



## A REALLY BIG FISH STORY

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Presented by:  
**Solid Bread Community**  
Fort Collins, CO  
[www.solidbreadcommunity.com](http://www.solidbreadcommunity.com)

### Review:

- Last time in our study of Jonah, we focused on **vss. 8-16 of Ch. 1**
- In that passage, we read how Jonah's plans to flee from the Lord begin to unravel:
  - A supernatural storm that defies all norms is raging - - and it's intensifying.
  - The boat is starting to break apart, and the sailors figure out that Jonah is the cause of their great danger.
  - They hit Jonah with a bunch of questions - largely focused on what they need to do to HIM to survive this storm that God has sent.
  - The sailors had run out of their expertise and Jonah had run out of his options.
  - Nobody on the boat was in control, and nobody had good answers for the rapidly deteriorating situation.
  - But the sailors also know Jonah is the only one on the boat who was connected to the One True God, and so they figured if anyone had any idea, it was Jonah.
- Jonah then tells the sailors to throw him overboard. He tells them this will calm the storm. He admits to the sailors that he's at fault.
- We determined several things from this instruction that Jonah gives the sailors, and from the larger story of Jonah in this book:
  - **Number one**, Jonah is still running from God. He still doesn't want to do what God wants him to do.
  - He's still stubborn and rebellious. He's still not willing to yield to God.
  - In effect, Jonah told the sailors that he would rather die than fulfill his mission to the Ninevites.
  - **Number two**, Jonah's in a defiant phase of his life, and so he's an unhappy person.
  - He grumbles, he complains, he wants his way, he's resentful, and he's short-tempered and self-centered – these things show Jonah's got a spiritual problem.
  - The story of Jonah – at least in THIS phase of his life - shows his conscious unwillingness to let God be the Lord of his life.
  - We're going to see more evidence of this defiance and unhappiness as more details of Jonah's story play out in the next chapters.

- **And then lastly**, we learned Jonah had no appetite for suicide. That did not conform to his belief system.
- The sailors had unwittingly presented Jonah with an open door when they asked him a leading question in **vs. 11**, “*What should WE do to YOU?*”
- Jonah simply walked through that door. He put the burden on the sailors rather than on himself. He took the easy way out.
- In his compromised spiritual condition, he avoided personal responsibility. This was his pattern.
- He could have fallen on his knees and repented right there – but he didn’t.
- He consistently side-stepped the higher road every time, and that’s what happens to us when we’re in that kind of darkened and obstinate place.
- We go for the easy choice, the natural choice, and the wrong choice.
- So -- the sailors do what Jonah tells them. They toss him overboard. And we saw that two things happened right away:
  - **First**, there was an abrupt change in the sailors’ physical world. The storm immediately stops, and everything around them becomes calm.
  - **Second**, there was an immediate change in the sailors’ spiritual condition.
  - The Bible records their words and actions, and this information argues for the sailors’ reverent awe and repentant faith.
  - There is good reason to believe their lives changed from this point forward.

**NOTE:** That brings us to **vs. 17 of Ch. 1** where we return our attention to Jonah once more. This will be our text for today’s lesson.

**NOTE:** There are several details in this verse that I want to unpack. If we properly deal with these things, that will help each of us to address some popular misunderstandings.

1. First, there is the statement, “*the Lord provided (some translations say ‘appointed,’ ‘arranged,’ or ‘prepared’)*”
2. (Then there is the statement) “*a great fish to swallow Jonah*”
3. (and lastly it is said) “*Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights*”
4. (Let’s briefly review each of these interesting details, and we’ll unpack them by asking a series of questions):

#### **A. The first question is this: ‘Is the appearance of this ‘great fish’ a miracle?’**

1. We talked about miracles in our last lesson on Jonah – specifically we talked about the sudden calming of the storm.
  - We noted that a true miracle is when God supernaturally intervenes and sovereignly imposes His power on the natural laws of life and physics.
  - This means we need to be more aware of how we use the word ‘miracle.’ As we noted last time, we use that word too casually too often.

