

## Surprising Salvation

[Announce Text] Please keep your Bibles open to Jonah 1:17-2:10 (pp. 774-775).

[Scripture Introduction] My name is Brett Sweet and let me state explicitly how much we miss gathering with you during this season of social distancing. We as elders love you and are seeking to do what we can to equip and strengthen you from a distance- that's why we're recording these sermons. We're in a short series on the book of Jonah- one of the most well-known stories in the Old Testament.

[Prayer for Illumination] Please pray with me...

[Illustration] What would you say if someone asked you the meaning of the word, "salvation?" The words in the Old Testament translated as "salvation" often have a temporal meaning. It's something connected to bodily safety in this life. You receive salvation from disease or salvation from your hostile enemies.

Importantly, in the New Testament we see that such temporal salvation is a small picture, a snapshot, a glimpse of the fullness of eternal salvation that comes through Jesus. But if we think about temporal salvation for a moment, a means of being saved from earthly circumstances, what would surprise you? Really, imagine it for a moment. You wake up in an ambulance on the way to the hospital and the paramedics explain that you've collapsed on your bedroom floor. Would you be surprised that someone was able to usher the paramedics to find you? Would you find it even more surprising if you were told that you were saved by Spider-Man? Would that surprise you? Well that's exactly the situation pregnant Jailyn Emmett of Saratoga Springs, UT found herself in.

She suffers from a heart-rhythm disorder. While her husband was away at Army Reserve basic training she felt her heart racing, so she called her parents who lived nearby. But no one answered. So she dialed 911- the last thing she remembered before she lost consciousness. The operator, though, did speak with someone on the end of the line. And that voice consistently identified himself as Spider-Man and Peter Parker. It was Jailyn's 5-year old son. When the ambulance went to the wrong house, the boy flashed the outside lights on and off so that they could find his mom. Salvation in the real world by a person known as Spider-Man. That's surprising. Salvation in the real world by a 5-year-old. That's surprising. But our familiarity with the book of Jonah has sometimes caused us to

lose the fact that in the real world it is absolutely astonishing, shocking, surprising that salvation would come through a large fish. Furthermore, Jonah the Son of Amittai, rejected and disobeyed God's Word when it came to him- and he ran from God. Just as we ran when God has sent loving commands to us- to love Him with all our heart, to love our neighbors as ourselves. To not gossip or complain. To consider others and their needs more important than ourselves. Therefore all of us, especially those of us who have been in the church a long time need to ask ourselves today:

**[Proposition] Are you surprised by salvation?**

This passage should surprise you. Temporal salvation by means of a fish is surprising. As we relive this true story together let's continue to ask ourselves if we are surprised by salvation. As we do so, we'll look at the surprising means of salvation, the prayer for salvation, and the surprising result of salvation.

Are you surprised by salvation? You should be when you look at

**[Main Point 1] The surprising means of salvation.**

As we heard two weeks ago. Jonah has been hurled into the ocean as a death sentence in consequence of his sin. Nobody survives being overboard and adrift at sea in a storm. But surprise! Jonah's saved! And the surprising means of salvation is nothing less than an enormous fish. Look with me at v. 17-

*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.*

Imagine hearing this for the first time. If we were to imagine a means of preserving Jonah's life, we might imagine floating debris or a passing ship. But it's a fish! The word for fish could mean literally "sea creature" so a whale is a possibility- but I'll stick with fish. God uses a fish to swallow Jonah. But if you or I think about getting swallowed by an animal- be it a hippopotamus, or lion, or an anaconda- we think death. That word "swallowed" usually implies danger or exile- something bad. But no. Surprisingly this fish is the means of Jonah's salvation. And he's in there, not for a few minutes. Not even a few hours. But for three days and nights. The expression in the original languages need not necessarily mean full 24-hour periods but it probably means well over 36 hours. That's a long time. Cramped inside a coffin sized squishy, smelly, stomach cavity.

