

Communion Preparatory - Saturday

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[0 : 00] And so Jonah died. Isn't that what the sailors of chapter one would have said? Those poor men, when they finally staggered onto dry land, if you look at the end of chapter one, no doubt these men reaching shore, falling onto their knees and kissing the seashore. The most incredible thing happened to us on the voyage to Tarshish. They would have said there was a storm, a storm like we have never seen. The ship was coming apart. We met this man, a runaway prophet. We met his God.

See that? The end of chapter one, verse 16. We met his God. We are new people, but Jonah, that poor man, met his end. Seems strange, we know, but the moment Jonah hit the water, the storm stopped. We are saved, but Jonah died. It's easy to forget, isn't it? Because we know the story so well that just as Jonah has no idea about chapter one, verse 16, no idea that this has happened, so too, no one else sees chapter one, verse 17. No one sees it deep, deep beneath.

The ocean. The Lord provided a great fish. Another but at the start of verse 17, a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. Chapter one of Jonah is an angry prophet in the hands of an angry storm-sending God. It is the death of a man who deserved to die. A terrible shame, but the storm came because of him. It was his fault. He died, and order was restored, and all became calm.

Isn't that what the sailors would have said? Wouldn't that have been their story? God was angry? God was angry. Jonah died, calm. Let me ask you this evening, do you think of God as basically angry? A God of wrath and justice? A God who loves judging, but who does show some mercy? Is God to you basically angry with a bit of mercy around the edges? Or do you think of God as overflowing in mercy, quick to be gracious, running to be compassionate, and slow to be angry?

[2 : 56] What would the sailors have said on dry land? Friends, the book of Jonah is here to say to us, we have no idea how merciful God is. No idea. The most faithful of God's servants who can travel to the ends of the earth for him and pour out their lives in serving him, the most faithful of people like that can nevertheless spend a lifetime only sticking their toe in the depths of God's mercy.

God is a fountain of love. Fountain of love. He is so immense. He fills all of space and time so that you cannot travel to the edge of God, and yet somehow if you could, imagine if you could spend a million years traveling to the very edge of God's being, you would find if you got there that compassion and mercy are flowing out of him, out of him to his world, and especially to his people. The book of Jonah is here to take us on a journey into the heart of God. We began it yesterday, yesterday, and this evening we get to be like tourists at the aquarium. You know the kind of tunnel you enter, you go down deep, you're in a tunnel and all above your head is water.

And we get to look on bone dry, but amazed at what we're seeing. And here in chapter two this evening, we are traveling literally down, down, down to the depths of God's mercy.

On the surface, all is calm. The storm is gone, but beneath the waves, well, God's work with Jonah is just beginning. On the surface, we've seen God's fatherly hand raised in anger, in chastisement, the rod of his anger. But above the surface is not all there is to see. What happens as the camera drops beneath the waves? You know, like in those Olympic diving pools, the camera goes beneath, you see the diver enter the water. Chapter two, God's camera goes deep beneath the ocean. And more than that, it goes into the belly of the fish. And more than that, it goes into the heart of the prophet.

[5 : 35] Here's two things. I want to show you two things this evening from these verses. Here's the first one. Number one, suffering is an instrument in the wise hand of God. Suffering is a tool, an instrument in the wise hand of God. Number two, death is a fortress which opens to the powerful hand of God. Look at the first one with me. Suffering is an instrument in the wise hand of God.

Just have that chapter two open in front of you, and just notice the shape of the text in front of us. It is the story, isn't it, of a journey down, down, down, and then a deliverance up.

So if you look at it, chapter two, verse one. Chapter two, verses one and two is a summary of the whole chapter. Inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said, In my distress, I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave, I called for help.

And you listened to my cry. Okay, verse two, that's the headline. I was in great distress in the very heart of darkness, and you heard me. You heard me.

And so now verse three, here's the start. After the headline, here's the start of the story. The start of that journey into darkness. You hurled me into the deep, and from here on it is all down, down, down from here, right into the heart of the seas.

