

SERIES: The Battle of the Wills: A Study of the Book of Jonah¹

SERMON: ***Location, Location, Location***

SCRIPTURE: Jonah 1:17-2:10

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Turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Jonah. Last week we learned that Jonah is more of a story about competing wills than anything; the battle between the will of God and the will of Jonah. And in Jonah 1:1-16 we learned that to live within the will of God one must respond obediently to the Word of God. We also learned that Jonah was disobedient to the LORD and ran away from God's call on his life to arise, go, and call out to the Ninevites. So God hurled a wind to the sea that ultimately resulted in the sailors hurling Jonah to the sea. Today we are going to look at what happened to Jonah after he was hurled to the sea.

1:17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Isn't this amazing! It's so amazing in fact that this verse has been a major stumbling block for centuries. A lot of people doubt Jonah could have survived in the belly of a fish. And so they put the whole story off as fiction or fantasy claiming that the story is just too incredible to be taken seriously. They say, "It's a whale of a tale."

Some of you here this morning may have doubts about the historical reliability of this story as well. I will deal with those doubts at the end of the service, but for now I will say that the historical reliability of this story is assumed by the writer, by me and by Jesus as well.

What many people have not doubted over the centuries, however, is the authenticity of Jonah's prayer in chapter 2. Most people have viewed his prayer as a prayer of repentance. I don't assume that Jonah repents in his prayer in chapter 2 and I'd like to spend most of our time examining the authenticity of Jonah's prayer. Let's look at it together.

Here's God's Word for us this morning: ***To live within the will of God one must respond authentically in conformity to the Word of God.***

We're going to look at 3 principles that help us determine whether our response to God is authentic. As we explore these I invite you to ask whether Jonah is responding authentically to God.

The first principle in vv. 1-2 shows us that ***God must be at the center of our lives if we are to respond authentically.***

I've entitled my sermon *Location, Location, Location* this morning. In real estate they say location is everything. In Bible study they say context is everything. The immediate context of

¹ The title of the series is used by permission from Dr. Dennis Magary. Most of the material in this sermon comes from and/or is influenced directly by Dr. Magary's OT exegesis class I took at TEDS during the summer of 2009 and from sermons Dr. Magary gave in July, 2003.

Jonah 2 finds Jonah in a particular location. The location of Jonah will help us determine whether or not his prayer is authentic.

2:1 *Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,*

Jonah's in the belly of a fish at the bottom of the Mediterranean. Surely this location impacts how he prays. But that's not the only context. We must also look at Jonah's character throughout the entire book.

There are two sides to every story. The same is true in Jonah. In chapters 1, 3, and 4 we have the narrator's side of the story. The prayer in chapter 2 is from Jonah's side. When you are trying to understand Scripture, as a general rule the narrator's perspective is to be trusted completely, whereas the character's perspective should be scrutinized in light of the narrator's perspective. The prayer in chapter 2 should therefore be evaluated in light of what we already know about Jonah from chapter 1 and what we will learn about him in chapters 3 and 4.

What do we know about Jonah from the narrator's perspective? Look at 1:17 again.

1:17 *And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

The writer doesn't discount the amazing nature of a fish swallowing a man, but wants to draw our attention to a couple things that are more amazing than the fish swallowing Jonah.

The LORD appointed a fish and the fish *obeyed* God. Why is that amazing? This word "appointed" is used 4 times in the book of Jonah. The other 3 are in 4:6-8 where God appoints a plant to grow up over Jonah, then he appoints a worm to eat the plant, then he appoints a wind. Everything God appoints *obeys* God, except for Jonah. God appointed Jonah to go to Nineveh and he has refused to obey so far. As a matter of fact everything and everybody responds more appropriately to God than Jonah. This is incredible, this is amazing.

We also need to compare the content of his prayer with the other prayers in the book of Jonah. The sailors and the Ninevites pray; and their prayers are prayers of repentance. Jonah has been running from God. And so we expect a prayer of repentance from him, just like we saw in the sailors. But does Jonah actually repent? Does Jonah respond authentically to God?