Jonah went into the sea knowing that he deserved death for his disobedience to God. Do you feel the same? Social distancing is hard. Jesus describes Hell as the ultimate social distancing. You're separated from God's blessed presence. There's darkness, so you can't even see others. And the only voices you hear aren't there to comfort or make you laugh- they are a wailing and gnashing of teeth. Unless you really wrestle with the fact that you've been running from God, disobeying God, and deserve the Hell Jesus describes you won't be surprised by salvation. You'll think you deserve it. And there's a good chance that if you have that attitude you won't receive salvation. Only people who know that they are sinners are surprised by salvation. Are you surprised by salvation?

If you are surprised by salvation you will accept the surprising means of salvation- no matter what that is. When you do, you'll instinctively find that the response to that is to seek God through prayer. So let's look now at the

### **[Main Point 2] The Prayer for salvation.**

We actually get to hear Jonah's thoughts in the immediate aftermath of his salvation from drowning. And he expresses his thoughts directly to God- in prayer. Do you do that? Well let's imagine then, that we are underwater veterinarians or marine biologists and we are able to hold up a stethoscope and listen to the sound coming from the fish's belly. What would we hear as we listened to Jonah's prayer? One thing we'd hear is that

[Subpoint 1] This prayer gives a summary of salvation

Look with me at vv. 1-2

*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.*

In chapter 1 it took the Pagan sailors only minutes to turn to the LORD God, the God of Israel. It takes Jonah the prophet days. Now, finally, he calls out to the LORD. But when he finally does- something amazing happens- God hears! Nobody else on earth heard this prayer. Nobody else on earth knew what Jonah was going through. But the LORD, the God of Israel, the only true God, heard Jonah's voice. And Jonah uses the word Sheol- which is a kind of broad term in the Old

Testament but basically means “underworld”- either the grave or Hell. Jonah calls out, not from the jaws of the underworld- but deeper in- from the very belly of Sheol. If salvation can be summarized, Jonah does a good job in this prayer. Jonah called out to the LORD, out of his distress and the LORD answered him.

Okay, okay, okay. But if we’re in our scuba gear, listening on our stethoscope and we hear Jonah give a summary of his salvation- let’s be honest- we want the details! Jonah, how did you really get in there? Tell me more! What was it like? Jonah is going to tell us. Because not only does this prayer give a summary of salvation,

[Subpoint 2] This prayer reveals the situation of salvation

Let’s get a glimpse into the details of Jonah’s situation by reading vv. 3- part of v. 6-

*For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, ‘I am 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 wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains; I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;*

Jonah’s prayer reveals his desperate situation. He’s been cast into the deep- not ultimately by sailors, but by God Himself. And he might say something like, “I kicked with my legs and tried to do the best strokes I could with my arms. I tried to tread water. But the waves were too high. These God-sent waves and billows passed over my head. Then I realized- I wanted to get away from the sight of the LORD, away from your presence, God. And you’ve given me exactly what I wanted- and it’s horrible. The water is not only on my left and right. It’s not only below me- now it’s over me. And I was sinking. Sinking. Darkness. Pressure. Cold. Down to the lowest and deepest depths- to the bottom.” That’s what the roots of the mountains means. And if Jonah is anything like myself he probably doesn’t like swimming when weeds touch his feet- but here he’s so far down they’re wrapped around his head. He keeps going deeper down into the land of the underworld. He’s sure it’s the site of his death. He feels the doors of life shut behind him and now v. 6 says that they are barred and chained. No escape. This is the situation of salvation that is revealed in Jonah’s prayer. Even the phrase about

looking upon God's holy temple, may not offer that little glimpse of hope. Some scholars translate that as a question: "How shall I look again upon your holy temple?" Feeling the righteous judgment of God. Without hope. Facing death. This is Jonah's situation for salvation.