[7 : 13] Verse five, the deep surrounded me as I sank. To the roots of the mountain, I sank down. Where is he now? He's reaching the bottom of the ocean, isn't he?

His feet are touching the plants at the bottom. Down to the roots of the mountains. I went down, down, down. This is a journey down.

And then notice, then and only then do we get verse six. But you brought my life up from the pit. From verse six onwards, now Jonah is going the other way, back up again to the surface.

Instead of going down, he's going up. And instead of death and danger, it is deliverance and life. Friends, do you see what this means? The simple shape of this chapter, down before up.

See, I used to imagine the sailors, I don't know about you, I used to imagine the sailors turfing Jonah overboard. And he hits the water, and a quick flail around, and before you know it, gulp.

[8 : 21] A whale has swallowed him. When we did these, when we did the book of Jonah at Trinity, our church, my church family here in Aberdeen, I gave out to the congregation in the run-up to the sermons, I gave out what I thought was a beautiful picture of Jonah and the whale.

Jonah sitting on the top of the water, and just the shadow of a whale coming up from the bottom of the ocean. Out of the blue, I called the sermon series, I thought this was a stunning picture, the whale coming up.

The problem with it, as nice as the picture is, the problem with it is, it's completely wrong, isn't it? Never give out pictures before you've preached the sermon series and discover the Bible contradicts what you've been saying to people.

Jonah, in the picture, is on the surface, and the whale is coming up to get him, but it's not right, is it? The fish that God appointed to Jonah swallowed him, scooped him off the bottom of the ocean.

Verse 7, when my life was ebbing away. It doesn't happen to you the moment you hit the water. To the roots of the mountains I sank down, the earth beneath me barred me in forever.

[9 : 35] That's when you saved me. That's when you sent the fish. Now, I want to just pause here for a moment with you this evening.

We're going to come back to this, but let me just say this. Here we are in the 21st century, reading a story of a huge fish swallowing a man who stays alive for three days and three nights, and then the fish vomits him onto the shore.

We have to ask, don't we, did this really happen? It's worth pausing briefly here, isn't it?

You may know, you may not know, many modern scholars have realized that the prophecy of Jonah is very different from all the other prophets in the Old Testament. In all the other books, we get loads of prophecy.

But here we get loads of Jonah. It's all about him. The only actual prophecy in the book is chapter 3, verse 4.

[10 : 38] One verse. And so many scholars have said, look, when you realize that, then you realize the type of book this is. This is more like a parable.

It doesn't have to be literally, historically true to contain truth. Jesus told parables. The prodigal son, the lost coin, the rich man and Lazarus made up stories that pack a theological punch.

Maybe Jonah is just like that. And then, of course, when you add into it the whale, well, of course, it's a fishy business, isn't it?

Hard to swallow. What do you think? Down through the years, many believers, conservative believers, have responded to that kind of line of argument by trying to produce evidence that, no, actually human beings can survive inside certain types of whales.

If you don't believe me, you can look it up. Encyclopedia Britannica is full of it. People have measured whale mouth sizes and stomach sizes and airways.

[11:49] There have even been stories of people who have meant to have survived inside whales. None of them, as far as I can tell, have been verified. But there is a better way to think about this.

Is Jonah real? Just turn, just for a moment with me, please, to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 12. Matthew, chapter 12. Matthew, chapter 12. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew.

Matthew. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew. Matthew.

Matthew. Matthew. Matthew chapter 12 and verse 38. Matthew.

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Jesus, teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you. He answered, The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.

[13:33] See, friends, this evening, as we read Jonah, we receive it, don't we, as we receive all Scripture from the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And as you look at these verses, verse 41, doesn't it seem that to Jesus the men of Nineveh were real people who experienced real repentance at the real preaching of a real man called Jonah?

If the men of Nineveh, verse 41, were not real, then Jesus' whole point here about who will rise up at the future judgment, his whole argument collapses.

And if verse 41 is real, doesn't it look like Jesus is assuming verse 40 is real as well? Well, friends, this evening, the real miracle of Jonah is not the fish, as miraculous as it is.