- The sudden calming of the storm WAS, in fact, a true miracle. The sailors recognized that, and it changed their lives. Miracles have a way of doing that.
- But is the appearance and appointment of this great fish a miracle? After all, very large fish, sharks, whales, and so on have all been documented in the Mediterranean Sea for many centuries.
- I think the best answer here is, **“Yes, it’s a miracle.”** The context shows God’s sovereign intervention and divine control, and the text says the fish was *‘provided’* or *‘appointed’* by God.

NOTE: Let me further explain a few things....

- God controlled the fish’s timing, its location, and its action - just as He will control the fish and make it barf Jonah onto the beach three days later.
- Jonah didn’t know this, and neither did the sailors. Nobody knew that God was behind the scenes making these unbelievable things happen.
- The ‘great fish’ being there when Jonah hit the water just seems very natural to human perceptions. But the Bible says God was involved...
- The Hebrew word **manah** (‘mah-NAH’) which is used here means to "appoint," "arrange," or "prepare," and it’s used in the book of Jonah several other times:
  - ✓ For example, He (God) *"sent a great wind on the sea," (Ch. 1:4).* We’ve seen this one already.
  - ✓ This was the supernatural storm the sailors endured, and **manah** is used to define how it arrived.
  - ✓ He (God, again) *"prepared a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give him shade," (Ch. 4:6)*
  - ✓ God *"prepared a worm," (in Ch. 4:7),* and He *"prepared a scorching east wind," (Ch. 4:8)* - - and here in like manner, in **Ch. 1:17**, God *"provided a great fish"* to swallow Jonah.
  - ✓ In each of these examples, the same Hebrew word is used, and the text in each case explicitly states that God sovereignly intervened on the situation.
  - ✓ He made something happen which otherwise would NOT have happened. God supernaturally imposed His will and power into a specific situation.
  - ✓ It’s not the same kind of obvious miracle that feeding 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes was - - but I think it’s most accurate to see God supernaturally intervening in natural laws and affairs here.
  - ✓ I believe this qualifies the appointment of this great fish to swallow Jonah as a true miracle.

**B. The second question is: ‘What can we know about this great fish?’**

NOTE: Some of you may be puzzled why this is even a relevant question at all. ('Who cares?' you might wonder...)

- It's important because there are many folks who think this story of Jonah is allegory.
- They don't believe it is true, and details like this 'great fish' lead them to feel this way.
- In the end, I feel such people have chosen to place limits on God. They REFUSE to accept any truth that is larger than the box they want to put God in.
- This is a dangerous position to find oneself. We cannot LIMIT God, and we MUST not!

1. Those who roll their eyes at the story of Jonah and the account of this 'great fish' tend to forget that Jesus Christ referred to it, not as fiction, but as FACT.

- Jesus used this specific detail of 'the great fish' as a solemn sign regarding the most significant event of His own life on earth - - His own death and resurrection. You can read this in **Matt. 12:38-41**.
- Further, Jesus said in that same passage that in the great Judgment Day, the men of Nineveh will rise up and condemn the scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus was talking.
- Jesus said this because the men of Nineveh repented at the simple and straightforward preaching of Jonah. We'll be studying this in a future lesson.
- But Jesus Himself - who was infinitely greater than Jonah - was physically WITHIN the religious leaders' company, and He was not being heeded by them.
- But concerning this question about 'the great fish,' it is preposterous to imagine our Lord issuing these words of warning if they were based on a fictitious prophet / fish / or population - - or about a fictitious repentance.

2. And that brings us to this 'great fish.' What can we know about it? (zoology lesson)

- The word in Hebrew that is translated "a great fish" literally means "a great sea-monster," and that general term applies to whales, sharks, and other varieties of large fish and aquatic creatures.
- No one really knows what kind of 'great fish' this was. In preparing this lesson, I read the views of some commentators who get rather emphatic about their research and their conclusions - - but the truth is we simply don't know.
- Many believe it was a Great White shark, which - while rare in the Mediterranean Sea now - were once much more common there and reached up to 30 feet in length, or more.
- Records have also been found of much larger species of sharks in that part of the world - but these species are now extinct.
- It's interesting to note that whole horses and oxen have been found inside sharks. Not in pieces - but whole.
- Entire bodies of men have also been found several times-- in one instance, the man was dressed in a full suit of metal armor.

