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You'll Meet God Deep in the Belly

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Jonah 1:17

17 Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah 2:1-10

1 From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. 2 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. 3 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. 4 I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' 5 The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. 6 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. 7 "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. 8 "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. 9 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.'" 10 And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

New International Version

For the last few weeks we've been looking at the fascinating story of Jonah, a prophet whom God wanted to have preach to the city of Nineveh to warn them to repent before it was too late. But Jonah didn't like Nineveh. They were kind of like Nazi Germany, practicing ethnic genocide against his Jewish people and others on a regular basis. So we should have expected Jonah to despise the people of Nineveh and in no way would he want God to give them an opportunity to repent. He would have preferred God rain fire down upon them than repent and turn back to God.

The Jesus Creed, the creed that shaped all that Jesus did says "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and love your neighbor as yourself. Of course Jonah lived before Jesus but Jesus didn't invent the creed. Loving one's neighbor was part of who the Jews were meant to be. It was Jesus who reemphasized the important of loving one's neighbor.

It's not hard for me to love my wife or my children. I can buy them presents, spend time with them, do things for them. But how do we show love to God. By spending daily time with him. Do you do that? By making worship a priority. Do you do that? By singing praises to him. But the real tangible way we demonstrate love for God is how we treat others.

What about loving people we don't like? What do you do with them because they'll always be there in one form or another. How you treat those people you don't like will determine whether you love God or not. That's why those people will always be there in our life. God has called us to love them. We can either run away from them or we can show love to them. It's a hard choice, but it's ours.

If you're thinking about running away from those you can't stand it's best to have a lot of money. We learned last week that Jonah was apparently somewhat wealthy because he was one of the few in that bartering culture capable of buying a ticket on a ship. People didn't carry money or credit cards

in those days. They would barter with what they had like trading labor for a ticket.

The ship Jonah bought a ticket on was scheduled to sail in the opposite direction from where God wanted him to go. As I said last week, if you've got money it gives you the false appearance that you can control your own destiny rather than being at God's mercy. And Tarshish, on the coast of Spain, would have been the kind of place where Jonah wouldn't have to encounter many of God's people because there weren't many Jews there. Lesson here is if you're going to run from God stay away from God's people who can remind you of the Jesus Creed. A lot of times that's why people stay away from church, they don't want their lifestyle challenged.

But the reality is that money or location can't possibly insulate us from God even if it feels like it can. Sure Jonah could buy a ticket for the ship but he didn't count on a storm threatening to sink the ship. But who has proven to have control over the weather? God. Now, not every destructive storm is God trying to make a point. But in this case it was pretty clear that Jonah was the cause. And yet he still refuses to repent and turn back to God. He even tells the crew to throw him over the side. He would rather die than turn back to God because of his extreme hatred for the Assyrians. Loving God is easy, loving our neighbors not so.

The crew of rough and tough Gentile worshippers of false gods, however, actually try to do the Jesus Creed thing and look for alternative options to throwing Joshua overboard. They did everything they could including dumping their to own cargo at great expense to themselves to keep him alive but nothing worked. Eventually they had to throw Jonah overboard or risk sinking themselves. And of course, as soon as Jonah hit the water the storm stopped.

That's where we left off last week with Jonah sinking into the sea thinking he was going to die. In Jonah 1:17 we read: *Now the LORD provided a*

huge fish to swallow Jonah. Another word for “provided” that’s closer to the original Hebrew is God “appointed” a great fish to swallow him. That word 'appointed' could be translated 'commissioned.' It’s what a king would do if he was going to appoint an ambassador or a messenger. God clearly can direct not only storms but the fish in the sea as well.

So what kind of a creature do you think could physically swallow a grown man whole? I read that sperm whales can swallow giant squid whole, so chances are, they could swallow a human whole. The bigger question is could you actually survive three days in the belly of a sperm whale? One article I read said that first, if you could survive being swallowed and get past his chomping down on you with all those teeth, you’d find yourself in a complex digestive system. Those big guys have up to four stomach chambers, like a cow. Then you’d have to find your way through those stomach chambers if you could while dodging all those nasty digestive enzymes that would start corroding your skin.

The bigger problem would be how to breathe in the whale. Whales are known to have gassy pockets. But if there’s any gas inside a whale, it’s probably methane, and that’s not going to help you much, beside imagine how that smells. If you got swallowed by a sperm whale and survived the teeth, the digestive enzymes burning at your skin and good old fashioned fear, you’d still probably end up suffocating fairly quickly for lack of air.

