

# Unstoppable In Rescue

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 07 May 2023

Preacher: Phil Pickett

- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     So if you could turn with me to Jonah chapter 2, we're actually going to read, well, we're going to read from chapter 1 verse 17, that's actually where the chapter 2 starts in the Hebrew Bible, so that's where the next section begins.
- So from chapter 1 verse 17 till 2 verse 10. If I forgot that first verse, that's fine, I'll just read that in verse 17 and then you can follow on the screen.
- 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. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 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.
- For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me, all your waves and all your billows passed over me. Then I said, I'm 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 wrapping about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.
- [ 1 : 2 4 ]     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.
- Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love, but I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. But I vowed I will pay salvation belongs to the Lord.
- And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon dry land. Well, the title of our series as we go through the book of Jonah is that your God is too small.
- And last week we saw that a small view of God means that we don't take his kingship seriously. In other words, if we don't think much about God being king, we're going to think, well, I don't have to do what God says.
- I can do exactly what I want, and there's no consequence. That's what Jonah thought, essentially. He was happy to follow God until God said, go to Nineveh, and Jonah said, no. And off Jonah went.
- [ 2 : 2 5 ]     He clearly had a small view of God because he thought he could run. He thought he could pop across to the opposite side of the Mediterranean, and there live happily without God.
- But God sent a storm to stop Jonah in his tracks because Jonah didn't reckon on God being the crater of all the sailors. We saw on the other hand had the right view of God.
- They saw his power. They recognized in God's power that this is the Lord of the universe. For them, their understanding of God was broadened in that in those few minutes, and they responded in the only right response.
- Now it was to bow before God is king. We can have a small view of God's kingship. And tonight we'll see that we can also have a small view of God's ability to save.
- You see, you might get a situation where someone thinks, okay, I know that God is king. I know that I should bow before him, but I'm lost. I'm hopeless.

[ 3 : 20 ] There's no chance for me. I'm too far gone. It's too late for me. God can't save me. Or they might look around at their friends, their family, and those people we're praying for, those people they think are far away from God, and they think, I know that God is king, but these people have rejected God as king.

And I don't see what can be done. They're too far gone. They're beyond God's reach. Well, our main point this evening is that God's rescue is unstoppable, that no one is beyond his reach.

And that's, I think, summarized really nicely in the final line of Jonah's prayer where he says, salvation belongs to the Lord. In other words, God is sovereign when it comes to his salvation.

God's in charge about who gets saved, how they get saved. God's sovereign over salvation. Salvation belongs to the Lord. It's all about him.

But as we begin, it's worth noticing that in this passage, often the focus isn't on God. You see, Jonah's a well-known story, both in and out of the church.

[ 4 : 23 ] However, people often lose sight that this passage is about God when they read it, because the focus is so often on Jonah, or even more on the sea creature that Jonah spends three days and three nights inside.

And there's loads of different theories about what that sea creature was. Was it a whale? Was it a great white shark? Was it just some freak-sized tuna fish? What was it some kind of sea monster?

And that might be a cause of fascination for some people. And they write long essays that are just actually boring with the kind of theories about how it might have worked.

But for many people, actually, this isn't fascinating. This chapter is just a cause to maybe chuck out the book of Jonah altogether. This seems unrealistic.

And this sounds unbelievable. Can we be sure anything really happened? Can we be really sure that Jonah is a book in history? Or is it a myth? Is it a lie? Is it just a metaphor?

[ 5 : 22 ] Can we really take what happens seriously? Because it sounds impossible. A man staying three days and three nights in this fish. Maybe it's just a nice story.

Maybe it's a myth, a lie, or a metaphor. And let me just preliminary, as a preliminary note, just say two things to that. First of all, we need to be honest when we come to a passage.

We need to be honest about our assumptions when we come to a passage. All of us have assumptions. If you come assuming that miracles don't happen, then you're going to have to conclude that this is a myth or a metaphor.

Alternatively, if you believe that there is a God who, as we saw last week, is the creator of all things and so has total command and control over his creation, it's not implausible that he could have taken part of his creation and used it to miraculously rescue Jonah from drowning.

Second, if you conclude that miracles don't happen, you're forced to read this text unnaturally. You see, rather, it's written as a simple record of history.

