

In The Belly

By

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Introduction

As young children, we have all heard the story of Jonah. Some know his story as “Jonah and the Big Fish”; others know it as “Jonah and the Whale”. We are all familiar with the basic story line that Jonah was told by the Lord to go to Nineveh. Jonah did not want to go and decided to get on a boat and sail to Tarshish instead. Along the way, a storm came which endangered the ship, and Jonah was thrown overboard. He then spent three days in the belly of a fish. Later he was “vomited on dry land” and eventually went to Nineveh where his preaching caused the people to repent and turn to God.

As I read the book of Jonah, chapter 2 caught my attention. The entire chapter takes place inside the belly of the fish. As I thought about this scene, I realized that Jonah was at the lowest point in his life. He was helpless, caught in the grips of death, with no way out. When we are driven to our knees by life, we can find ourselves in a similar type of situation, where the only option seems to be “to give up”.

Is there hope? Yes! As long as there is a God in Heaven, there is hope. This study focuses on Jonah’s prayer and provides the evidence for our hope in the Lord.

Scriptures Used In This Lesson

Jonah 1

Jonah 2

Proverbs 6: 16 – 19

II Samuel 21: 15 – 17

Psalms 18: 3 – 6, 16 – 19

Exodus 20: 3 – 6

II Corinthians 5: 18 – 21

What Is “In The Belly”?

Read Jonah 1: 1 – 2, and 2: 1. Jonah found himself inside the fish because he had sinned, i.e., he had deliberately disobeyed the command of the Lord. The “belly” is the near-death experience. It can be physical, emotional or both. It is a point where we feel helpless, hopeless, and overrun by our circumstances. Similar to Jonah’s experience, our “in the belly” experience will be dark, uncomfortable, distasteful, and all encompassing. Jonah was most probably surrounded with partially digested food. Our experience may be just as disgusting to us. We may feel that we have been “eaten alive” by our circumstances. Death may seem to be just a step away. We are “in the belly”. We feel that we have sunk as low as we can go; life can’t get much worse. Read Jonah 2: 3 – 5 to get a sense of how helpless Jonah felt.

Recently I was confronted with an experience that seemed like it was beyond me. Every step I took to try to correct the problem was unsuccessful. I found frustration around every corner. I asked for help from others, but they were limited in what they could do or the time they could give attending my

needs. The clock was ticking away and I felt helpless. Several times in my mind I said, “I give up. I just give up. There’s no way out.”

Have you ever had an “in the belly” experience? If so what area of your life did it affect? Have you seen others go through an “in the belly” experience? How did you/they survive?

How do we get to this point? Many times, we find ourselves in difficult situations because of our decisions and acts of disobedience like Jonah. Sometimes these decisions can have very dire consequences, not only for us, but for others as well. We sit back and wonder, “How in the world did I ever get myself in this position?”

You may not experience your “in the belly” event immediately; it may come over time. Jonah didn’t experience the fish until sometime after he traveled in the opposite direction of the place God instructed him to go. Read Jonah 1: 1 - 3. Nineveh was near the Tigris River in northern Iraq; Tarshish was probably in Spain. The extent of Jonah intentional disobedience is more clear when we realize that Tarshish was about 2000 miles from Nineveh.

When was the last time you willingly disobeyed God, i.e., you did the opposite of what He told you to do? How did the circumstances turn out, pleasant or unpleasant? Did you encounter consequences that were for the most part, expected or unexpected? Did you benefit from disobedience? Why did you disobey? Why do people in general disobey?

Key Point: You can’t run from God.

Key Point: Many times we will encounter *unexpected* consequences due to our disobedience to God.

Here is a list of the type of decisions that can get us into trouble, i.e., “in the belly”:

- Willful disregard of direct instructions from God
- Disobedience of biblical principals
- Going contrary to sound wisdom
- Decisions based on rationalization (justification of actions after you’ve already decided to engage in them)
- Decisions based on manipulation (of circumstances, people, etc.)
- Decisions based on trying to win the approval of others
- “Spur-of-the-moment” decisions, or ones based on passion or rage/anger
- Any of the sins listed in Proverbs 6: 16 – 19
- Fear
- Worry
- “Vain imaginations” (acting upon thoughts and things that you have imagined as if they were true)
- Bitterness

What type of decision got Jonah in trouble? What type of decision last got you in trouble? What type of decision do you think “trips up” most people? What is the best way to keep from falling “in the belly”?

Not all “in the belly” experiences are due to our decisions. Sometimes we are entrapped by our enemies – physical and spiritual. Read II Samuel 21: 15 – 17. This “in the belly” experience of King David came when he was engaged in battle against the Philistines. He had fought until he was exhausted. Seeing his condition, one of the Philistines determined to kill him. But one of David’s soldiers came to his rescue.

Can you think of a situation where someone may have been “in the belly” due to the actions of others? What about children abducted by others? What about soldiers engaged in a battle? What about those who lose their jobs? What about those whose spouse, and/or parents have abandoned them?

Sometimes what we experience is not our fault; things just happen over which we have no control.

Key Point: Sometimes bad things happen because we live in a sinful world that is separated from God’s guiding Holy Spirit.

Your Cry Is Heard

Read Jonah 2: 1 – 10. Let’s take a closer look at what the Word is telling us.