But do we have to believe Jonah remained alive in the belly of the whale to say we believe in the Bible? Jonah 1:17 says *and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.* Listen to what Jesus said of Jonah in Matthew 12:40: *“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the Earth.”*

If Jesus was comparing his future experience with Jonah’s, then we’re talking about a real death here. When Jesus was laid in the tomb, he didn’t just faint. Humans didn’t survive beatings and nailings on Roman crosses. The cross

was meant to be a form of capital punishment. When they took Jesus' body off the cross they wrapped it as a mummy because they knew he was dead, completely dead. The point of the gospel is that Jesus died for our sins, not fainted for our sins. Jesus didn't swoon for our sins. Jesus didn't sleep for our sins. Jesus died for our sins. He was dead and then was resurrected.

When Jesus was referring to his future three days and three nights "in the heart of the Earth" he was prophesying his own death experience that was coming and it had to end with a death in order to have a resurrection. According to Jesus, Jonah previously had had one of those three day death experiences and we're left to assume a resurrection also.

So what if we assume Jonah was dead for three days in a watery tomb and his skin eaten by the digestive juices in the fish's body? We read in Jonah 2:1, *From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.* If he's dead, how can Jonah be praying? That's where our misunderstanding about dying comes in. We assume that when we die we either go straight to some streets paved with gold or we sleep. But either way we believe our soul is somewhere alive and well.

We read in Jonah 2:2-7 *"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. 3 You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.*

This is the testimony of Jonah's dying. He's calling out to God from "deep in the realm of the dead." *4 I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' 5 The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. 6 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. 7 "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.*

As Jonah watched his life ebb away in the seconds while he was falling, it appears he started regaining perspective. The things he hated in life became less important. 7 *"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD...* It's funny how when everything is going well we develop our own plans and forget the Lord. But things change when we think we're going to die. In Jonah's case he probably was dead and by the end of three days fairly well disfigured.

8 *"Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.*

9 *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.'"*

Could this be a post death conversion? We've heard of death bed conversions and foxhole conversions in war but what about a post death conversion? I don't know. Maybe. Clearly by his testimony, Jonah was willing to turn back to God; "what I have vowed I will make good."

10 *And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.*

After that great testimony of turning back to God, Jonah gets delivered on the third day. Now the third day is a big day in Bible stories. In the Old Testament, often when there was a dramatic rescue on the part of God, it would come on the third day. So a reader would expect in a normal Bible story that Jonah is going to get some dramatic rescue event... a visitation from the angel Gabriel, fly home on a chariot of fire, get beamed up through a prayer, something like that. That's not how it works in this story.

Jonah 2:10, *"And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land."* Is it just me, or is that a little more detail than we really want? This is like the middle school version of this story, because that word vomit is an exciting word for middle schoolers.

If you wonder why the English translators of the Bible didn't choose a more dignified, churchier, more Presbyterian word than vomit, it's because in

the original inspired text, the Hebrew word is even more graphic than that word. The writer wants to make sure the reader gets this. Jonah didn't get dropped off by an angel. The whale vomited.

What he would have vomited, I don't think would have been recognizable. Jesus wrapped in cloths after two days in a cool spring time cave would have at least been recognizable as a human. But his body would have been very beaten and maligned from his initial trial to the strain of carrying the cross to his actual time on the cross. He would have looked a bit like a deformed monster, scary to look at. The movies give us this tall, handsome, glowing actor as Jesus when he comes out of the cave. But I don't think that's how he would have looked.

Resurrection stories are hard for us to digest. I always remember a pastoral call my wife received while serving a church in Dallas. Someone urgently wanted Martha to come pray with her sister. So Martha took the information of where to meet up with the sister and the location turned out to a funeral home. The sister had died and her loved one expected Martha to raise her from the dead. I'm sure Martha's salary would have doubled if she'd been able to do that. At least she would have gotten movie royalties from the story.

Resurrection stories aren't that uncommon in the Bible. In my study guide this week on the MPC website I have listed nine Old and New Testament examples of resurrections in the Bible. Besides, if we can believe a badly damaged Jesus could be resurrected from the dead, is it that far fetched to believe that Jonah could have been resurrected?

As we read earlier, Jesus said toward the end of His life that he had one sign to give this sorry tragic world, and he called it the sign of Jonah. *"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish (hit bottom, at the lowest there) so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the*

heart of the Earth."

The point of the story is that Jonah is a little foretaste of the victory of Jesus who comes to meet us at our lowest points in life and declares that death loses, sin loses, sorrow loses, sadness loses but joy ultimately wins. That's true whether you believe Jonah is an allegory or a story telling technique that didn't really happen but conveys a truth or you believe that by God's grace he could have survived three days in the belly of a whale or you believe as I do that he died and was resurrected.