[Application] For some of you, you can relate. It was the diagnosis. The family crisis. The danger. The hopelessness. The loneliness. But deep down it's been the same for all of us. All of those things are symptoms of deeper issues. Those were just weeds around our heads- the real waters were the fact that we knew we were sinners in need of a Savior. Have you been there? Are you there right now? The proper response is the response of Jonah- seek the LORD in prayer until you are certain that He hears you. And if He heard Jonah from the belly of a fish under an ocean of water, He'll hear you in your seat right there or when you are in the bedroom alone, or when you drive down the road.

Others of you here, though, feel like you've prayed this prayer and you ask why God heard Jonah's prayer and answered him but yet it doesn't seem like He's answering you. You're sinking and you're asking where your fish is. I'm sorry for that. Notice that Jonah wasn't immediately swallowed by the fish as soon as he touched the water- for whatever reason, this prayer reveals that the situation of Jonah's salvation meant sinking, perhaps slowly, down. He had to wait too. Jonah's prayer mirrors many Psalms and the Psalms often talk about waiting on the LORD. And how hard that is. But ultimately salvation will come. And we as a church, the people around you, are here to wait with you. Jonah was alone- you don't have to be. Ask people around you to pray for your salvation- whether eternal or temporal- no matter what your situation is. And remember that we are meant to be surprised by salvation. Perhaps God is going to work in a surprising way. Are you surprised by salvation?

When we return to these verses, though, we're still underwater listening with our stethoscopes as Jonah prays. And his prayer has given us a summary of salvation and it has revealed the situation of salvation. Let's continue as we come to the climax. Because

[Subpoint 3] This prayer shows the surprising source of salvation

The fish was the surprising means of salvation. But what was the actual source? Where did salvation really originate? Let's look at the end of v. 6- v.9

*...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; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!"*

Jonah's prayer continues. We wanted details and now we've gotten them. Throughout the first two chapters of Jonah- Jonah has continually been going down like he's on the wrong escalator at the Mall. And it goes only one direction: "down"- he went down to Joppa (1:3), he went down into the ship (1:3), Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship (1:5), from there he laid down (1:5), when he was thrown into the ocean he went down to the bottom- v. 6. But now v. 6 tells us that he's on his way up- because the LORD brought him up. He was fainting away, losing consciousness but the LORD saved him. And v. 9 Jonah pronounces the theme of the book- Salvation belongs to the LORD. It's the LORD who saves Jonah. It was the LORD who appointed the fish (1:17). It's the LORD who heard Jonah's prayer. It's the LORD who brought Jonah up.

The LORD is the source- but why is that surprising? Because the LORD is the One who was wronged. The LORD is the One whom Jonah disobeyed. The LORD was the One Jonah ignored while he slept and the other sailors sought help. Let's be honest, if the LORD were like us, and we were in possession of salvation- if it belonged to us- we wouldn't extend salvation to someone like Jonah. We'd only give it to those who were perfect and treated us perfectly.

V.9 tells us something else surprising. Those uneducated, backward pagan sailors paid vows and offered sacrifices right away. But it takes three days in a fish's belly for a religious prophet to even catch up with them. Yet God can save them both because He is the surprising source of salvation. Thus it should put an end to any self-righteousness in the church based on background and upbringing.

[Application] It took near drowning and swallowing by a fish for Jonah to see that salvation only comes from the LORD. **What will it take for you to see that salvation only comes from the LORD?** Will you trust in money to save you from your problems? The world economy has taken a massive hit. How about romance? Prince Charming or the Lady in Red? Or maybe you think that if a certain family relationship was different- then you'd have the temporal or eternal

salvation you seek. But if you are trusting in those things to deliver you- then they are your god. They are idols. And Jonah tells us in v. 8 that if you pay regard to vain idols you will be forsaken by God and His steadfast love.

Money can't save you- salvation belongs to the LORD. Good works, volunteering, social action can't save you- salvation belongs to the LORD. A virus-free community won't save you- salvation belongs to the LORD. A spouse, or a better spouse won't save you- salvation belongs to the LORD. Receiving respect or admiration from those around you can't save you- salvation belongs to the LORD. Completing your project, achieving your career goals, having obedient children, or being obedient children won't save you. Salvation belongs to the LORD.