What is authenticity? In our society we place the individual at the center of reality. According to Wikipedia, authenticity essentially means this: being true to oneself.² And you're authentic if there is consistency between what you value as an individual and how you live your life.

Authenticity in a Christian sense is different. God is placed at the center of reality. Authenticity is being true to God's Word, not to oneself. And you're authentic if there is consistency between what God says and how you live. When I talk about authenticity throughout the rest of this sermon this is the definition I'm using. Did Jonah put God at the center of his life in this prayer? Let's look at the first line of the prayer.

² From the vantage point of an existentialist

2:2

*I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.*

Jonah likes to quote Scripture. As a matter of fact most of the lines in this prayer are from the Psalms. When other Scripture is quoted you should always look up the passage in its original context. That will help shed light on the significance it has in the passage you're studying.

The opening lines of this prayer are a word for word reference to Psalm 120:1. So, we need to look at Psalm 120:1. The first part of Jonah 2:2 matches it word for word in the original language, but the word order is different. I've arranged these verses below with the original word order.

Psalm 120:1 *To the LORD, out of my distress, I called out, and he answered me.*³

Jonah 2:2a *I called out, out of my distress, to the LORD, and he answered me.*

Do you see the difference? The words are the same, but Jonah's changed the order. The Psalmist begins with the LORD, but Jonah begins with himself. In Hebrew word order is important; what is at the front of a phrase indicates what is most important. Jonah not only begins with himself, he refers to himself constantly throughout the prayer; Jonah refers to himself at least 25 times in this prayer; in fact there are only 2 lines in the entire prayer that don't mention Jonah. Jonah is doing in this prayer what he is doing in his life; Jonah is putting himself first.

Jonah didn't put God at the center of his life, but we need to put God at the center of our lives. There is a lot that could be said here, but one practical way you could put God at the center of your life in prayer would be to begin with praising God and thanking him for what he's done in your life before you launch in to all of your requests.

If we are to respond authentically to God then God must be at the center of our lives. I question whether Jonah has put God at the center of his life yet. But let's continue to investigate. Let's look at the second principle that helps us to determine whether our response to God is authentic.

The second principle in vv. 3-7 shows us that ***we must turn toward God in true repentance if we are to respond authentically.***

2:3-7

*For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows passed over me.*

³ Here I've used the same words of the ESV in Jonah 2:2, but placed them in the order of the Masoretic Text (Hebrew).

*Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight;
yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'*

*The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
At the roots of the mountains.*

*I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.*

*When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.*

Remember what I said about perspective earlier? That becomes very important here. Keep in mind this prayer is from Jonah's perspective. In vv. 3-6 Jonah is describing his descent to the bottom of the sea, from the time he was hurled overboard until he was swallowed by the fish.

Verse 3 says, "I was cast into the heart of the seas"

Verse 5 says, "The weeds were wrapped about my head"

Verse 6 says, "I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me"

If you remember though, we've actually been watching Jonah descend since 1:3. Jonah disobeyed the Word of the LORD and "*went down*" to Joppa. Then he "*went down*" onto the ship. Then he "*went down*" into the ship. The verb "go down" is a euphemism for death in the Hebrew language. From the narrator's perspective this descent was a downward spiral towards death which was a result of *Jonah's* disobedience.

But what is Jonah's perspective of the descent into the sea?

2:3 For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas.

It's all God's fault from Jonah's perspective.

2:4 I am driven away from your sight.

From Jonah's perspective he's been driven away from God's sight, not running away from God's presence, as the narrator told us 3 times in chapter 1.

In light of what the narrator told us in chapter 1 we expect repentance in this prayer, but do you notice the glaring absence of a confession? Jonah has fled from the presence of the LORD and he takes no responsibility for his actions. There is no acknowledgement that his "distress" may be

the result of his own sin. From the narrator's perspective Jonah's descent is Jonah's fault. From Jonah's perspective this whole thing is God's fault.

