

REPENTANCE IS A BEAUTIFUL THING

JONAH 1:17-2:10

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow 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 fish's belly.

And he said: "I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, 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 floods surrounded me; all Your billows and Your waves passed over me. Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.' The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head. I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God.

When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple. Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy. But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD."

So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

The Masters Tournament at Augusta National Golf Club is known for tight security. The tens of thousands of patrons who attend the event are channelled through a single gate. This

makes for a crowded entrance, *and for a few moments a captive audience.*

One of the first times I attended the Masters there were several guys outside the gate wearing sandwich boards and carrying bullhorns. They were shouting at the crowd, “Repent or go to hell... Turn or burn... Repent, the end is near...” *That kind of message...*

I’m not questioning the theological accuracy of their statements. But their presentation left something to be desired. They came across as crazy and vengeful.

Hey, you can warn people about hell, without giving them the sense you’d just as soon them go there.

Repent doesn’t mean *insult*. Sadly, this is the only impression some folks have of the word “**repentance.**”

Satan is skillful. In the collective mind of the culture he’s turned the word “*repent*” into an *ugly, hate-filled, angry, condemning, judgmental word* - instead of the *pleasing, pleasant, endearing word* it actually is. It sounds strange, but “**repentance is a beautiful thing.**”

After his ordeal on the Mediterranean Sea, Jonah would forever see *repentance* as something beautiful. It was a *welcomed* frame of mind - a *peaceful* posture.

Repentance was Jonah’s rescue from a horrible, hell-a-cious experience. The moment he repented it ended an entrapment from which he desperately wanted to escape, *but didn’t think he could ever do so.*

Repentance was Jonah’s salvation.

The biblical word “**repent**” is an interesting term.

The Hebrew word “shuwh” (shoob) means simply, “to turn.” The Greek, “metanoeo” (met-tan-l-a-o) means “to have another mind, to change one’s mind, or to think differently.” After reading of both Testaments I like to define repentance as “**the willingness to change.**”

Understand I can’t always effect the changes I know I need to make. When a desperate heart first comes to Jesus it’s overpowered and trapped - a slave to sin.

You can’t change even though you want to do so.

If we had the might - or know-how - or where-with-all to alter our spiritual lives we wouldn’t need Jesus. This is why, in the Bible, *repent and believe* go together.

Only Jesus can change me in the way I need to be changed. This is why conversion from darkness to light, a new life in Christ, is a result of faith. But faith’s prerequisite is repentance - *the willingness to change*.

So what if I *believe* Jesus can revolutionize my life if I’m not willing to undergo the changes that involves.

The opposite of repentance is “*stuck.*” The *unrepentant person* is still enjoying what he knows to be bad for him. He’s unwilling to *let it go and give it up*.

It reminds me of the guy who read for weeks that cigarette smoking was bad for his health. It causes a host of problems, not the least of which is lung cancer.

After weeks of reading the literature, this fellow decided he had to do something!... He needed to take some action!... So *he stopped reading the literature.*

Rather than *stop smoking* the man *stopped reading the warnings...* He preferred *ignorance to deliverance.*

It wasn't that the man couldn't change - **he never even tried.** He never got that far. He was simply *unwilling to change* - in other words, **unrepentant.**

This was Jonah aboard the boat headed to Tarshish.

He too was *unrepentant.* God had required of Jonah some changes in his thinking that he was unwilling to make. Jonah had been called by God to go to Nineveh and preach to Assyrians - *but Jonah hated Ninevites.*

He refused to obey and went his own way... Jonah packed up his duffle bag, hoofed it to the port of Joppa, and boarded a slow boat to China (or in his case, the distant land of *Tarshish*). Jonah's plan was to put 2500 miles between *his own will and the will of God...*

But God said, "Not so fast..." **No one outruns God.**

At times the will of God can seem very, very difficult.

Obedience can be hard at first. God's demands tax us and stretch us. Following God can require some endurance, and resistance, and even some suffering.

But never forget there is only one undertaking more difficult than following God... *that's to turn from His will and disobey.* **God sees to it no child of His succeeds in their sin. He makes sure we're miserable without Him.**

When the sudden storm shook their boat the sailors sensed God wanted what was on board... At first, they tossed over the cargo, but the storm continued to rage.