- I found a couple of fascinating stories, and one was from 1758. A sailor fell overboard from a frigate in the Mediterranean, and he was swallowed whole by a shark. The captain fired at it, and the shark regurgitated the man back up.
- The man was alive and not injured too much. The shark was harpooned, dried, and presented to the sailor, who then went round Europe exhibiting it and telling his story. That shark was 20 feet long.
- Another story is told in The Expository Times, from August 1906. This account took place off the Falkland Islands. Here, a sailor was discovered inside of a whale as it was being cut up. The man was alive, but he was unconscious.
- As I said, theories abound about what kind of 'great fish' this was, but we just need to take the story of Jonah at face value.

**C. And now, the third question: "What is meant by three days and three nights?"**

**NOTE:** This is an interesting detail that deserves a bit more exploration. In **Matt. 12:40**, Jesus describes Jonah as being *'three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster.'* In that same verse, Jesus also says *"....so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."*

1. So, Jonah was in this 'great fish' **at least** some thirty-two to thirty-four hours, and, for part of the time, he was in a state of consciousness.
  - It is a Jewish saying that, *"A day and a night make an Onah, and part of an Onah is as the whole."*
  - An Onah is a Jewish unit of time. In other words, Jonah did not need to be in this 'great fish' for three full 24-hour periods to fulfill this *'three days and nights'* parameter.
  - Even in early England, a prisoner sentenced to three days' imprisonment was seldom more than forty hours in jail, and sometimes only thirty-three-- part of a day was reckoned by law as a day.
2. The best way to understand the phrase *'three days and three nights'* from a Jewish definition – and this includes what Jesus Christ predicted about His own death and burial – is this:
  - Both Jesus and Jonah were "confined" in difficult situations where they could not move about freely for three consecutive **periods** of darkness (night) and three consecutive **periods** of light (day).
  - Jesus could not move about because He had physically died. The Bible is crystal clear. Jonah's situation was probably different - - more on that in a moment.
  - But the point I am making is this: both Jesus and Jonah met the Jewish qualifications of *'three days and nights.'*
  - For Jesus in the tomb, and for Jonah in the 'great fish,' each was confined for three periods of darkness and three periods of light.

- And just as the imprisonment laws of England once were, part of a day was reckoned as a day.
- I'm giving you just enough information here to avoid all the rabbit trails that want to come up - - I encourage you to do your own reading and research on this matter.
- I'm just trying to explain that this did not need to be three full 24-hour cycles for this *'three days and three nights'* phrase to be stated as it is.

**D. Here's another question, and this is a rather interesting one: "Did Jonah die, or did he remain alive in the great fish?"**

**NOTE:** (Confession time for me). I came into this study believing that Jonah had died – at least for the latter part of his time in the 'great fish.' Now, however, after doing a lot more study, I have arrived at a different conclusion.

1. By way of background, there are two main views of what happened here with Jonah:
  - One view holds that Jonah died, and he later returned to life when the great fish puked him up.
  - The second view holds that Jonah remained alive for the entire time he was in the great fish.
  - Both views agree on a literal reading of the book of Jonah, and both views affirm God's supernatural ability to rescue His prophet.
  - The difference is whether to see **Jonah 2:10** as a description of a weak, smelly, bleached, slimy, disheveled Jonah - or as a truly resurrected Jonah.
2. I now think Jonah remained alive the entire time (I'm getting a bit ahead of today's lesson, but here's why I feel this way):
  - In **Jonah 2:2**, Jonah is praying from inside the great fish, and he says, *"From the depths of the grave I called for help."*
    - ✓ The use of *Sheol*, the Hebrew term for "the grave," could indeed mean that Jonah had died.
    - ✓ Yet it's also true that the words *"the depths of the grave,"* is sometimes used as a poetic phrase which refers to an agonizing or horrifying experience.
    - ✓ Even David had these moments, and he used this kind of Hebrew poetic language to describe his agony. In **Psalms 86:13**, David prayed:

*"For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the depths, from the realm of the dead." (other translations say, 'from the depths of the dead,' or 'from the depths of Sheol.')*

- ✓ Now, David had clearly not died. But he felt like he was about to. As far as David was concerned, his life was at an end - - and this is the same thing Jonah had concluded.
- ✓ Yet, we also must understand that Jonah was conscious inside the great fish. His coherent and repentant prayer in **vss. 2-9 of Ch. 2** make that point quite clear.
- ✓ He could not have prayed in this manner while he was dead. So, at least for a portion of his confinement, Jonah was alive.
- Furthermore, even Jesus Himself described His own death using some poetic phrases. In that **Matt. 12:40** passage, Jesus said ‘....the Son of Man will be three days and three nights **in the heart of the earth.**’
  - ✓ But Jesus’ place of burial was in a garden cave on the very surface of the earth’s crust. The Biblical record is clear.
  - ✓ We tend to read ‘heart of the earth’ as being some location much deeper down, but that’s not the point of Jesus’ words.
- It’s much the same situation with Jonah here. When he prays (and we will be studying this prayer next week), he heavily quotes from the **Psalms**.
- And Jonah’s appeal in **2:6b** is remarkably close – once again! – to another one of David’s prayers in **Psalms 30:3**.

**(Cf. Jonah 2:6b)** – ‘But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God.’

**(Cf. Ps. 30:3)** – ‘You, LORD, brought me up from the realm of the dead; you spared me from going down to the pit.’ (NOTE: several translations – again – use the phrase here ‘from Sheol’).

- **So, what’s our conclusion here?**
  - ✓ We need to recognize that Jonah, David, and even Jesus, used Hebrew phrases that were poetic in nature to describe – in respective order - their terminal confinement, their absolute desperation, and their physical death.
  - ✓ I feel that in Jonah’s case, he felt he was as good as dead. He saw no way out. As far as he was concerned, his life was done.
  - ✓ That’s the same spirit and attitude David expressed, and so both Jonah and David said things like ‘realm of the dead,’ ‘the pit,’ ‘from the depths of Sheol’ and so on.
  - ✓ Jesus said He’d be ‘in the heart of the earth’ but He was buried in a rich man’s garden cave.
  - ✓ The point is Jesus was emphasizing He would actually / physically be dead, and He’d truly be in the realm of the dead thereafter.
  - ✓ I just don’t think we can make a good argument that the use of these Hebrew poetic phrases is intended to mean more than the context would otherwise indicate.

- Jesus used an analogy to compare His own death to Jonah's situation inside the great fish.
- Just because Jesus' death and resurrection were *actual*, that doesn't necessarily mean that Jonah must have also *actually* died and later returned to life.

NOTE: As one commentator puts it:

*"Jesus used an analogy in **Matt. 12:40** that does not mandate perfect congruency between the two events. Jonah's hopeless situation was illustrative of Jesus' death; Jonah's sudden appearance at Nineveh was illustrative of Jesus' resurrection. The three days was an additional similarity. Jonah returned from the edge of death; Jesus, who is greater than Jonah, returned from actual death. Analogies do not require absolute agreement in every detail."*

- ✓ And so - - - this all becomes a key reason why I have changed my view.
- ✓ While I once thought Jonah had died inside the great fish, I lean now in the direction that he did not.
- ✓ The Bible does not state that Jonah died, nor does it state that God brought him back to life. If those things happened, the Bible is silent.
- ✓ I believe God kept him alive the entire time, and I think Jonah's prayer is a strong argument for this position.
- ✓ Various creative attempts have been made to provide scientific explanations for Jonah's survival, but I think it is best to understand this remarkable account as a sequence of divine miracles.
- ✓ I think it is most accurate to accept that the Lord supernaturally prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah, and the Lord supernaturally protected Jonah during his ordeal.

**NOTE:** I always make best efforts to teach what I believe the Bible is saying. I never stand up here and willfully try to steer you the wrong way. That said, you need to study God's Word for yourself – be as the Bereans and arrive at your own conclusions.