And here's why the LORD as the surprising source of salvation is such good news: the biggest problem you have is your sin against Him. Like Jonah, you've disobeyed Him. You've run from Him. But, surprisingly, He's the source of salvation. And that means that He knows what it takes to save you from your going down, down, down. Your running. Your drowning. Your disobedience. Will you see what Jonah saw and expressed in this prayer? Salvation belongs to the LORD. And our God is so good, that He freely and lovingly gives it to people like us.

Are you surprised by salvation? We've looked at the surprising means of Jonah's salvation and we've listened and learned from Jonah's prayer for salvation. Let's now look at something else surprising

### **[Main Point 3] The surprising result of salvation.**

To me it would be good enough for Jonah to acknowledge God, receive his eternal salvation, and then die slowly in the belly of the fish. That would be grace toward this disobedient prophet. But that's not what happens

Look with me at v. 10

*And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.*

We see here that the fish is more obedient than the prophet- he's where God appoints, he swallows what God feeds him, and he spits out his food when God tells him to. But why? For what result do we end chapter 2 like this? Because we need to get to chapters 3-4. The surprising result of salvation is mission. God

saved Jonah centuries before Christ and saves us today for His mission to advance His own glory. This should be surprising to us. God takes disobedient people, people who run from Him, and He saves them of His own accord, and then He blesses us to be a part of His great mission. You've sinned in the past. Don't let that stop you from embracing the mission that God wants to be the surprising result of your salvation.

Are you surprised by salvation yet? Doesn't this seem unusual? Unexpected? No? We've looked at the details, let's look at the big picture again and see if we are surprised. A disobedient man, running from God, is hurled into the ocean to drown- BUT DOESN'T BECAUSE THE LORD SENDS A FISH TO SWALLOW HIM! This is so unusual, so surprising, so unbelievable that some have proposed that "A Great Fish" might be the name of an inn where Jonah stayed for a long weekend. Were Jonah in Spokane, maybe he'd been swallowed by our own "Bigfoot" Tavern or by a "Flying Goat" pizza. But that's not the case. It was a real fish.

And think about the Ninevites if they heard this story about the man who is bringing them salvation. A man who descended into a fish's belly! This means of salvation is so unusual, so unexpected, so counterintuitive, so preposterous, let's just admit it: It's almost as crazy as imagining that someone would need to descend into the grave, into death itself to bring the salvation of the LORD.

Listen to Matthew 12:38-40

*Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he (Jesus) answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For 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."*

Here's why you should be surprised by your salvation. It took more than a fish to save you. It took more than a prophet like Jonah to save you. It took God Himself coming to you. Even more surprising than that, it took Jesus' death on the cross for your sins and burial in the ground to save you. It took his resurrection from the dead to save you. Jonah's was a near death experience. Jesus' was a full death experience. And He has left no works for you to do to receive salvation. Only stop



running and rely on the fact that salvation belongs to the LORD. The Lord Jesus Christ.

[Application] Kids, don't let people tell you that you are a fool for believing stories about prophets being swallowed by fish. Make them deal with Jesus. Jesus stated that Jonah's story is a fact. He said the same regarding Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, and a number of other commonly challenged Bible stories. And Jesus has taught like no one else- and changed the world. He has loved like no has loved. He died to pay for your sins and He rose from the dead. The evidence is clear it's just that, like Jonah, we'd rather go down than see that we need the LORD to lift us up.

I hope when you leave here shortly that you go out surprised by your salvation again. Or surprised by your salvation for the first time. The reason why is because when people experience something surprising they talk about it. They spread the news. They're not afraid of the same things others are. The surprising result is a life on mission. Be surprised by your salvation- that God would save YOU. But also be surprised that salvation doesn't come by an ambulance or even by someone calling himself Spider-Man. Be surprised that salvation belongs to the LORD.