If you're not feeling that joy right now because of something you know you've done and you think things are kind of messy in your life as a result do what Jonah did as he hit that water. You've got to turn it over to God. But why wait until you hit the water? Do it today.

If you're having a hard time with someone, they're probably hard to love. Don't beat yourself over the head about not loving them. Some people are hard to love but you can do your part. Start by asking God to unleash the love that's within you for that person. That's a simple prayer that you may not feel like praying. Do it out of faith. God will honor that.

Next, picture the person as a very damaged version of God. We're all made in God's image but life has a way of warping and mangling us as we go through it. If you've ever been to a demolition derby where cars run into each other with the last one still moving winning the trophy, you know how mangled once beautiful Cadillacs and Lincolns look at the end. They don't even look like themselves any longer. But Jesus died for even the most mangled soul among us. God sees the potential for what we can become and not the mangled mess we've become.

Thirdly, pray fervently that Jesus will become very real in their life. They may be a follower of Christ because I've worked in enough churches to know that unbelievers don't have the corner on obnoxiousness and meanness.

Church people can be rude, thoughtless and even mean despite proclaiming Jesus as their Savior. But pray that Jesus will become more real in their life because as Jesus becomes more real in our life we become more sensitive to our shortcomings. What praying for them does besides what God can do, it begins to breakdown the revengeful thoughts against them that can develop in our heart as it did in Jonah's.

Live the Jesus Creed of loving God with all your being and your neighbor has yourself. Don't let disgust toward a mean or obnoxious neighbor sidetrack you from loving God. You are loved, now go and love those God loves.

Some Examples of Resurrections in the Bible

The Bible is filled with resurrection stories. In **I Kings 17:17-24** Elijah the prophet was sent by God to the widow of Zarephath. Elijah told the widow, who was running out of flour and oil, that God would provide for her and her son. God miraculously replenished the flour and oil in her containers so she could provide for herself, her son and Elijah. But then her son got sick and died. Elijah went up to the boy's room in the loft, laid himself over the boy's body three times and then prayed that God would allow the boy's soul to come back into him. The boy was raised from the dead.

In **II Kings 4:20-37** the prophet Elisha stayed with a woman and her husband whenever he passed through their town. They even built an extra room in their house for Elisha to use. Elisha wanted to give the woman something for her hospitality. He promised she would have a son in a year's time. She did have a son, but when the son was a boy he got a terrible headache so the dad sent him home where he died. The woman put the boy on Elisha's bed and when Elisha arrived he laid himself over the boy's body, then pacing back and forth in the house praying. The boy came back to life.

In **II Kings 13:21** people were about to bury a man, but when they saw a band of raiders coming, they simply threw the dead man's body into Elisha's tomb. The Bible says when the corpse touched Elisha's bones he revived.

In the New Testament Gospel of **Luke 7:11-16** Jesus stopped a funeral procession as they were carrying the casket of the only son of a widow to the cemetery. Jesus had compassion on the weeping mother. He told her to stop crying, and then he raised her son from the dead.

In **Mark 5:35-43** Jairus asked Jesus to come heal his dying daughter. By the time Jesus arrived she had already died. Jesus sent the mourners out, but took the girls' parents and Peter, James and John into the room where the dead girl lay. He said, "Little girl, get up" and she did.

In **John 11:1-44** Lazarus had been in the grave four days when Jesus approached his tomb and called out, "Lazarus, come forth." Lazarus came out, still wrapped in the strips of cloth. People had to help him out of them.

In **Matthew 27:51-53** at the time when Jesus died there was a violent earthquake and the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom. The Bible says tombs were opened and many bodies of saints arose from the dead. It says that after Jesus' resurrection they went into Jerusalem where many people witnessed their return to life.

In **Acts 9:36-41** Tabitha got sick and died. Since Peter was in a nearby town they asked him to come. Peter had everyone leave the room where Tabitha lay, knelt down, prayed and then said to the body, "Tabitha, arise." She opened her eyes and sat up.

In **Acts 14:19** Paul was stoned by the opposition and thought to be dead until the disciples surrounded him and he revived. It could have been a resurrection.

In **Acts 20:7-12** Paul was teaching a group of believers when a young man sitting in the window fell asleep and dropped from the third story to his death. Paul ran down, laid himself over the body and then embraced him. He told everyone the boy was OK, and he was.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO GET STARTED IN FAITH

1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's ideal

Romans 3:23-24

2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death

Romans 6:23

3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us

Romans 5:8

4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow Him to become the master of our life

Romans 10:13

Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below...

"Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me."