It had to be a sailor or a passenger that God was after. When the lot fell on Jonah the fugitive was found.

Initially, the sailor's didn't want to throw a man overboard, but this was a serious, life-threatening storm. It wasn't letting up until it had what it was after.

Verse 15 ends this delimita for the sailors, "So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging." But as Jonah sunk under the murky ocean, the struggle was just beginning for the unrepentant prophet. Chapter 1 ends, "Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah."

Let me help you with the flow of this morning's text by giving you seven words. This is a little corny, *which is really out of character for me, since I'm never corny*, but all seven words in my list begin with the letter "M."

Think of the old Campbell Soup jingle, "Mm, Mm Good - Mm, Mm Good - That's what Campbell Soups are - Mm, Mm Good." When the hungry fish swallowed Jonah in the soupy water, he sung, "Mm, Mm Good."

In fact, God - even Jonah, afterwards - hummed the same, "Mm, Mm Good." For rather than negative, repentance is good, and pleasing - and even beautiful.

Here's our seven "Ms": **mammal, model, maybe, misery, memory, mercy, movement.** All these Ms combine to teach us that *repentance is Mm, Mm good.*

Notice first, the **mammal**. I say it was a mammal - *a whale*. But that's an assumption. The Bible doesn't say "*whale*." Verse 17 calls it, "*a great fish...*" "**Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah.**"

And of course, this is where the skeptics have a field day scoffing at the Bible. *How could anyone believe a man was swallowed by a whale - survived in his belly three days - got spit up on dry land - then lived to tell about it?* This whale of a tale is a fine way to entertain kids in Sunday School, but adults should know better...

It reminds me of a cartoon. Jonah is standing on the doorstep of his house. His angry wife opens the front door, and shouts, "**For crying out loud, Jonah! Three days late, covered with slime, and smelling like fish! And what story have I got to swallow this time?**" This is where the story gets a little fishy, and tough to swallow.

Did you hear about the atheist who asked his Christian friend, "**Come on now, how could Jonah really survive for seventy-two hours in the belly of a whale?**"

The Christian answered him, "*I don't know, but when I get to heaven I'll be sure to ask him.*" The atheist shot back, "**But what if Jonah isn't in heaven?**"

The Christian replied, "**Then you ask him.**" *Hey do I believe Jonah was swallowed by a fish? Absolutely!*

Here are a few thoughts... Verse 17 tells us "**the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah.**"

The Hebrew word translated “*prepared*” implies a special, unique preparation. God didn’t just pick the biggest of a school of fish, and say “*You’re it.*” The Hebrew word means “*to carefully design and weigh.*”

In fact, the Jewish rabbis taught that God created the fish that swallowed Jonah on the fifth day of His original creation - *for the unique privilege of chauffeuring Jonah.* It swam the seven seas for thousands of years waiting on the appointed time.

Since whales are the largest animals currently living in the sea we assume one swallowed Jonah - but not necessarily. It could’ve been a now extinct creature.

The rabbis suggested it was *one-of-a-kind.* Perhaps it was an ancient dinosaur created with a cavity off its digestive track, planned by God to house the prophet.

Here’s another thought, a baby is conceived in his mother’s womb. God provides for that baby to float, eat, grow, and survive for 280 days in a sack of fluid.

Don’t think I’m dumb enough to compare a pregnant woman to a whale. I’m stupid, but not that stupid. And I value my life. But if God can keep a baby alive in a woman’s belly for forty weeks, why can’t He engineer a way to sustain Jonah in a whale’s belly for three days?

Modern navies have nuclear subs that generate their own air and water - and stay submerged indefinitely.

An *Astute* class submarine can sail around the globe 40 times, over a 25 year life-span, and never surface.

Ironically, humans can engineer a submarine to accommodate 98 sailors for months at a time, yet we don't think God can create a fish that can carry one man for three days. It sounds like our problem is faith.

We've got more *faith in man*, than *faith in God*.

