea but look at this. Instead of God turning away from Jonah, although it may have seemed that way to Jonah at the moment, rather than experiencing God’s rejection, Jonah experienced God’s merciful provision. Look at the words of verse 17 – **“But the Lord provided...”** God wasn’t through with Jonah yet. God’s mercy was still reaching out to Jonah. It was a severe mercy. He didn’t prepare a bed of ease for him. There were still consequences to his running from God, but the Lord provided. He didn’t land on a cruise ship. He is inside the belly of a fish, trapped in the darkness, with seaweed wrapped around his head (2:5), but it was the perfect place to encounter himself and his own foolish behavior and it was the perfect place to encounter the mercy of the Lord! The Lord provided for Jonah what he needed.

When Jonah thought he was finished, he encountered the provision of the Lord. When Jonah felt himself sinking down into the depths, it was there he found the Lord’s mercy. **“To the roots of the mountains I sank down...but you brought my life up from the pit” Jonah 2:6.**

You may have failed the Lord. You may be running from his presence and feeling like there is no hope for someone like you, but even in your sin, even in your failure, there is still hope. Look at the word of the Lord to Jonah in chapter 3. This may be the most important thing you hear today. **“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.” Jonah 3:1**

A second time. A second chance. God is the God of second chances. We’ve blown it, failed, disobeyed, tried to run but he is the God of a second chance. The God of another chance. The bible is full of stories of people who have failed and yet God in his mercy takes us messed up folks and gives us another chance.

Maybe you’ve thought God couldn’t forgive you for your past mistakes. Maybe you’ve been convinced that your situation is hopeless. That you’ve run out of chances. That God couldn’t ever love you or use you again. You’ve run too often, too far. You’ve stopped praying. You’ve stopped trusting, but today, like Jonah, you hear God calling you again, another chance,

another time. A second time, or a 100th time, he is calling you. Out of the storm, out of your failure, out of the belly of a fish, whatever circumstance you're in, the Lord is calling you. It's not hopeless. Your situation is not hopeless. You are not hopeless. God is calling to all of us who have failed. He has made provision for us if we will turn to him. From inside the belly of that fish, Jonah made a decision that changed everything. In spite of all that was going on, Jonah said, **“But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.” Jonah 2:9**

When Jonah made that decision to trust in the Lord, in spite of his hopeless circumstances, in spite of his disobedience and failures and sins, when he surrendered it all to the Lord, everything changed. **“And the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time...Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.” Jonah 2:10-3:3.**

Are you ready for a second chance? Are you ready for a new beginning? Are you ready to move from hopeless to salvation and victory? It's start with believing and trusting in the Lord. It starts with surrendering all to him. “With a song of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to you.” Isn't it time you surrendered it all to him? It's time for surrender and for obedience. God is giving you another chance to obey him.

There is hope for impossible situations. There is hope for all who have failed. There is hope for you today. Isn't it time you made good on your promises, on your vow to the Lord? It is time for you to stop running and to turn to him. He is calling you, offering you mercy and forgiveness. I think it's time you surrendered to him and obeyed the word of the Lord.