Verse 2: Even though Jonah was in this position because of his disobedience, and he was as low as he felt as he could go, the Lord still heard his cry. *For the child of God, there is no condition or situation that is out of reach of the hand of God.* He can hear your cry no matter what’s going on. Jonah’s cry was one of desperation, sincerity, intensity, and repentance; one of “I’ve got no where to turn except to the Lord.”

Verses 3 – 5: These verses describe the severity of Jonah’s condition. Notice the following phrases (from the NIV). Have you ever felt this way before?

- Hurlled me into the deep...
- The very heart of the seas...
- Currents swirled about me...
- Waves and breakers swept over me...
- 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...

Needless to say, Jonah felt he was in a hopeless condition with no way out. Things could not get much worse. Notice Jonah 2: 6. Jonah felt “barred in forever”, but the last half of the verse shows the hand of God. Again, it bears repeating, *there is no condition or situation that is out of reach of the hand of God.*

Read Psalm 18: 3 – 6, 16 - 19. David felt the same way, but came to the same conclusion: God heard his cry.

Key Point: For the child of God, there is no condition or situation that is out of reach of the hand of God. Your cry is heard.

Attitude Is Everything

A natural response to the Key Point above is, “Well why doesn’t God do something...now? I’m suffering!” The key to Jonah’s salvation from certain destruction is found in verse 7. His attitude towards the Lord was not one of anger, impatience, or frustration. It was one where he had given up, completely, and as he looked toward the Lord, his heart cried out. He had a repentant heart that acknowledged the holiness of God. *The Lord, not his circumstance, was his primary focus.* It was at this point that Jonah could be in “right relationship” with the Lord. His heart had turned from one of disobedience to one of obedience. Jonah had repented.

In verse 7, Jonah “remembered” the Lord; he offered up a prayer to His “holy temple”. In Jonah’s distress he still recognized that the presence of God was *holy* and honored the Lord as such.

When you are “in the belly”, do you remember the Lord...as holy?

Read verse 9. With a “song of thanksgiving”, Jonah would “sacrifice” to the Lord. He acknowledged that “Salvation comes from the Lord”. What’s Jonah saying in all this? “God, I honor *You*.” Jonah placed God above his circumstance.

Key Point: The key to our deliverance is placing God above our circumstance.

Have you placed God above your circumstance? Have you honored Him in spite of what surrounds you? How can we transition from “consumed with grief, regret and worry” to “consumed with the Lord”? What holds us back and keeps us from making that transition?

What Are You Clinging To?

I skipped one verse in all this – verse 8. Read verse 8. This verse caught my attention more than any other.

They that observe lying vanities, forsake their own mercy. (KJV)

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. (NIV)

Those who pay regard to false, useless, and worthless idols forsake their own [Source of] mercy and loving-kindness. (Amplified)

What are you clinging to? What do you think will bring you deliverance and rescue you from your trouble? What have you been imagining? *What is the focus of your hope...your deliverance or God?* Is God your deliverer or your bank balance? Is God the source of your strength (physical, emotional, and mental), or your own efforts? Will satisfaction come from a new job or God, Who provides the right job.

Key Point: Jonah's focus was on God, not his deliverance.

If we cling to our solutions, if we place our hope in other people, money, things of the world, or a relationship, we forfeit the favor of the Creator of the Universe – the One who spoke the world into existence. *Where you place your hope for deliverance becomes your idol - emotionally and mentally clinging to the perceived solution to your problems, instead of the One who provides your solution, is a rejection of Him.* Its almost like turning your back on Him and looking to something He created.

Key Point: Where you place your hope for deliverance becomes your idol.

Key Point: God said, "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20: 3)

God wants to be the primary focus of your life. Nothing should be placed above him...not your spouse, child, money, career, deliverance...nothing. God wants you to know Him on an intimate level. The situation you're in now is an opportunity to draw closer to Him and to get in right relationship. You may have thought you were close before, but now you have the opportunity to get even closer. *Our focus in life must be Him, not what He can provide.*

Be Reconciled

Read II Corinthians 5: 18 – 21. The word "reconciled" comes from the Greek word "katallasso" which means to "return to favor". God wants us to be "returned to His favor" through Christ. He wants us to be close to Him; to enjoy an intimacy beyond what we imagine – even in the midst of trials.

Human nature is one where we are motivated to change by discomfort. When a young child misbehaves, we sometimes apply a mild level of "discomfort" to his rear-end to "encourage" him to change his behavior. Adults, unfortunately, keep this same nature. The discomforts of life motivate us to change. God uses our discomfort to "katallasso" us and bring us to a new level of intimacy with Him. The key is in how we respond.

If we respond in anger, frustration, disobedience, bitterness, or despair, we lose the opportunity for deliverance. But if we give up and turn our heads towards His holy temple, as Jonah did, then He hears our cry. He will first act upon our hearts; that's where the intimacy takes place. Then He may or may not change our circumstances. But our intimacy with Him, His Spirit dwelling and renewing us in our hearts, will carry us through our trials if our circumstances don't change.

We can't make it on our own. It takes the grace of God to survive and thrive. That is why Jonah's words ring with truth:

"Those who pay regard to false, useless, and worthless idols forsake their own [Source of] mercy and loving-kindness. (Amplified)

Summary

In your darkest hour, God is there. You are never alone. Jonah was inside a fish at sea, and God still heard His prayer. God will never leave you nor forsake you. But you must place Him first, above anyone, anything, and even your desired deliverance from your trials. And salvation will be yours.