

## What To Do When You've Been Swallowed By A Fish Matthew 12:38-42, Jonah 1

### **Slide 1**

What happens when the worse that you could've imagined happens?  
When you underestimated the worst that could happen. When it's  
even worse than any worst-case scenario.

Most times it's not that we underestimated, it's that our Worst-Case  
Scenario never actually happens.

In *Worst-Case Scenarios a Survival Handbook*, there are all kinds of  
helpful advice. For example, listen to how you should fend off a shark.

1. Hit back. If a shark is coming toward you or attacks you, use  
anything in your possession, camera, probe, harpoon gun, your  
fist – to hit the sharks' eyes or gills.
2. Make quick, sharp, repeated jabs in these areas. Sharks are  
predators and will usually only follow through on an attack if they  
have the advantage.

After these instruction, there are two pages of ways to avoid being  
attacked by a shark. I didn't need to read those because I have my  
own policy... don't go swimming in the ocean.

Which segues into today's message. The scenario we're looking at  
today is probably one of the most well-known stories of the Bible,  
Jonah and the Whale.

Even many non-believers know this term if not the story. However, if  
you think of Jonah and the whale and the only image you can conjure  
up is that of Disney's Geppetto and the whale from Pinocchio, then you  
need to spend more time in the Bible.

Regardless if people don't know the story, most people know what it means to be a "Jonah," even if they don't know why being a Jonah means you bring bad luck.

Groucho Marx once said, *"Oh, are you from Wales? Do you know a fella named Jonah? He used to live in whales for a while."*

The book of Jonah is found in the section of the Bible called the Minor Prophets.

Now, they aren't Minor Prophets because they're less important than the Major Prophets, they're simply less wordy than the major prophets.

Jonah, a prophet of Israel, was told by God that he must go to the city of Nineveh and preach a series of revival services.

The problem was that the people of Nineveh were enemies of the Jews and Jonah didn't think they were worthy of hearing a message of mercy and grace.

Therefore, he not only refused to do as he was commanded, but he tried to run from God. The Bible tells us that Jonah headed in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh.

He boarded a ship that was heading to a city called Tarshish, which many scholars tell us was located in modern Spain.

So, Jonah's not just going in the opposite direction of where he was supposed to be going, but he was heading as far away as was imaginable.

What you need to understand is that Tarshish would have been considered the very edge of the known world.

While on his journey, a violent storm developed and threatened to sink the ship. The sailors cast lots to see who was bringing them bad luck and guess who drew the short straw, so to speak, Jonah.

When their attention is directed to Jonah, he tells the sailors that he's running from God and the only way they can save themselves is to throw him overboard. Which they did.

As soon as Jonah's feet touched the water, the storm stopped. Then Jonah gets swallowed by a big fish.

Which brings us to our Worst-Case scenario for this week, *What To Do When You've Been Swallowed By A Fish.*

## **Slide 2**

I've never been inside the belly of a large fish, but I suspect it's dark.

Jonah probably assumed the worst-case scenario was that he would be thrown overboard and drown. I mean, how could it be worse than that?

I don't even think Jonah could've imagined a scenario worse than drowning. But listen to what we're told in the story.

Jonah 1:17, *"Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."*

I know we think of Jonah being inside the belly of a whale, but technically the Bible just says it was a *"huge fish."*

Now understand, these verses are not a zoology lesson. I'm not even sure that 3000 years ago people would've known or cared that a whale was a mammal, not a fish.

We know it couldn't have been a Baleen type whale since Right whales or humpback whales have tiny throats, but it could've been a toothed whale, like a sperm whale or an orca.

Or, God could have just created a special fish for that occasion, after all, that's one of the perks of being God.

It doesn't matter, because either way you aren't going to stay alive inside of either one for three days, not without divine intervention.

Thomas Paine wrote, *"The story of the whale swallowing Jonah, though a whale is large enough to do it, borders greatly on the marvelous; but it would have approached nearer to the idea of a miracle if Jonah had swallowed the whale."*

Regardless of how Jonah defined his present reality, he knew he wasn't in a good place and, if you keep reading, you'll hear Jonah's prayer.

Jonah 2:1-2, *"From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. He said: 'In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.'"*

The phrase *"Land of the Dead"* comes from the Hebrew word *Sheol*. It was like Jonah was saying, *"I'm going through Hell."*

This is why, when you end up in a bad place, the first thing you need to do is figure out where you are.

Maybe you're grieving the loss of a loved one, maybe your marriage has fallen apart, or perhaps you've lost your job or your health.

Jonah was in a bad spot, but on the other hand, he wasn't dead. It sounds cliché and pithy, but as long as you have a pulse, your story isn't over.

### **Slide 3**

Once you know where you are, you should take the time to figure out how you got there. Sometimes, there's a clear answer and sometimes there isn't.

In Jonah's case there was. He knew exactly what had brought him to that spot.