[ 6 : 23 ] There's no reason to think that suddenly it's going into a myth or metaphor. But if you conclude that miracles don't happen, you're forced to read it unnaturally, you're forced to think that either it was some myth going around or either the writer was lying or, as some people think, oh, maybe there was an inn called the fish that Jonah spent a few days in.

Maybe it's this some weird metaphor. The problem with those theories is that that's not how Jesus read this passage. In Matthew chapter 12, you can turn there in your own time, but we'll also come to it next week.

Jesus refers to this story not as a myth, a lie, or a metaphor, but as a real historical event. In fact, he uses this passage to point to his own resurrection, his own death and resurrection.

If Jonah in the fish was anything but a real historical event, Jesus was not only a bad teacher, but it calls into question whether his resurrection was a lie, a metaphor, or a myth.

It's important that we have confidence that this really happened because Jesus said it really does and he ties his resurrection to it. I just thought that was worth mentioning, and I'm happy to chat after the service if anyone has any more questions or wants to think it through more.

[ 7 : 40 ] I thought we'd just mention it in some ways just to get it out of the way because the sea creature is not the focus in this passage. God is the focus. Jonah's not the focus.

It's God and the focus is on the God who saves. We even just see this in the bits of narrative that bracket the section.

I don't know if you noticed that there's two different types of genre in the passage that we read. You get Jonah's prayer, which is a bit like poetry versus two to nine, and then you get these two bits of narrative in one verse 17 and two verse 10.

The lesson's very clear from those two bits of narrative. God saves. At that point we should all go, woohoo, that's great. The thing is, just telling us that God saves, we can't like, oh, okay, yes, God saves, that's great.

You see, narrative is great at telling us the facts, but sometimes we need the poetry. Sometimes we need the poetry to give us the feeling. That's what Jonah's prayer does in verses two to nine.

[ 8 : 51 ] Sometimes the narrative and the prayer point to the fact that it's all God. Even just looking at those two bits of narrative, what we see is it God does all the actions.

We see the Lord appointed a great fish. The Lord spoke to the fish. In those two verses, Jonah, the fish, and the God are all mentioned.

There's only one person who's doing anything. There's only one active participant, and that's God. Everyone else is passive. This is all about God. That's only emphasized as we come to the prayer, which is what I want to spend most of our time in, because Jonah's prayer helps us to appreciate that this salvation is all about God by showing us that it's a salvation despite.

It's a salvation despite. First God saves Jonah, I want us to see. First God saves Jonah despite his desperate circumstances.

Despite his desperate circumstances. Jonah's prayer traces Jonah's descent physically and spiritually down and down. Last week we saw that while God commanded Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh, instead, Jonah arose and went down.

[ 10 : 03 ] He went down away from God, down to Job, or down into the ship, down away from the captain. Now Jonah's prayer traces him going down even further still. Let me just read again from verse three.

Jonah says, you cast me into the deep. If you were to draw a little diagram, you can trace the words going down as it were. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas. The floods surrounded me.

All your waves and billows passed over me. Verse five, 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.

It's a description of drowning. It's a description of sinking down to the gates of death. I don't know if you've seen maybe Blue Planet or Blue Planet 2 when the camera sinks down, down, down into the ocean, deeper and deeper as the light begins to fade.

And past 200 meters you get into the twilight zone and light slowly begins to dim. Just becomes a flicker above the camera. And then once you get to 1,000 meters deep, there's just total darkness.

[ 11 : 06 ] You're enveloped by blackness. It's the deepest depths a sperm whale can dive to. But sadly for Jonah, he doesn't have the warm soothing voice of David Attenborough describing the creatures to him as he goes down.

He doesn't do any good. Jonah any good. Jonah has sunk beneath the waves. He's as good as dead. And it doesn't take long for someone to drown.

But what's amazing is that in these last moments, Jonah calls out to God. Jonah has refused to repent. He has doggedly refused to repent. The whole time this storm was raging, the whole time he was asleep in the boat and when the sailors were saying, what's happening?

Jonah refused to repent. He was like, I'm right. Rather be chucked off the ship and die than repent. But now in verse 2 we read, he calls out to the Lord in his distress.

And amazingly God answers him. This is literally the low point in Jonah's life. He is as far away from life as you can be. He has been all but imprisoned by death.

[ 12 : 13 ] Verse 6 says, I went down to the land whose bars closed over me forever. Jonah's all but dead. And yet God answers him.