It's what God does with Jonah and to Jonah that is the incredible thing here. And if the God who made the sea and the dry land, chapter 1, verse 9, if the God who made those things wants to use a fish to do an even greater miracle, who am I to question?

Who are we? What do I know better than Christ? So let's go back to it, Jonah chapter 2. What is Jonah showing us here?

[15:02] Here's what he's showing us. Suffering is an instrument in the wise hand of God. Suffering is an instrument in God's wise hand.

God's hand in chapter 2 is stretched out to Jonah. And as it is stretched out, it is his fatherly hand. And it is wise. God knows what he's doing.

He's taking Jonah down somewhere. Remember chapter 1, verse 3? Jonah went down to Joppa, down into the ship. It's as if God says, okay, Jonah, let's do this thing.

You want to go down? I'll take you down. Down, down, down, down. And the narrative is saying to us, God is saying to us, friends, sometimes to get through to you, to get through to you, my people, I will take you to the very depths of human existence.

I will take you to the edges of survival. If that's what it will take to show you who I am and to change you. Why didn't God send the fish to skim him off the top?

[16:18] Why the experience of drowning? Isn't that what Jonah is giving us? Here is what drowning looks like and feels like. Have you ever felt absolutely helpless?

I mean really, really helpless. I've seen it in somebody close to me, somebody with a slipped disc, begging, literally begging on a hospital bed for morphine, unable to move.

Circumstances of life where somebody is completely overwhelmed, seemingly crushed, the light almost about to go out.

Maybe you've been there, suffering. It's no wonder, is it, that Jonah's literal experience in the ocean, it's no wonder that it becomes in the Bible a metaphor, a picture for the experience of being completely, completely and totally overwhelmed.

Some of you will have felt that. Some of you will know it. I sat just two months ago with a good friend, a strong believer, someone who has worked overseas in missionary service, the kind of person if you met them you would listen to.

[17:50] And this person described to me how for the last eight years they have lived with a measure of constant anxiety because of location, because of ministry, because of hardship, constant stress, always there in the background.

But with particular periods of intense difficulty added on top of the constant stress. Now my friend said to me, there were many, many times in those eight years where I thought I will not come out of this still, Christian.

Why does God do that? A kind of eight-year-long experience of what? Drowning. Suffocating.

Unable to breathe. Choking. You see the language in verse three? The current swirled about me, all your waves and breakers swept over me.

That is literally true for Jonah, but oh, the comfort, countless, countless generations of believers have found in words like Psalm 42.

[19 : 03] All your waves and breakers have swept over me. Not literally, but well, metaphorically, experientially, emotionally.

I've been in the pit, Lord, in the mire, in the quicksand of life, and as I sank, it just seemed to go on and on and on and down and down and just when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, the further I went.

What Jonah is showing us is that this kind of drawn-out suffocation, rather than instant salvation, this is an instrument.

It is a tool in the hand of a wise God. A device in the hands of a wise and loving God to do what? To waken him up.

To waken him up to God. He is now speaking to God again, isn't he? Coming close to God again. Verse 4, wanting to return to where God lives.

[20 : 11] You notice in chapter 1, he never prays directly to God, tells other people about him, and will not address him. Me and God, we're not on speaking terms anymore.

You see, resentment towards God was like a Teflon coating around Jonah's heart. His ministry from God was finished.

His relationship with God was damaged. And he was fleeing and running. And God will stop at nothing, nothing, to break him down, turn him round, and call him back.

Listen to these words. Awakening is a helpful word for what happens to Jonah because it describes what this experience is like.

Jonah's sleeping on the boat, chapter 1, was a symptom of the lethargy that had crept over his inner life once he had walked with God. As a prophet, he had enjoyed the privileged intimacy of receiving the words he spoke directly from the Lord.

[21 : 19] He had been God's man. But something had gone wrong in Jonah's heart. Spiritual decline often happens so slowly that you hardly notice.