Do you also notice the absence of Nineveh in this prayer? Jonah disobeyed the LORD's call on his life to go to Nineveh. If this is a prayer of repentance then where is Jonah's promise to go to Nineveh? True repentance involves a confession of sin and a turning towards God's will and his way. God's will and God's way are in Nineveh, but there is no mention of Nineveh in this prayer. In place of Nineveh we have two strange references to the temple in vv. 4, 7.

Apparently right before Jonah hit the bottom of the sea he threw up a prayer to God. This is the prayer:

2:4 I am driven away from your sight; Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple

There is another reason I've named this sermon *Location, Location, Location*. Where is the temple? It's in Jerusalem. But Jonah is not supposed to be in Israel. Jonah is supposed to be in Nineveh. Is Jonah repenting here or is Jonah trying to get God to see things his way? Jonah's location is in the belly of a fish. Jonah should be repenting and planning to go to Nineveh. But instead Jonah makes clear his desire to be back in Israel.

An authentic response to God requires true repentance. True repentance involves admitting your sin before a holy God and turning back towards God's will and his way. I don't see any repentance in these verses. All I see is Jonah taking credit for his own deliverance.

Jonah views his deliverance as a result of his prayer.

1:7 When my life was fainting away; I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you into your holy temple.

2:2 I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

From Jonah's perspective his prayer has reached God in his holy temple. And the result is deliverance. But what is the narrator's perspective? The narrator doesn't mention that sequence at all. Let's go back to chapter 1 verse 17.

1:17a And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.

The fish is appointed before any of Jonah's actions or his prayer. So the deliverance is not a result of Jonah's prayer. The fish was appointed before he ever prayed.

Authentic people are honest with themselves, with others, and with God about their faults. They don't try to take credit for things they haven't done. Authentic Christians don't try to cover up the reality that they are disobedient sinners who fall short of God's standard in his Word. They don't try to cover up with a bunch of Bible verses and flowery prayers.

I think we agreed last week that all of us are called to share the love of Jesus with the people we know. And we agreed that if you're not sharing the love of Jesus with the people that you know you are living outside of God's will. So, there is no amount of church attendance, Bible studies, Scripture memory or prayer meetings in the world that will hide your disobedience from God. You may be able to fool those around you, but you're not fooling God. A few of us in this room have the title "Pastor" in front of our names. We're not fooling God either. Authentic living is not marked by being able to quote Scripture; it's marked by living Scripture.

For your life to be lived within the will of God you must respond authentically in conformity to the Word of God. An authentic response requires true repentance.

I don't see Jonah repenting. But there is another principle that helps us to determine if our response to God is authentic. Let's see how Jonah measures up here.

The third principle in vv. 8-10 shows us that *we must be amazed by God's saving grace if we are to respond authentically.*

2:8-9

*Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;
What I have vowed I will pay
Salvation belongs to the LORD!*

Verse 8 jumps out of nowhere. Why is this statement about *those who pay regard to vain idols* here in this prayer? Where does it come from? Well technically it comes from Psalm 31.

Psalm 31:6 *I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD.*

Notice Jonah deleted "*I hate*" from his prayer, but what we know of Jonah in the rest of the book confirms that he does hate pagans. But he also leaves out another important line from the Psalm: "*but I trust in the LORD.*" The Psalmist doesn't trust in idols; the Psalmist trusts in the LORD for salvation. Jonah hates idol worshipers, but does Jonah trust in the LORD for his salvation? Look at how he compares himself with the idol worshipers he hates.

*2:9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; What I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the LORD!*

Wouldn't the line from Psalm 31, "I trust in the LORD," have been a more appropriate response to his situation? Jonah seems to trust in his religious behavior, his vows and sacrifice, rather than the LORD.⁴ Jonah promises that he *will* make sacrifices to the LORD and vows. But remember that Jonah's idea of worship is linked to a specific location, Jerusalem.