Even in death, Jonah was not outside God's control or beyond his reach to save. It makes me think about how when the Apollo astronauts were circled the moon, communications were cut off every time the command module went behind the moon to the so-called dark side of the moon because the moon blocks all radio signals.

Well, there's no dark side of the moon with God. There's nowhere you can't be hurt. There's no desert. There's no mountaintop. There's no trench, ocean trench where you're outside where God can't hear you, where you're outside his view, outside the ability for him to communicate with you.

You know, that's true physically. That's true in all types and times of life. There's God hears the teenager who's crying out to God inside the toilet cubicle because they're being bullied.

He hears the person in solitary confinement in prison. He hears the woman calling out in an abusive relationship. There's nowhere. There's no place. There's no time in life where we're beyond God being able to hear us.

[ 13 : 31 ] And whether you're a Christian or not today, that's something that we need to keep in mind of. Like God can hear you. All you need to do is call out to him.

Maybe that's for the first time. So first, God saves Jonah despite his desperate circumstances. Second, God saves Jonah despite his disobedient past.

I wonder if you've ever felt I've done too many wrong things for God to want anything to do with me. If God saved people based on their past, Jonah would be stuffed.

Remember, he was meant to be God's prophet. He was meant to be God's mouthpiece, speaking God's word to God's people. He was meant to be going to Nineveh to speak on God's behalf there.

And he did the opposite of that. He went as far away from God. He, in the most high-handedly disobedient way, you know, there's no way that you can put a glimmer of light in what Jonah does.

[ 14 : 27 ] Jonah just absolutely says I want nothing to do with God. I'd rather drown than repent. Jonah deserves God's judgment. He knows it. In verse four, he says, I'm driven away from your sight.

Jonah's talking about hell there. He's talking about being separated from God, from all his goodness. In verse two, Jonah mentions shale, that place of the dead that then Hebrew sometimes also refers to hell.

Physically Jonah is at a low point. Spiritually Jonah is at a low point. Jonah's not the doorstep of hell. The gates are closing. But then God saves him.

And when you think of Jonah, I want you to think of the person who you feel is the furthest away from God. The person who stopped going to church maybe as soon as they could, as soon as they're old enough to say, not going in and has never looked back.

I want you to think about the person who hates God with all their might. And if you try to talk to them about Jesus, if you try to even mention going to church, they just, they want nothing to do with it.

[ 15 : 28 ] They want to either change the conversation or just walk away. I want you to think about the person whose life is a long list of saying no to God who in everything just wants to go the opposite direction.

Maybe that person's even you. That's the person who God saves. Jonah has a disobedient past.

He's guilty. He deserves God's judgment. And yet despite all this, God saves him. Jonah doesn't deserve it. It's all God's mercy.

He doesn't treat him as he deserves. That's why Jonah says so accurately, salvation belongs to the Lord. He doesn't belong to Jonah. He didn't just like wave the right flag and God said, all right, okay.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. And we see that particularly when we come to Jonah's prayer. God saves Jonah despite his desperate circumstances, his disobedient past. And he saves him despite his dodgy prayer.

[ 16 : 28 ] Jonah's prayer you see is really interesting. You see on one hand it sounds a lot like the psalm. So you take Psalm 116, which we just sung or Psalm 18, which we'll sing at the end.

And there are lots of similarities. Let me just read a bit of Psalm 18 for you and you'll see how it sounds like Jonah. Psalm 18, David says, the cords of death encompassed me. The torrents of destruction assailed me.

The cords of shale entangled me. The snares of death confronted me. In my distress, I called upon the Lord to my God. I cried for help from his temple. He heard my voice and my cry to him reached his ears.

It was very similar. Now Jonah is probably quoting and structuring his psalm based on psalms that he knows, song based on psalms that he knows. So in one way, Jonah's prayer is a very good prayer.

However, many theologians have pointed out there's some issues. For example, at no point does Jonah say sorry. He admits that he's under God's judgment, that God has cast him into the sea, but we might expect Jonah to just go a little bit further given what he's done.

[ 17 : 35 ] Maybe to pray a bit like David in Psalm 51, Lord, my God, have mercy on me and your steadfast love cleans me from all sin. There's none of that kind of language though. Jonah doesn't pray that instead actually he spends most of the time talking about himself and he gives God only one little mention, two lines in verse seven.

