

TAKE YOUR NEXT STEP**JOIN A SERVE TEAM****NEW HERE?****CONNECTION CARD****STAY UP TO DATE****SUBSCRIBE TO DIGITAL BULLETIN****Series: Jonah & the Mercy of God****Title: The Depths of Mercy****Text: Jonah 1:17-2:10**

In Herman Melville's great American novel, *Moby Dick*, Father Mapple preaches a sermon on the book of Jonah before the epic voyage to hunt down the white whale. Father Mapple says, "Shipmates, this book, containing only four chapters — four yarns — is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures. Yet what depths of the soul does Jonah's deep sealine sound! What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet! What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish's belly!... As with all sinners among men, the sin of this son of Amittai was in his wilful disobedience of the command of God... And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists."

Last week, we referred to Jonah as a "story," which was not meant to suggest that the book of Jonah is fictional. To some, the word "story" implies fantasy or even intentional falsehood. However, the word "story" is simply another term for narrative, a literary form that recounts a series of facts or events and establishes a connection between them. The biblical narrative in the book of Jonah is a complex interweaving of theology, history, and literary art. Theologically, the book portrays the character of God. Historically, it recounts events in a specific time and place, even if those events seem unbelievable. As a work of literature, the author skillfully retells the story with a particular literary structure, using satire and irony to criticize those among God's people who believe God's mercy is limited only to them.

Through the story of Jonah, the main theological theme is the Lord's mercy. The Lord shows us mercy by not treating us as our sins deserve, but instead responding with compassion, patience, and rescue.

Mercy that Preserves (1:17)

- Like *Moby Dick*, the whale is the book of Jonah, which often gets too much attention. People ask, "Was the great fish a whale?" "How could someone survive in the belly of a fish?" However, the text of the book of Jonah does not focus on the fish.
- The emphasis of the text is upon the Lord, who *had arranged for the great fish to swallow Jonah*. Without the great fish, Jonah drowns. The fish embodies the mercy of God and the means through which God preserves Jonah's life. The book of Jonah contains four instances of this verb "arranged," all of which pertain to elements of nature the Lord employed to teach Jonah a lesson.
- The expression "three days and three nights" does not necessarily encompass a literal seventy-two-hour period with three whole nights and three whole days. It was a common practice in early Judaism to count a part of a day as a whole day.
- Inside the belly of the fish, Jonah's running and his illusion of control stopped. The Lord's mercy finally has Jonah's attention. In the depths of the sea, the mercy of God meets Jonah.

Mercy that Hears (2:1-2)

- Jonah 2:2-9 records Jonah's prayer from inside the great fish. Although many people pray in the book of Jonah, this is the only recorded prayer. In chapter 1, the pagan sailors prayed, and the captain asked Jonah to pray.
- Only now, in the depths, does Jonah pray. Now "in my great trouble..." Jonah cries out to God. There is no depth beyond the reach of God's mercy.

- Jonah had reached the end of himself, and God answered him. That is mercy because Jonah does not deserve an answer. He ran from God, disobeyed God's command, and endangered others, but God heard his cry from the brink of death.

Mercy in the Deep (2:3-6)

- Notice the pronoun in verse 3, "*You threw me into ocean depths...*" Jonah realizes that the Lord is in control. While the sailors threw him into sea, Jonah gave the meaning of the event as being caused by the Lord.
- Jonah describes his descent into the deep using vivid imagery and death language. Jonah has gone as low as he can go as he is buried by the weight of the sea.
- In verse 6, Jonah acknowledges God's mercy, "*But you, O Lord my God, snatched me from the jaws of death.*" God's mercy lifts Jonah from the watery grave and rescues him.

Mercy that Saves (2:7-9)

- As Jonah was slipping away, he remembered the Lord. Jonah in his running from fleeing the presence of God, but now in his trouble he remembers the mercy of the Lord.
- Jonah recognizes idols cannot save. An idol is anything we cling to instead of trusting God.
- Ultimately, Jonah confesses that salvation belongs to the Lord alone. This is the theological center of the book of Jonah: only God saves. No human effort, no morality, no religion, no self-rescue. The mercy of God saves everyone who turns to him in their trouble.

Mercy Restores (2:10)

- The Lord speaks again, now to the great fish, and orders the fish to spit Jonah onto the beach. Unlike Jonah, the fish obeys instantly. Ironically, the fish obeys better than the prophet.
- God's mercy restores Jonah, not because he earned it, but because God is merciful.

Someone Greater Than Jonah (Matthew 12:38-41)

- In Matthew 12, some religious leaders ask Jesus for a sign. Jesus briefly alludes to Jonah and the fish as a sign to a wicked generation. Jesus says someone greater than Jonah is here.
- Jesus used the story of Jonah to speak about his death, burial, and resurrection. Because, unlike Jonah, Jesus did not run from God's will. Jesus did not resist the Father's mission. Jesus willingly came to rescue sinners and embody mercy.
- Jesus entered the depths of human suffering and death to reveal the mercy of God and that salvation alone comes only through him. Jesus receives the punishment for sin that all of us deserve, but instead, we receive the mercy of God. We cannot save ourselves. No matter how deep we think we are in our troubles, the mercy of the Lord in Jesus reaches us and saves us.

Further Study of Jonah:

- Watch the BibleProjects video: <https://bibleproject.com/videos/jonah/>
- Read the book of Jonah at least once this week, or once a day this week.