Worship becomes remote. Prayer becomes repetitive. The Lord's table becomes a habit. Hearing the word becomes routine. And your Christian life runs as if it's on automatic pilot.

You are no longer engaged. Gradually and increasingly, a sense of unreality comes over your walk with the Lord. Cynicism, resentment, and unbelief grow in your soul like weeds in a garden.

But it all happens so slowly, you hardly notice you are sleepwalking your way through the Christian life. That's where Jonah was until God sent the raging storm, the tumbling dice, and the pounding waves.

Have you ever been there? Do you know what that's like? Maybe you're there now. This evening, a season, a new season of life is upon you, a new chapter. But you know you have been drifting from God, drifting far from Him.

[22 : 31] And Jonah says to you, if God takes after you, Jonah shows you He may let you go very, very, very far down before He brings you up.

Maybe you're not running from God this evening, but you are being pounded by life, almost broken by it. You feel completely overwhelmed.

Well, we need to see something else Jonah says here. Do you notice the way he puts it, verse 3? Verse 3 is so different, isn't it, from the way the narrative works.

Chapter 1, verse 15 works. The sailors took Jonah, threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. They hurled him into the sea. But what does Jonah say, verse 3? It's not the sailors who hurled me.

You hurled me into the deep. Isn't that incredible? You cast me. Who did this to me? The sailors or God? Verse 3, You hurled me into the deep.

[23 : 41] All your waves and breakers swept over me. God is the one sending this. God is the one at work, still holding, still keeping, still watching, always in control, but always knowing just what it is we need to get us to where he knows we need to be and to get us to where he knows he wants us to be.

Martin Luther said, even the devil is God's devil. He prowls around, but he prowls around on God's leash and only recognizing God's wise hand in everything can keep us from despair.

Isn't that right? God's wise hand in everything. Sometimes he uses a scalpel, just like a surgeon might use it, wield it to cut, to bring pain.

It's painful on the way down, but the instrument in the right hand, the wise hand, brings about a transformation in the soul we could never have imagined.

Just listen to these words, Joni Erickson, Tadda. Many of you I know will know her, know of her writing, her work, paralyzed as a young woman in a diving accident.

[25 : 10] Joni Erickson, Tadda, has the same testimony as Jonah. Listen to what she says. Astonishing words. I really don't mind the inconvenience of being paralyzed if my faithfulness to God while in this wheelchair will bring glory to Him.

When God brings suffering into your life as a Christian, be it mild or drastic, when God does that, He is forcing you to decide on the issues you have been avoiding. That's Jonah, isn't it?

God is pressing you to ask yourself some questions. Am I going to continue to try and live in two worlds, obeying Christ and my own sinful desires?

Or am I going to refuse to worry? Am I going to be grateful in trials? Am I going to abandon my sins? In short, am I going to be like Christ?

He provides the suffering, but the choice is yours. Listen to this, she says, but today as I look back, I am convinced that the whole ordeal of my paralysis was inspired by His love.

[26 : 24] I wasn't a rat in a maze. I wasn't a brunt of some cruel divine joke. God had reasons behind my suffering and learning some of them has made all the difference in the world.

That's the key, isn't it? Learning some of God's reasons for the suffering, some of those reasons are to break our independence, to smash our pride, to crush our idols.

Someone has said, I don't know about you, I think this is really helpful, someone has said that if the whole story of the universe is like a feature-length film, four-hour-long film, massive film, the whole story of the universe from before time began right into eternity, if it's like a film, we all have parts in that film that last for what?

The equivalent of ten seconds? How much are our lives in that millennia-long eternal story that God is writing? And you see, when we appear in that story for our ten seconds, to tell God, our Heavenly Father, that He should be doing something different with me, well, it's like stepping into that four-hour movie, isn't it, and telling the director you're getting it wrong in the storyline.

These four seconds are wrong. That's what it's like, isn't it? Who are we to know what the director is doing, the story he's telling? We just don't know.

[27 : 56] But God, the author of life, the fountain of life, knows what He is doing with you this evening wherever you are, wherever your loved ones are, your children, your parents.