You might disagree and say that, see that Jonah's prayer in a more positive light and that's fine. And I'm not saying that Jonah didn't repent at all. The fact that in chapter three, Jonah goes to Nineveh and he preaches is a sign that there is repentance.

There is some measure of repentance with Jonah. What I want us to notice though is that despite Jonah's dodgy prayer, God hears him. Verse seven, when my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord and my prayer came up to you into your holy temple.

If you've never prayed to God, you don't need to worry about your prayer being perfect. Or even if you've prayed many times before, you don't need to worry about your prayer being perfect.

We can spend so much time agonizing over praying the right thing, whether that's in public or in private. And none of us will pray perfectly until we're in heaven.

[ 18 : 53 ] Our prayers will always be tainted by sin, by selfishness, by pride, by a failure to recognize all the sin that surrounds our lives. But most of the God hears dodgy prayers and he saves people who call out to him with dodgy prayers.

Just like our past doesn't earn God's salvation, our prayers don't merit God's attention. God hears and he saves because he wants to, not because in some way our prayers are good enough to merit God hearing them.

Salvation belongs to the Lord, whether it's saving or hearing our prayers. And if you want one more piece of evidence, just look at the order of which things happen. Jonah prays, from Jonah's perspective, he prays and God answers him.

We see that in verse two. But we zoom out and we see God's perspective. Verse 17, we're told that the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah and save him.

God had the lifeboat ready before Jonah even called for it. In some ways it's God's initiative, even before Jonah prays. God saves Jonah despite his past, despite his prayers, and also despite his dubious future.

[ 20 : 10 ] Now, I don't want to spend long on this because there's spoilers for chapters three and four. But suffice to say that while Jonah repents in chapter, beginning of chapter three, end of chapter two, his life doesn't just suddenly get brilliant.

He suddenly doesn't turn into a model Christian. In fact, some of Jonah's worst moments are still to come. In chapter four, Jonah's a pretty horrible guy.

He's not a model that we're meant to copy. He's self-centered. He's bitter. He's angry. Jonah doesn't suddenly turn into a wonderful, perfect guy.

His life, his future is full of potholes. And yet despite Jonah's dubious future, God rescues him. And I mention that because I know that several of you are afraid of professing faith because you're not sure if you can keep it up or you're not sure that you'll be able to look the way you want to.

And you know what? Sometimes maybe you will act like Jonah in the Christian life. And the thing is we all have our Jonah moments, you might say. Jesus does say a tree is known by its fruit that our lives as Christians should be evidence of our profession of faith.

[ 21 : 29 ] But sometimes you will mess up, even dramatically, possibly even publicly. People might know about it and I pray that never happens. I also know that every Christian sins and actually often we know about each other's sins and we confess our sins to one another and we pray, we build one another up and we keep walking by God's grace.

And with God's help, there'll be good days and bad, but the trend will be steadily upwards. God doesn't save us because we're going to suddenly live perfect lives. From the moment we trust in Jesus, he saves us despite our dubious futures.

God saves Jonah despite his desperate circumstances, despite his disobedient past, despite his dodgy prayers, despite his dubious future.

You can't be far away, too far away for God to save. You can't be too bad for God to save. And your prayer might be really messy, but God will still hear it.

He promises to hear those who call on him and if you repent and trust in him, he not only hears you, but he hears you as his child. You don't need to be afraid that you won't be able to live up to it because that's why God gives his spirit into the hearts of his people to help fill in those potholes and to help them to walk in and by his grace.

[ 22 : 57 ] God saves Jonah despite so much. In the end of chapter nine, that really is a great summary. Salvation belongs to the Lord. It's not anything to do with Jonah. It's not anything to do with us.

God saves by his grace. And that salvation is ultimately fulfilled and seen in Jesus. I mentioned that Jesus quotes this passage in Matthew chapter 12. And Jesus says there, he says, 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? In other words, Jonah's experience of, it was a kind of death and resurrection experience.

Coming under God's judgment and then being brought and well vomited back to life on a beach. And in some ways that's a picture. Jesus says that's a picture of what he came to do.

Jesus's death and resurrection traveled on a similar curve. If you were to graph it out and more important, Jesus truly died. And Jesus didn't and Jesus, Jesus died, but he didn't just die.