**CLOSING THOUGHTS:** What are some takeaways from **vs. 17** for you and me? Are there any parallels we should consider between this part of Jonah's story and our experience?

I have two things I'd like to leave with you:

**1. Miracles sometimes happen in our lives even when we are not aware of them.**

- Many people – and sometimes that includes you and me - desire to see miracles in our lives from God.
- Much as it may distress some of us to hear this, I think this often boils down to our selfish wish to have God "prove" Himself to us.



- Our general attitude here is, “If only God would perform a miracle, sign, or some sort of supernatural wonder, THEN I would believe!”
- This is a wrong notion though, and this posture is contradicted by Scripture.
- When God performed amazing and powerful miracles for the Israelites, did that result in their obedience? No! The Israelites constantly disobeyed and rebelled against God even though they saw all the miracles.
- When the rich man died in **Luke Ch. 16**, he asked to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers. That would have been an obvious miracle, and that’s what the rich man was appealing for.
- But Abraham told him instead, *“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Cf. Luke 16:31).*
- Abraham’s point is the truth of Scripture is sufficient for our unbelief. We must trust in what God’s Word says and not look for other evidence which will not convince anyone’s hardened heart.
- The first point is miracles are not the panacea for unbelief or a lack of faith. The Bible affirms repeatedly that we should not be thinking this way.
- But the other point is we do not see the miracles that God is doing in our lives every day.
- In **1 Cor. 13:12**, we are reminded that as long as we breathe the air of this planet, we will be *‘seeing through a glass darkly.’*
- The larger principle is we cannot conceive of all the things God IS doing in the here and now, and we won’t appreciate all of that until the next life.
- I’m convinced that a time is coming when we will all look back and see the various ways God sovereignly managed things in our lives on this earth – and I believe some of those things will be miraculous.
- Some of those things will be protection. Other things will be blessing. Perhaps some of those things will be provision - - and so on.
- I think the list is generous of the various ways God will have intervened in our lives and performed miracles within our circumstances and relationships that – right now – we simply miss. We don’t see them.
- But our God is a great God, and I believe that miracles are happening even when we don’t know they are happening.
- Someday, we won’t be *‘seeing through a glass darkly,’* and I think we will be blown away at what God did for us and how He supernaturally intervened.

**2. The second thing I want to leave with you is this: God was not done with Jonah, and he’s not done with you and me.**

- We can try to run from God – but He runs after us much faster.
- We can become rebellious and abandon God – but He won’t leave us.
- We can make bad choices that severely limit our lives and our options – but God keeps an open door for us.

- We can hit rock bottom – but God’s love and mercy is far greater than our failures.
- The point is, God continues to pursue our heart because He greatly desires a right relationship with us.
- Sometimes we feel utterly defeated. We’re at the bottom rung of the ladder and we have no strength to climb back up again.
- But just like Jonah – and even when he’d reached ultimate despair and he felt like he’d hit a ‘dead end’ - God is still at work!
- He’s still rescuing us, planning our path, and forging opportunities for us in our painful seasons of waiting.
- No matter your circumstances, the truth is God is much greater. No matter your despair and ‘dead end,’ God’s mercy and grace can lift you up.
- We serve a supernatural God whose love for us is INFINITELY greater than all our failures.

**NEXT TIME:** “A Prayer from a Deep Place” (Jonah’s climb back up starts with a change inside)

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Solid Bread Community was started with a passion to teach the truth of God’s Word – every part of it, as it was divinely inspired to be understood.

The rules are simple. First, teach what IS there. Don’t pretend the Bible is not saying what it is saying.

Second, don’t teach what is NOT there. Don’t force a passage to mean something it really doesn’t.

And – number three, if the Bible states it plainly, we should too.

**Contact Solid Bread Community at:**

**PO Box 431**

**Windsor, CO 80550**

[www.solidbreadcommunity.com](http://www.solidbreadcommunity.com)

Email: [connect@solidbreadcommunity.com](mailto:connect@solidbreadcommunity.com)

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