Here's another thought... Even if it was a whale this story isn't an impossibility. The average sperm whale has a mouth 20' long, by 15' high, by 9' wide - *larger than a lot of bedrooms*. Whalers have found whole, man-sized squid and sharks inside these whales.

Though it would be stifling in a whale's stomach - 104-108 degrees - there would be plenty of air to breathe. Whales ingest large quantities of oxygen.

The gastric juices in a whale's stomach would affect the pigment in a man's skin - but the chemicals don't digest living flesh. If they did, they would eat out a whale's own stomach. *A man could survive in its belly.*

In fact, over the years there have been a number of reports among whalers, of fellow fishermen who fell into the sea only to be found later, alive inside a whale.

One story is of a whaler named James Bartley. In 1891 he was lost at sea off the coast of the Falkland Islands. The accident occurred as sailors harpooned a whale. A few hours later as they were harvesting the whale's blubber they noticed activity in its stomach.

When they cut open the animal's belly they found James Bartley alive and well - his skin was discolored, but he was

otherwise unharmed. Aspects of the story have been debated, but the scenario is a possibility.

Here's my point, in 1:9 Jonah referred to God as "the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." If God made the sea, and its billions of inhabitants - big and small - then He can prepare a fish capable of capturing and carrying Jonah for 72 hours.

Again, verse 17 reads, "Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."

But here's another **M**-word: **model**. If you still doubt that the book of Jonah is a true story; then fast-forward 800 years. The person we call "**God**" - Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man - referred to Jonah and his stay in the great fish's belly as a historical account.

Matthew 12:39-40 tells of the day when, "Some of the scribes and Pharisees answered (Jesus), saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You."

But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For 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."

Jesus not only testified to the historicity of the person of Jonah, and the book in his name - He said the story was a *model* - or *type* - or *sign* to future generations.

You wonder why the fish kept Jonah for exactly three days and three nights? This was no accident - no random length of time. The duration of Jonah's *time out* was precisely planned by God down to the hour.

It was a sign. What happened to Jonah in the sea modeled the three greatest events in the history of the world... *the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus!*

And in light of the words of Jesus in Matthew 12 let me give you another **M**-word... **maybe**. *Here's a maybe...* We can't be definitive, but the text suggests.

It's possible Jonah died. Literally, drowned in the sea, and his dead body was preserved inside the fish.

Then after Jonah's resurrection he was spit up on the seashore. *It's a maybe...* but it would make Jonah even more a type or **model** of Jesus than we thought.

Notice, a couple of statements Jonah makes in chapter 2. In verse 2 Jonah writes, "**Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice.**" Sheol was the OT term for Hades or Hell - the abode of the dead.

Remember, in Luke 16 Jesus describes Sheol as a duplex. Two contrasting places were divided by a great gulf. There was a *pleasant side* and a *torturous side*.

Believers went to a pleasant place called Paradise - unbelievers went to a parched place of fiery torment.

Maybe Jonah is speaking metaphorically. *The belly of the fish felt like hell.* It was hot as hell. It was dark. The juices burned his flesh. It was 72 hours of torture.

Or it could be when he “**cried from the belly of Sheol**” he was speaking literally. Physically, he was dead - but his spirit spent those 72 hours in another world.

Notice also Jonah’s words in verse 5, “**The waters surrounded me, even to my soul...**” Whatever he went through impacted him spiritually. It could be the spirit of Jonah journeyed into the afterlife and back - not unlike the voyage Jesus would take nearly 900 years later.

Of course, whether Jonah actually *died*, or *endured* inside the fish he was *conscious enough - for long enough* - to realize the misery that surrounded him.

Misery is our fourth **M**-word. Notice in verse 2 Jonah refers to his incredible ordeal as “*my affliction.*”

He recalls in verse 3, “**For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me; all Your billows and Your waves passed over me.**”

Have you ever been tossed into a raging river - or battled an ocean riptide - or you drifted too far out into the ocean surf, and suddenly were in over your head.

Have you ever been on the verge of drowning? A water crisis is a terribly hopeless, helpless feeling.

And sometimes God allows us to reach a *hopeless point* - or a *helpless place*. He realizes that a little bit of desperation can help produce a repentant heart.

It reminds me of the young man who approached the elder of his village and said he wanted to know God.