Suffering is an instrument in the wise hand of God. He takes Jonah to death's door and wakes him up to Him. Generations of believers have known this, haven't they?

But do you know there's something even more than this, even more powerful for us to see? Number two, not just that suffering is an instrument in the wise hand of God, number two, death is a fortress which opens to the powerful hand of God.

Death is a fortress which opens to the powerful hand of God. Notice how all of this going down is not all that happens to Jonah. Do you notice that? This journey down has a destination point.

It's going somewhere. It's going to death. He is drowning. But many people drown. Many people have the experience of drowning without actually dying and drowning.

[29 : 14] They're rescued and saved. But here, the language of death is all over this passage. Look at it. Chapter 1, verse 17. Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

Three days and three nights. In the Bible, three days and three nights is a shorthand way of saying he was in the land of the dead. See, there seems to have been a belief in ancient times that to get to the land of the dead took a journey of three days and three nights.

That's how long it took you to get there. And the moment you use that phrase three days and three nights, everybody knows you are talking about heading to the morgue.

It's just an idiom, a phrase. We do the same with our idioms today. So there's an avalanche on the mountain and a climber is buried under several feet of snow and the rescue workers, when they find her, they tell her, you are so fortunate to be alive.

We were convinced you were six feet under. Dead and buried is what they're saying, isn't it? Jonah was not six feet under, he was three days and three nights.

[30 : 26] Dead and buried. And look, the place that you journey to, chapter 2, verse 2, the land of the dead has a name, the grave.

If you're using the ESV, it's called Sheol. You'll see a footnote to it in the NIV. Chapter 2, verse 2, the depths of Sheol, the grave. It's the place where the spirits go after death, where they're waiting for judgment.

Sheol is a shadowy place, the underworld, the home of the dead. But notice where Jonah is. He's in the depths of it. Not just in it, but right in its deepest, darkest place.

In the English Standard Version, verse 2 says, from the belly of Sheol, more literal rendering. It's interesting, isn't it?

The belly of the fish leads to the belly of Sheol. Sheol is a monster. The fish is not the real monster in this story. It's Sheol. Jonah enters the fish, and inside the fish, it's as if the grave swallows the fish.

[31 : 41] We talk, don't we, about the jaws of death, the grave swallowing someone. And when the monster has you well, look at verse 6, look how Jonah changes the picture.

Death is not just a journey you go on. Death is not just a monster who swallows you. What's the picture change in verse 6?

Death is a prison, a fortress you enter. Death is Alcatraz. The earth beneath barred me in forever. You've seen those films? The doors shut, the iron gate clanks. Jesus talked, didn't he, about the gates of hell. The gates of hell, and Jonah says, I met them.

I was right outside them. I was dropping through those gates like a stone. They closed upon me forever. You can take or leave this, but I think myself, it is an open question as to whether Jonah actually died, or whether he just came to within a hair's breadth of dying.

[32 : 55] You can decide for yourself. Here's the important point. It's not just that Jonah was drowning, and God was powerful enough to rescue him. That happens all the time, doesn't it?

My brother in Spain sent me a video, a cute video, of his one-year-old child walking off the edge of the pool into the deep end, and he reaches in and just scoops him out. It's cute.

It's funny. Parents come to the rescue the moment the child's in trouble, don't they? But that's not the measure of God's power here, is it?

No. Jonah entered that moment of experience when you hear the door of death closing behind you and the key turning in the lock. And you look back over your shoulder, and it is an iron gate with an iron bar and an iron lock.

Jonah thought that door was shut. He thought that death had thrown away the key, and then verse 6, then verse 6, but you brought my life up from the pit.

[34 : 01] You brought my life up. See what he's saying? This is your sea, God. Your waves. This is death in your world, the world that you rule.

And you reached down and you smashed through the citadel of death. Is that what Jonah's saying? Death is a fortress which opens, opens its prey to the powerful hand of God.

