

## August 14, 2016: Jonah's Misery

Dear Listeners,

Last week at this time, I started a series of messages based on the prophecy of *Jonah*. We heard about Jonah's *mandate* to bring the Word of the LORD to the Assyrian people of *Nineveh*, preach against them. Jonah, however, refused and *deserted* and boarded a ship to flee in the opposite direction. It's only after a *violent storm* is hurled onto the sea and the sailors cast the lot to see who it is against whom the gods are provoked to anger, that Jonah comes out with the truth. He *has to proclaim* the LORD, his God, as the only true God, the God who made heaven and earth; he *has to confess* his sins to these sailors about his deserting from God's calling and mandate! It's shocking to the sailors, who don't just ask Jonah for further information but who exclaim in astonishment, "*What have you done?!*" If you have a God like the LORD, how do you dare to defy His will, refuse His task, and run away in His world? What shame to hear the *sailors* express more respect for the God of heaven and earth than *His own prophet*! How could you do this to us, dragging *us* along into this reckless bid to escape from the LORD God!"

The sailors now know, dear listeners, that they depend on *Jonah* for the safe outcome of this tragedy. "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" May be they thought of a special honour and treatment for Jonah as God's servant, or of a special sacrifice they would have to make. Whatever it would take to appease God's wrath, even with silver or gold, they would do it! Jonah, however, suggests, "*Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will become calm.*" His sin of defiance and mutiny deserves the *death penalty*, Jonah knows! The sailors disagree with this and judge that Jonah's sin cannot be that serious; they aren't ready yet to throw Jonah over board. Who knows, maybe that will meet with even *greater* wrath of Jonah's God! Instead, the men did their best to row back to land, but they could not for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then the sailors acknowledge *God's justice*; yet they plead with Him for *mercy* to themselves, "O LORD, please do not let *us* die for taking this man's life!" What great contrast to Jonah's negligence, Jonah's defiance, Jonah's refusal to pray: *these men* did everything they could to spare his life and even though they know his sin and guilt, they cry for mercy!

Jonah has hardly *touched* the water of the sea or the wind dies down and the sea grew calmer and calmer. This too testified to the greatness and almighty power of the LORD God! The LORD granted them His time of *grace*, to seek Him, and to inquire after Him. At this time, however, the justice of God was *more severe* over His *servant* who knew Him than over these *heathen sailors*. The men greatly feared the LORD and they offered a *sacrifice* to the LORD and made *vows* to Him. That must have been quite an experience for those sailors when they threw Jonah overboard! They knew: *that's it* for Jonah! No one can *survive* when cast into such a boiling and raging sea! Jonah, however, *did* survive it! Indeed, the LORD not only spared his life *miraculously*, He also worked on Jonah *spiritually*! The LORD changed Jonah's *heart* and *mind*; He brought His servant to

repentance and conversion. Jonah survived and told the story in the form of a *Psalm* of thanksgiving and praise, the story of his fear, his misery, his despair, and his confession that salvation is only with the LORD!

The LORD provided a *great fish* to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. What great power God has: He doesn't only govern and direct the sea and the wind; also the *animals* listen to His voice! Well, when Jonah reflected on it later on, and meditated on the LORD's way with his life, he experienced it as the *depth of the grave*. He knew he was entering the realm of the dead and the gates of Hades were closing behind him! Just imagine the terrors of being hurled from the deck of a ship into those swirling waves; yes, and then to awaken in *pitch blackness*, in the *slimy pit* of the fish's belly! Yes, there too, Jonah didn't know any better but that he was going to die, buried alive as he was; he was deeply afraid and fearing for his life: "in my distress I called to the LORD!" Jonah knew his sin, his defiance of the LORD, having fled from the LORD, and now he also knows *the depth of his misery*, the punishment he receives: "I have been banished from your sight, will I ever again look toward your holy temple?" Indeed, that's the surprising thought he had in the face of death: he would no longer have the *communion* with God in His holy temple!

This story of Jonah, dear listeners, isn't just a *fable*, a *fantasy*, but a true story that really happened. The fact that the *Lord Jesus* mentions Jonah's time of three days and three nights in the fish, while mentioning the repentance of the Ninevites as well, shows that *it truly happened*. Jesus mentions it in connection with His *own* death and time in the grave. In fact, through this connection you see the *gospel* in this story of Jonah's misery as well; the *gospel* of Him who is more than Jonah: Jesus Christ, the Son of God! He was sent to earth from which the stench of sin was coming up to God's throne; He, however, did *not* flee, but rather wanted to go; to go in love for this world, for you and me!

Jesus Christ, He is our perfectly *obedient prophet*, and on Him God the Father laid our depravity and curse, our wickedness and sin! Although *He* deserved to live, God cast Him into death to pay the price for the salvation of men from death, for Jonah, for you and me! *Jonah* may have thought that he was in the realm of the dead and experienced it that way; yet, our *Lord Jesus Christ* truly was banished from God's sight, from His presence, forsaken by God as He descended into hell! Then *His body* was in the realm of the *dead* for three days to prove that He was really dead. That's the *price* He paid for Jonah, for the salvation of Nineveh, in spite of its stench of sin and decay; the price He paid for you and me! Jonah, in the meantime, learned his lesson: it's one of two things, God's *judgment* or His *grace*; he knows that it's *life* or *bitter death*! Do you know it too, dear listener, this fear of God, this reality of sin and misery in God's sight, and His certain judgment? Then you must be deeply persuaded as well, as Jonah became, that "Salvation comes from the LORD!"

The LORD provided a *great fish*, dear listeners, by which Jonah was *saved*. That's one of the great *miracles* in this book of Jonah. Indeed, God's *Providence* is front and centre, not only in providing this fish but also in the great storm, the calm sea, and the miracle tree (ch 4). It shows *God's* almighty power and sovereign plan, which we see in sharp contrast with *Jonah's* attitude. Jonah thought he could defy God's almighty power, the

reach of His Sender, but he forgot that he had to do with the Almighty God who *provides* all things and *holds* everything in His fatherly hand! Of course, then the *event itself* has been denied and opposed. Others have tried to prove it by adducing other cases of similar events, like the story of a certain *Ambrose Wilson in 1927* about a sailor who had been swallowed by a sperm whale but who was found alive still when the animal was butchered. All that, dear listener, is not important at all! We don't know the details, but we do know that it was a miracle of God's sovereign power and grace! It was His work of salvation!