[ 24 : 06 ] He died bearing the sins of people. Jonah, Jonah went to the point of death under God's judgment. Jesus died bearing the full weight of God's judgment against the sin of his people.

On the cross, he cried, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? You might say that in the words of chapter two, verse four, Jesus could say, I'm driven from your sight as he felt the full wrath of God upon him.

Jesus died for sins, but he didn't die a sinner. He was innocent. And that's why in the first verse that we read in our opening verse, Peter could say to the crowds that God raised him up, loosing him from the pangs of death because it was impossible for death to hold him.

Jesus's death and resurrection follows that same trajectory as Jonah going into the well and out onto the sand. Jonah shows us that salvation belongs to the Lord.

And that's a salvation God has ultimately accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And Jesus has done everything possible.

[ 25 : 17 ] Everything necessary so that we can be saved despite everything, despite all that we are. We read in that first reading we had in Ephesians chapter two, verse five, that even while we were dead in our trespasses and sins, God made us alive with Christ.

Paul says to the Romans that God shows his love for us. Why will we still sinners? That while is that's despite language. God saves us despite all of our sins.

That's something we need to remember if we believe us as well. When we're confronted by our sin again, when we mess up, it's so easy to think, oh my goodness, how what, to feel rubbish, to feel how can I pray to God?

How can I stand it before him? God saves us despite our sins. We continue in the Christian life despite our sin.

Sin belongs to the Lord, it's all of grace. The question is, have you called out to God? Will you call out to God as Jonah did? He's the only one who can save.

[ 26 : 24 ] And verse eight and nine, Jonah gives us two options really. He says, those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. In other words, if your hope in life and death is somewhere other than God, well, that might do you for several years, that might do you for five years, for 10 years, but they'll come at a time in your life where that hope will crumble, that foundation will slip from beneath your feet in life or in death.

And you'll realize that it cannot carry the weight of your hope. It cannot save you. You'll realize that you have forsaken your hope of steadfast love.

On the other hand, you can call out to him and you'll know his steadfast love, the love that is unending, unstoppable, the love that comes despite who we are, in the face of who we are, the love that God bestows on his people, even while he knows all of their sin, he lays his love on us and plucks us out of the pit as we are singing in Psalm 116.

Don't push that love away. Don't forsake your hope of steadfast love. I just want to end with the story of John Newton because, well, just reading Jonah's chapter one and two really reminds me of his life because like Jonah, he learned the lesson, not only of God's absolute power and sovereignty, but also that God saves us despite.

John Newton is perhaps most famous for writing that amazing grace that we sung this morning. And the story of his conversion is also well known. Newton was a pretty nasty man. He said of himself, I sinned with a high hand and I made it my study to tempt and seduce others.

[ 28 : 11 ] I know not that I have ever since met so daring a blasphemer. And in March 1748, John Newton was on the Greyhound, traveling back home when his ship was overtaken by a massive storm.

Sounds familiar? And the sails were ripped. There was little hope of survival. They were bailing the ship for about a week. They were bailing for so long that Newton got it so tired he couldn't help with that anymore.

So they lashed him to the wheel. So he was the one that was going to keep the ship in course. And while he was lashed to this wheel for 12 hours, he thought back over his life and he thought, I'm done for.

This is God's judgment come upon me. There is nothing that could be done for me. There is no hope of salvation. Later when he was, I guess, no longer lashed to that wheel, he found a New Testament and he read Luke 11 verse 13.

And he said, if you then being evil know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?

[ 29 : 19 ] And Newton read that verse and he thought, well, maybe there's still a chance that God will hear me. If God is so much better than human, Father, maybe there's a chance that God will hear me and he called out to God and God hurt him and God saved him.

John Newton was saved by the grace of God. What's grace? It's salvation despite. And that grace stuck with Newton the rest of his life and he wrote amazing grace. And let me just read you the last words of the words of his last will and testament.

Because I think it really summarizes what we've been thinking of this evening. He says, I commit my soul to my gracious God and savior who mercifully spared and preserved me when I was an apostate, a blasphemer and an infidel and delivered me from the state of misery on the coast of Africa into which my obstinate wickedness had plunged me and who has been pleased to admit me, though most unworthy to preach his glorious gospel.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. He saves us despite all that we are. Salvation is all of grace. I commit my soul to my gracious God and savior who mercifully spared and preserved me.

Each one of us be able to say that. Let's pray.