

“A Poem from the Pit:  
Jonah and the Journey Outward (Part 5)  
Jonah 2:1-10

To improve my German, I often listen to news and sermons. Recently I tried something different: a German podcast series that explores the complex nature of death. If my *verständnis* is ok, here's what I learned.

We think death is simple. You're alive, then you're dead. Doctors know it's not that simple. It's not just that your heart stops. It's not just that your brain quits. The cells in your body are, in fact, still alive long after the doctor declares you dead.

Even at the purely physical, scientific level, matters of life and death are not so simple as we think. It's a podcast about death. But it actually shows how layered and complex and rich human *life* is. The Scriptures show us that on top of this scientific sense of life's richness, the spiritual sense of life and death is richer still.

The Bible introduces us to the source of life: the LORD, Yahweh. But even before we are introduced, we already experience this person, so full of life, because the LORD is the giver of life, and if we're alive, then we are always living because of his life.

And to be away from the presence and power and grace of the LORD is to lack life. To be dead. To move away from his face is to have life slip away from you. And that's what's so deadly about Jonah's journey away from the face of God. To run from God's life is to have a kind of death wish.

Throughout chapter 1 Jonah gradually realizes that if he's going to flee God's face, he's fleeing life itself. He's going to die. And then finally at the end of chapter 1 he seems like he's going to get his wish. If the only way to be alive is to be in the presence of God, then he'd rather be dead.

Finally he's gotten away from God's face, he thinks, as the sailors throw him into the raging Mediterranean Sea. And that's when the LORD appoints the great fish. The waters surrounded him; now the guts of a fish surround him. The wind and waves overwhelmed him; now the flood flushes him into the depths of the fish. The face of God crowded in on him: when he was on dry ground, while he was aboard the boat, and while he sank under the waves. Now the face of God has cornered him in the depths of the fish. Where are you going to run to *now*, Jonah? Do I have your attention? Look here, Jonah.

Jonah refuses to look at God's face for two days. And finally, three days into his underwater captivity, Jonah has nothing else to do but face the LORD. And that's when we get his poem from the pit.

In the Hebrew imagination, there are three parts of creation: the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the underworld. The place where God and the spiritual beings dwell; the place where we dwell; the place where the dead dwell. Lots of times the underworld is thought of as a watery place, a dark watery grave. And that's exactly where Jonah has gone:

(3) “Into the depths, to the very heart of the sea.”

(6) Down to “the roots of the mountains.”

To an underwater prison, where the depths of earth wrapped its bars around Jonah.

Jonah says, verse 4, that he's been “banished from God's sight.” Which is what he wanted.

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But now what’s happened? Now he’s actually experiencing what it means to be lost.

Did you know that many people who survive an intentional jump to take their own lives say that the moment they jumped, they experienced a great sense of regret? That they suddenly realized how precious and miraculous life is? That they’re so glad they failed? Glad to be alive?

Jonah has hit rock bottom, and his life is slipping away as the face of the LORD disappears from his vision.

And it’s at that moment that everything changes.

(7) “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD.”

It’s not that he forgot about God. But he *remembered*. He remembered the very thing that made him want to flee from God’s face. He remembered that the LORD is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. That he gives life, forgives sins, and restores life. He remembered that this is what God promised to be *to him*.

In verse 4, when he’s at rock bottom, he turns toward the Promised Land. Toward God’s temple. Toward God’s presence. Toward the source of life. “I can’t see you, LORD. I know that this is what I wanted. But now that I’ve got what I want, I don’t want it anymore. I don’t want this isolation. I don’t want this so-called independence. I don’t want death. I want, and I need, *you*. Your presence with me. Your covenant bonds of love all around me. Your life in my veins and my lungs.”

And so— picture this— kneeling there in the guts of this monster fish, Jonah turns toward the temple. He bows down. He pours out what’s left of his energy and his heart. And he cries out for the presence of God.

Verse 7: his prayer rose from the pit and reached the LORD in his holy temple, so far away. And Jonah makes a promise: verse 9: I will return and offer sacrifices and keep my promises and speak of your grace and salvation.

See what he’s done? He’s imitating those pagans from chapter 1. They barely knew his God. But they cried out. They offered sacrifices. They made vows. Jonah’s poem from the pit is an imitation of the pious prayers and penance and promises of the pagan sailors. Clinging (2:8) to worthless idols does no good. The pagans learned this, and ended up confessing “Salvation is from Yahweh!” And now Jonah has learned this. He’s learned the futility of making his ethnic identity and his religious job and his moral reputation into idols. And at the gates of hell he turns to the LORD’s face and says “Salvation is from the LORD!”

Some people say that this verse is the central verse of the Bible. That this *experience*— reaching the end of yourself and turning to the LORD — is the central experience of human life. That *growth* is, in a way, simply remembering— over and over and over again— that it’s infinitely better to be honest about our brokenness and sin and need, and alive in the presence of the LORD, than to be proud and self-sufficient, and dying without the face of the LORD in sight.

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“Salvation is from the LORD!” Have you had your Jonah-moment? Do you have it on a fairly regular basis? Do you “remember” the relentless nature of his grace and love when you’re deep in the pit?

You realize, don’t you? — that when you are at the end of yourself and even at the end of your *life*, you can turn toward the face of the LORD, and know for certain that your cry will reach him in his holy temple, right?

You know, don’t you? — that when the cords of death surround you, you can call out “LORD— save me!” and your cry will be heard. Right?

You do know, don’t you? — that if you make this your cry, that the LORD will (as the Psalm says) deliver you from death, your eyes from tears, your feet from stumbling. That the LORD will make you stand up tall and walk in his presence in the land of the living. Right?

Jonah remembered that this was true. But here’s the thing. You and I know even more deeply that it’s true— that this path back to the LORD’s presence is open; that his mercy is more than our sin and failure. Why? Because the LORD Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane. And there, all the waves and breakers began to sweep over him and overwhelm his soul. He went there to seek his Father’s face, and he began to lose sight of the face he’d known for all eternity. Even before he’s arrested, he says to his friends “my soul is flooded, even to the point of death. Pray with me!” And of course, they go off and sleep instead. And soon they leave him. And soon Jesus, the true prophet of God and son of God, hangs on the cross and cries out “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Why have you turned your face from me? Why am I alone? Real death is being away from the LORD and giver of life.

It was the plan— awful but perfect and beautiful— of the Father and the Son that they would re-enact God’s relationship to Jonah. That Jesus would cry out like Jonah did. But that the Father would turn his face away... Until 3 days later, when the Father turned his face back toward Jesus and raised him from the grave. Until the grave spit him out like the fish spit Jonah out.

Because Jesus experienced what we deserve for running from the LORD— even though he *delighted* in God’s presence— you and I know that when we cry out, no matter how far we’ve run away from God’s face, he will hear our voice and rescue us. We’ll experience what Jesus deserved for his faithfulness, no matter how unfaithful we have been. Salvation is from the LORD.

Friends, whether you’re in the pit or on the mountaintop: say from your heart: Salvation is from the LORD! And it is. And it shall be. Amen.