Jonah loves salvation and Jonah loves worship, but he loves it for himself and he wants it to stay in Israel with the Israelites. Jonah loves salvation and Jonah loves worship, but he thinks it is for

⁴ This is ironic because 2:9 is referencing Psalm 50:14. The context of this Psalm makes it clear that God doesn't need ritual sacrifice, rather he calls for a *sacrifice of thanksgiving* for what he has done.

religious Jews like himself and not sinners like the Ninevites. But if Jonah understood that he himself was a sinner then maybe he would be amazed at the salvation that God offers to all people.

What about us? Are we amazed at the salvation that God offers? I don't think we hate people who aren't Christians; I think we generally have a heart for them. So maybe we can't relate to Jonah in that way. But I do think that many of us can relate to Jonah in the fact that we prefer Jerusalem over Nineveh. Jerusalem is more comfortable than Nineveh. We love salvation and we love worship, but it's easier to celebrate it all right here at First Free. It's hard and uncomfortable to share the salvation we love outside of these walls. And so we spend a lot of time talking about salvation here, but we don't spend much time talking about it out there.

Jonah says salvation belongs to the LORD, but does Jonah even understand salvation? Does he understand that salvation is what God does and not what we do? Does he understand that people are saved from their sin and not just from their circumstances? Jonah, you say, "Salvation belongs to the LORD." But do you really believe it? Do you really believe it or are you just quoting Scripture?

What is God's opinion of someone who knows the truth, but who refuses to live the truth? What is God's opinion of those who can quote Scripture, but who live lives in disobedience to Scripture? Look at what happens next.

2:10 And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

We expect to find the word hurl here. God hurled a wind to the sea, the men hurled cargo to the sea, and the men hurled Jonah to the sea. The writer could have used the word hurl here. As a matter of fact there are 3 other verbs that could have been used here to describe what the fish did with Jonah. But the writer chose to use one of the most disgusting verbs in the OT. The fish *vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.*

What did God think of Jonah's Scripture filled prayer? It made him sick! This prayer has been fooling people for centuries because it looks like one of the most beautiful prayers in the OT. But it doesn't fool God. God doesn't think it is beautiful. God thinks it's disgusting. Quoting Scripture to cover up disobedience is sickening in God's eyes.

Now I'm not saying that God had the fish vomit up Jonah onto dry land because his prayer made him sick. I'm just saying the writer *uses the word vomit* to let us know what God thinks of Jonah's prayer. The fish vomits Jonah onto dry land because God wants Jonah in Nineveh. But Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh. Jonah wants to go back to Israel. Jonah thinks his Scripture filled prayer is the reason for his salvation. But Jonah is wrong.

Jonah closes his prayer with *salvation belongs to the LORD*, but Jonah doesn't understand salvation at all. Jonah thinks he's being saved from his circumstances, but God is trying to get him to see that salvation is for the Ninevites.

I come to this conclusion in part because of what follows in the story. God doesn't answer Jonah's prayer. Instead God delivers Jonah on to dry land where Jonah finds his original problem is still waiting for him.

3:1-2 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you."

Jonah didn't get to go to Israel to offer sacrifices. Instead Jonah is reminded of his original call: Arise, Go, and Call out to Nineveh.

At this church we know Scripture pretty well. But if we are honest we might have to say that we have not been faithful in obeying what Scripture says about evangelism; we don't share the love of Jesus with the people we know. We can quote God's Word, but it is still waiting to be obeyed, just like God's call on Jonah was awaiting him when he was vomited onto dry land.

I think we need to get serious in this church about evangelism. I need to get serious about evangelism in my own life. Maybe the first step for you this morning is to write down the names of 3 people you know, who you need to share the love of Jesus with. Begin to pray for them and to look for opportunities to share.