The old man took him to the river and held his head under the water. The young man was stronger than old man - so finally he forcibly lifted his head. *Gasping for air he wanted to know what his mentor was doing?*

The elder told him, “When you’re as desperate for God as you were for air, then you’ll find Him.” Often God uses our desperation to bring us to repentance.

And remember this is why repentance is not *the ability to change* - but *the willingness to change*.

Jonah is so *in-over-his-head* he can do nothing... Perhaps this is where you are today. You’re desperate. You’re drowning. You’re sinking in a sea of despair.

The old Puritan preacher Thomas Watson once said, “Until sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.”

In addition he wrote, “Never do the flowers of grace grow more than after a shower of repentant tears.” It’s the *misery* of our sin that plows up our hard hearts.

Repentance is finally coming to embrace the attitude: *if God works, then I’m willing. I’ll cooperate with what His Spirit wants in me.* And most times it’s the misery of our situation that produces this desire to repent.

There’s more misery for Jonah, verse 5, “The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head.”

Imagine, peeling away layer after layer of smelly slime. You’re sinking deeper and deeper. You’re fighting the grip of this crawling, entrapping seaweed.

Verse 6, “I went down to the moorings (or foundations) of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God.” Jonah sunk to the bottom of the canyons on the ocean floor. Here’s another suggestion Jonah may’ve drowned in the sea.

Imagine what happens to Jonah...

He’s grabbed by the sailors and tossed overboard. He feels himself sailing threw the salty air until his body slaps against the surface of the water. He tries to get a gulp of air before he starts sinking like a rock. It’s cold and dark. He’s submerged in the murky seawater.

Meanwhile, a great fish has been swimming for hours on a trajectory that will intersect with Jonah’s free fall. A hunger pang hits the massive animal a few feet from Jonah’s suspended body. The whale opens its mouth and swallows some fish-bait named Jonah.

Jonah floats past the animal’s teeth without getting chewed... he hits the back of its gullet... then slides down the digestive tract into its stomach. *What a ride!*

The whale thinks, “Mm, Mm Good.” But Jonah is thinking, “Mm, Mm Bad.” He is the miserable prophet.

And imagine this trip from *pick up point* to three days later and your *ultimate destination*. This was the worst rollercoaster ride of all-time. You got on board with a full stomach, and lost your lunch along the way.

Imagine, being in the belly of a fish as it twists and turns; then rolls and dives through the ocean at high speeds. *I can get motion sickness on the way to the local grocery store... I can't imagine Jonah's misery.*

And God is not afraid to make us miserable when need be. When *our obedience* and *His will* is at stake, *our comfort* becomes His last concern. Remember, God loves you too much to allow you to succeed in sin.

I'll never forget the night I'd just put my kids to bed. I'd just gotten comfortable in the ole lazy boy, when three year-old Nick comes waltzing through the room.

I said, "*Son, what in the world are you doing out of bed?*" He turned to me with a defiant look, and said, "*Dad, mind your own business.*" *Hey, I proceeded to show that young man exactly what my business was!*

In fact, it's every father's business to discipline his children... *And God is a good, good Father!* When He sees one of His kids straying outside the boundaries of His will, He isn't afraid to *take care of business.*

Trust me, the same Lord Jesus who *picked up a wooden cross to save us, will also take up a wooden spoon and spank us.* *Just ask the Prophet Jonah!*

Which brings us to the next **M**-word... **memory.**

Read with me two verses. Verse 4, "*Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.'*" Then verse 7, "*When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer went up to You, into*

Your holy temple.” In *the belly of a fish* Jonah recalled *the courts of the Lord*.

Jonah remembered the sheer joy and tranquility - the unexplainable peace - the warmth of being in the center of God's will... It was the same feeling he had experienced while worshipping God in the Temple.

It's been said, “**You don't truly love something until you realize it can be lost.**” Jonah had forgotten how much he missed God's peace, and bliss, and blessing.

