



THE GOD WHO SAVES

A few years back, Kellie bought me a book entitled *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. And it's a very useful book to have on your person, with chapter headings such as:

- How to escape a swarm of killer bees.
- How to survive an encounter with a bear.
- How to deal with a charging bull / stampede.
- How to wrestle free from an alligator.

All very useful stuff. But what it doesn't have is a chapter on "What to do if you get swallowed by a large marine animal." For that one, you have to look elsewhere.

Which brings us once again to the book of Jonah ...

Jonah 2

OK, the story of Jonah has intrigued people for centuries, and not surprisingly it raises certain questions ...

For starters, what was it that swallowed Jonah? The Hebrew word *dag* just means any kind of marine animal, so that's not much help. Some people have suggested the Whale Shark, which is native to the Mediterranean; but the most likely candidate is the Fin Whale, the second biggest whale in the

world (and also native). While it's true that a Fin Whale's throat is too small to actually swallow a man whole, it might be able to carry him around in its jaws. And interestingly, the Hebrew word for 'belly' is just another way of saying 'inside', and is used of the stomach, the intestines, the womb – even the tomb. So, I reckon Jonah got lodged in its mouth.

But that leads to another question: could a person really survive such an experience? Probably not. Then again, I'm not sure the Bible says he did. Look at the phrases Jonah uses: "From the belly of *She'ol* I called for help." "To the roots of the mountains I sank." "You brought my life up from the pit." Now yes, this is Hebrew poetry, with Hebrew poetic license, but it still sounds a lot like death to me. In fact, in Jewish tradition '3 days and 3 nights' is a euphemism for death itself. So, it's possible that Jonah actually died inside the whale, which means that God had to bring him back to life again (hence Jesus' comparison in Matthew 12:40).

But interesting though this is, that's not what this chapter is really all about.

It's about grace – and the focus is Jonah's prayer.

Now it can be easy to look at this prayer and think, "What a great prayer." And out of context, it is. But in reality, it's a *lousy* prayer – because there are things you don't see which you should, and things you do see which you shouldn't. Things which can affect our walk with God, and our witness:

1) What we *don't* see. There is one thing in particular missing from Jonah's prayer – and it's kind of important:

- **Repentance.** Jonah has disobeyed God, but do you hear him saying, "Lord, I was wrong, so now I'm going to put things right"? Nope. Instead, Jonah promises to visit God's temple and offer sacrifices. Now at first glance, that might sound as if he's heading in the right direction. But God hasn't told him to go to Jerusalem, He's told him to go to? Nineveh. He hasn't asked him to offer animals, He's asked him to? Preach.

Jonah might be a prophet, but he's not a very sorry one.

2) What we *do* see. There are 3 things we see in Jonah's prayer, which as Christians we need to avoid:

- **Self-righteousness.** Jonah prays, "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that is theirs" (vs9). Who is he talking about? It's the Phoenician sailors! Jonah is saying, "Thank You God that I'm better than those filthy pagans." He's assumed the best about himself and the worst of them, when, in reality, *no-one* is righteous in the eyes of God! It's like the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14).
- **Self-centredness.** Who is Jonah praying for in this chapter? No-one but himself. There's no concern for the Phoenician sailors, who have just risked their lives trying to save him; or even for his family and friends, the people closest to him. The only person Jonah is thinking about is ... Jonah. When we pray, who is the focus? Is it God and the needs of others? Or is it ourselves and our own wants, our own demands?

- **Self-blinkeredness.** Jonah seems unaware of his own disobedience. Sometimes, we can look at the world, at other nations, other cultures, other situations, or the people we work with or go to school with or live next door to, and see the problems inside of *them* – but fail to see the problems inside of *us*. That’s why you’ll sometimes hear me own up to this blunder or that mishap: it reminds me of the fact we *all* mess up.

As Jesus said, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own?” (Matthew 7:3). Romans 1-3 says the same thing.

We’re all in the same boat (or whale, if you like).

There But For The Grace ...

So, the real monster in this story is not the sea, or even the whale. The real monster is? Jonah. To quote horror-writer Stephen King, “Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside of us, and sometimes, they win.”

So where is the grace in all this? It’s there in vs10. God saves Jonah – but not because of his prayer.

He saves him in *spite* of it.

And that’s the 1 thing Jonah *does* get right. “Salvation belongs to *Yahveh* (as in, the God of Israel).” Not to ourselves or our efforts, but to Him. And that is what grace, and the Gospel, are all about. We cannot save ourselves – which is why God, in Jesus, had to come and do it *for* us.

It’s only in Him that we can find the forgiveness and fulfilment that we truly long for.

Now, even Evangelicals can get this wrong – sometimes. And it can happen so, so subtly. E.g. I’ve known people who have been Christians for years and forgotten what they used to be like, and behave so judgmentally of others that they actually put people off of Jesus rather than attract them to Him. And I’ve known others who became Christians in a particular way – saying a prayer, raising a hand, going to the front of an auditorium – and are critical of anyone whose story looks slightly different. And before you know it, we’re preaching a salvation by works.

But what Jonah teaches us is salvation is more about God’s grace than it is about our actions. And it’s vital that we know that, and it’s vital that we sow that.

Because He, and He alone, is the God who *saves*.