We have this candle that we light when we hear of someone who decides to follow Jesus as a result of God working through us or a ministry we support. When it is lit it is usually because of a ministry we support. What would happen if we got serious about evangelism? There are over 300 families in this church. Wouldn't it be amazing to see this candle lit every week because we were faithfully sharing the gospel with those in need? But before we can light a fire in others, it must be lit in our own hearts.

If the first step is identifying people we need to share with, the second step is to become amazed by the saving work of Jesus.

Let's go back to the fish in 1:17.

1:17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

I told you I would deal with doubts about the historical reliability of this story, so let's look at it now. Is it really possible for a fish to swallow a man and for that man to survive three days in its belly?

The answer is actually quite simple. Yes, if you believe in miracles. Some say this account can only be explained as a fictional story with a spiritual truth. But that cannot be done unless you are ready to explain away the resurrection in a similar way, because Jesus himself affirms the historical reliability of the event and links it to his resurrection.

In Matthew 12:38-41 we find Jesus talking to the Pharisees. They are asking him for a sign (or a miracle); they wanted proof that he was the Messiah. He answered them and told them "*no sign*

will be given...except the sign of Jonah.” According to Jesus the account of the fish must be explained as a miraculous event. There is no other suitable explanation. But there is more.

The word “great” occurs 14 times in Jonah. Here are a few examples we’ve seen so far:

- A great city (1:2)
- A great wind (1:4)
- A great storm (1:4)
- The men were greatly afraid (1:10)
- A great fish (1:17)

Not only is the fish itself great, but the account of it swallowing Jonah is great. It is a miracle. But what is the author of Jonah trying to teach us with the use of the word “great” and this miraculous event? And how does it relate to Jesus’ resurrection?

You see, the storm was great, the wind was great, the city of Nineveh was great, the fear of the sailors was great, the sea was deep, the fish was great, and the story of the fish swallowing Jonah is greater still, but there is nothing greater, nothing deeper, nothing wider in the book of Jonah than God’s work of salvation, for the Ninevites. That’s what the writer is trying to drive home and that’s what Jesus drives home!

Let’s look now at what Jesus says about Jonah.

Matthew 12:40-41 *For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth...and behold something greater than Jonah is here!*

Pay attention especially to that last line in verse 41: *and behold something greater than Jonah is here!*

The story of Jonah is great, but there is nothing greater, nothing more amazing, nothing more incredible than the salvation that we have in Jesus, who is raised from the dead and has accomplished victory over death, sin, and the power of Satan.

The miracle of the fish swallowing Jonah may be hard to believe. But it is not as hard to believe as this: a holy God has forgiven wretched sinners like the sailors, like Jonah, like the Ninevites...and like you and me.⁵

What is truly amazing is not that the fish swallowed Jonah. The whole of Scripture is full of miracles. What is truly amazing is the miracle of salvation. And God has offered salvation to each of you this morning.

In order to believe the book of Jonah you have to believe in the miraculous. And in order for you to be saved from your sin you have to believe in the miraculous. You have to believe that Jesus died to save you from your sin and that he rose from the dead, declaring victory over your sin and death.

⁵ Most of my thoughts here were influenced by Bruckner, pp. 56-58

You have to respond authentically to God if you are going to live within the will of God. You have to put God at the center of your life. You have to turn from your sin and repent. And then you will be amazed at the miraculous, saving grace of God. We have to be amazed at the saving work of God! If you're not amazed at what God has done in salvation then you will never be excited about what God is doing in salvation. A fire has to be lit within us if we are to spread the flame. If you're not amazed at the saving grace of God then you'll never live authentically – your life will never be consistent with God's Word until you are amazed by God's work.

Jonah's response was not authentic; Jonah's response was not adequate; Jonah's response was not even appropriate. Jonah put himself at the center of his life. Jonah never repented. And Jonah was not amazed by the saving grace of God.

God wanted repentance. God wanted obedience. God wanted Jonah. But Jonah doesn't want what God wants.

The battle of the wills rages on for now. Come back next week to see what happens with our vomit drenched prophet in chapter 3.

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