Friends, like I said last night, without knowing many of you, because you are Christian people, many of you I know, you know exactly what this feels like, don't you?

anybody who has ever stood at the open soil of a grave or stood on the shore of a watery grave will tell you, won't they, the grave is like a creature that clothes its mouth over your loved one, closes over the body, and there is nothing, nothing you can do.

dead is dead, dead is dead, is dead, is dead. It is a journey to the underworld from which people do not come back.

[35 : 25] Gone is gone, is gone, is gone. And so here for us this evening in front of us, because this was true for Jonah, and because of what we read in Matthew 12, because this was true for the Lord Jesus Christ, friends, here is the greatest news in the world, death opens its mouth to God's hand, opens its mouth.

When I was writing this, I remembered, when I was writing this, I remembered many years ago, one of my children, I can't remember which child, one of my children ran out of the living room to find me in the dining room.

And the moment they rounded the corner and found me, I saw the panic in their eyes straight away. I knew something was wrong before they reached me. And my child had a car stuck in their mouth. Why children put cars in their mouths? I don't know, but they all do, don't they? And they couldn't breathe. Stuck. Fortunately, the car was just in the mouth.

No further. And I reached in to get something that does not belong there. Pulled it out. A foreign body.

[37 : 04] Do you know that when death closes its grip around a believer, it's as if God says to death, you have swallowed a foreign object.

One of my children. He opens its jaws. Death swallows its victim down to its belly. And Jonah says God can reach right down into the pit, right down and pull his child back.

Pull him back again. You see, this one man's deliverance in Jonah 2 becomes a picture, doesn't it? Jesus said, becomes a picture of his own deliverance from death.

Because Jesus' deliverance from death was real, brothers and sisters, this evening, that becomes our deliverance from death. See, tell me this evening, which is a greater miracle?

Which is a greater miracle that God can make a fish to swallow a man and keep him alive for three days? Which is greater? That God can do that? Or that God can send his Son into the bowels of the earth?

[38 : 18] To lie stone cold dead and then raise him to life again? I am not amazed at the fish. I am astonished at the empty tomb.

I want to sing for joy that death lies dead, broken, death has been snapped in half, exploded from the inside out. for one day death will lay its hand on me.

One day death will lay its hand on you. And as death closes hard around us, look where we are. In Christ. In Christ. Christ who has plundered hell, emptied the grave, made death yield its fortress contents to him.

One day all the dead in Christ will rise. Your loved ones in the ground. What have they been? The Bible says not simply buried. Buried is what the world calls it.

[39 : 25] You know what we call it? Planted. Planted. Planted. Planted for the day of resurrection. In Christ your loved ones are. In his hand one day he will reach down himself from heaven.

Open the grave. And raise those who belong to him. Well I said there were two things to see in this prayer.

There's actually three. Not just God's wise hand. Not just God's powerful hand. But also his merciful hand. Salvation from the merciful hand of God.

Look at verse 4. I said I have been banished from your sight yet I will look again towards your holy temple.

Verse 7. When my life was ebbing away I remembered you Lord. My prayer rose to you to your holy temple. Isn't that incredible? Jonah the rebel.

[40 : 29] Jonah with the calloused heart. Jonah the sinner. Oh on the surface above the water there is God's frown. There is the tempest.

There is the storm. There is judgment. But oh below the surface in the deep there is a sinner coming home to a holy God.

But more on this tomorrow morning. salvation belongs to the Lord. Brothers and sisters may God hold you.

Hold you in your deepest sorrows. Keep you in the valley of the shadow of death. And bring us back always to him.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Amen.

[41 : 31] Loving Heavenly Father we ask together that you would show us this evening show us throughout this weekend that being in the palm of your hand is such a safe place to be.

Some of us need convincing that that's where we are for we feel so far from you. Some of us feel like we're drowning.

Some of us know what it means to come up from the depths and so we praise you. We thank you that in your rich mercy you see us and know us. Cause us we pray to see you and know you and keep us in your hand we pray all our days for we ask it in Christ's precious name.

Amen. Amen.