It took the stark contrast between *the joys of God's Temple* and *the miseries of the fish's belly* to jar the prophet's memory. **Perhaps you've forgotten what it was like to love God and feel loved by God?**

Your pride, and rebellion, and stubbornness, and disobedience have driven a wedge between you and what was once your greatest joy... **Don't forget, God misses you even more than you miss Him!**

God loved Jonah so much He chases him half-way around the world - hurls a storm at his boat - has him thrown overboard - prepares a great fish - insures his misery - stirs up his memory - *just to get him to repent*.

Jonah didn't - but he could've written Psalm 139.

Listen to its Jonah-like lyrics. “**Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell (the Hebrew word is literally “Sheol”), behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost**

parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.”

The story of Jonah proves that *nothing* can separate us from God’s love - *not even our own stubbornness*. He tirelessly pursues us and desires that we repent. God knows that **repentance is a beautiful thing!**

And here’s the sixth **M**-word in this story - it’s a truly wonderful word - **mercy**. Here it gets “**Mm, Mm Good.**”

As Ephesians tells us, “**God is rich in mercy.**”

In verse 8 Jonah recalls the goodness of God. “**Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy.**” Only the God of Israel was a God of mercy.

The ancients invented gods to keep people in line. Their gods were fickle, angry, vindictive. They had to be appeased or they would rain down judgment. That’s why Jonah says to worship idols is to forsake mercy.

Jonah now realizes that all his trouble was of his own making... While the prophet walked in God’s will he was never thrown over the side of a ship, or wrapped in seaweed, or sunk to the bottom of the deep...

Following God’s will had proven far safer and more advantageous than walking in the will of Jonah.

It was when he *forsook God* that he *forsook mercy*.

And as Jonah remembers God’s goodness, and dwells on His mercy it stirs up in him a desire to repent.

This is what Paul predicted in Romans 2:4, when he asked, “**Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance,**

and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” It’s thoughts of God’s goodness that stirs up repentance.

As Jonah reflected on *God’s faithfulness* it created in him a desire to be *faithful*. In verse 9 he repents - He turns back to God - **He’s willing for God’s will.**

“But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD.” Jonah submits. He gives in to God’s will.

Realize, before Jonah ever experienced *a change in circumstances* he first adopted *a change of attitude*.

He repented. Jonah turned from his rebellion, and surrendered to God’s will. Our fugitive stops *running from God* and *running toward Him*. Devotion and sacrifice became Jonah’s salvation - not Tarshish.

Notice in verse 9, Jonah chooses to be thankful for God’s will ahead of time. He embraces it with praise...

He trusts that God’s will is always **Mm, Mm Good!** *Are you wise enough to draw the same conclusion?*

And notice the final **M**-word... **movement.**

It’s amazing that all the while Jonah is trapped and imprisoned in the belly of this great fish - *the fish is on the move.* After the fish gulped Jonah he started swimming toward Nineveh. Even at Jonah’s lowest point, God was at work positioning him for revival.

God was placing Jonah back in the center of His will.

Here's the point, if you're a child of God even when you think you're going nowhere, God is still at work. *Today's sorrows are the seeds of tomorrow's blessing.*

Finally, we're told in verse 10, **"So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land."** Notice, the whale was far more obedient than God's prophet.

The moment God speaks to the fish it obeys!

Marine biologists have long observed that whales are sophisticated communicators. They give off sounds that are recognized by other whales in their pod. A lot of research has gone into the patterns of these sounds.

Well, it shouldn't be surprising that God the Creator is fluent in whale talk. As soon as God gave the order, the fish obeyed, and vomited Jonah onto the shore.

Imagine, being a Mediterranean fisherman. You're on the shore cleaning your nets or repairing your boat when a whale swims into the shallow water - rises from the surf - and up-chucks a man onto the beach...

The guy's skin is bleached white.

His clothes have dissolved into threads.

His hair is wild and brittle.

He's rubbing his eyes getting use to the daylight. And the first words out of his mouth... **"Nineveh or bust..."**

You'd look at that wild man and think, ***"What an ugly sight!"*** You would see nothing pretty about Jonah - his appearance, or his situation. But you'd not be looking through God's eyes, or from Jonah's perspective...

For repentance is a beautiful thing!

The mammal, the model, the maybe, the misery, the memory, the mercy, the movement all combined to bring Jonah to repentance. *What will it take for you?*