After the sailors had cast lot and figured that it was Jonah who was the cause of their storm, they confronted him and asked him what was going on.

*Jonah 1:7-9, "Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

The sailors were terrified when they heard this, for he had already told them he was running away from the LORD.

*Jonah 1:10-12, "This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.) The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."*

Understand, Jonah was the author of his own misfortune. He was running from God, but even with that realization he'd rather die than be obedient. Seems a little extreme.

I wonder what would've happened if, instead of asking to be thrown overboard, Jonah had repented and promised that as soon as his feet touched dry ground that he'd catch the next camel to Nineveh?

Often times, before we can figure out how to move from our present reality to our preferred future, we need to figure out what brought us to this point.

At some point, you need to realize that you're where you are in life because of choices you made. I'm not talking about accepting the blame, simply accepting responsibility for your choices.

Choices you made when you were a child about how much effort you'd put into school, choices you made as a teen about who you'd hang out with.

Choices that you made as an adult about where you'd go to college, who you would work for, and who you would marry.

All of those things, both the bad and the good choices you've made, have brought you to your present reality.

People often end or sabotage their marriages when they start looking for something they perceive is missing in their present situation. Whether it's intimacy or affirmation.

Maybe you were a perfect spouse and your partner still left or cheated on you. You might ask, "*What choice did I make that led to this?*" Well, you chose to marry them.

Again, accepting responsibility for your choices isn't accepting blame, but if we can see how yesterday's choices brought us to today, then we can begin to understand how today's choices will shape where we will be tomorrow.

In 2018, at the request of the United States, Canada arrested Meng Wanzhou, an executive for China's largest telecommunication company. In retaliation, China arrested two Canadian businessmen on trumped up charges.

Now understand, that neither of those two men were to blame for ending up in prison, but at some point, they both made the choice to work in an unstable and potentially dangerous country.

So, once you've figured out where you are and how you got there, the third step is to devise a method to get out.

#### **Slide 4**

If figuring out where you are is defining your present reality, then this step is defining your preferred future. Where do you want to be, a year from now, five years from now, or tomorrow?

Jonah's response was twofold. Chapter two begins with these words, *"Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from inside the fish."*

The next eight verses are Jonah's lament which is a fancy word to say that Jonah was whining, and that's not always wrong.

The Bible is full of people baring their hearts to God, questioning and complaining, and that's fine. If God couldn't handle our laments He wouldn't be much of a God.

Even Jesus, when He was on the cross, questioned when he cried out Matthew 27:46b, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

God isn't threatened by our questions. He's bigger than that, after all He's God.

But it wasn't enough for Jonah to lament about where he was and how he got there, he was willing to take the steps necessary to move ahead in a positive direction.

It's not enough to identify your present reality, you also must be able to visualize your preferred future. Where it is that you'd prefer to be? What are the steps that you need to take in order to get there?

Jonah knew exactly where he was and why he was there. He even knew what needed to be done to correct the situation. So, he ends his lament with a cry of repentance.

Often, people confuse repentance with saying, "I'm sorry." How often do kids do something wrong and when confronted with their behavior are quick to say, "I'm sorry."

*"I'm sorry I hit my sister." "I'm sorry I didn't clean my room." "I'm sorry I told a lie."* But it doesn't change their behavior. True repentance includes changing our behavior.

In one of Peter's first sermons in the book of Acts, we read, Acts 3:19a, *"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out..."*

Do you see the two actions, there? Repent of your sins and turn to God, and the result is that your sins will be wiped away. That's repentance and forgiveness. Your part and God's part.

So, Jonah repented. He not only saw the need to ask God's forgiveness, but he also saw the need to be obedient to what God had asked him to do.



Jonah 2:9, *“But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the LORD.’”*

In Jonah’s prayer to God, he agreed to do what he had been originally called to do. He knew that he wasn’t getting out of the fish by himself.

Now there are those who’d tell us that Jonah wasn’t necessarily alive in the belly of the fish for three days. Their view is that he died and literally cried out to God from the place of the dead.

That’s fine as it almost fits better with the narrative that was read earlier. Even Jesus said in Matthew 12:40, *“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”*

We know that Jesus died on the cross, was buried, and rose from the dead, so the fact that God would be able to do the same for Jonah doesn’t negate the miraculous in the story.

We’ve all been in Jonah’s spot at some time or another. I don’t necessarily mean that we’ve been swallowed by a big fish.

I mean we’ve been in a spot that the only way out in our mind is the miraculous.

Maybe an illness, or a failed relationship, or financial problems, or maybe just a point of despair where all you could see is the darkness.

During those dark times, we call out to God asking for His deliverance, promising to do what He wants us to do.

The old adage of there being no atheists in a foxhole holds true. I’m sure there’re no atheists in the belly of a fish either.

I love the story of the two old guys talking and one said, *“That was an awful nasty storm last night.”* And the second one said, *“Yep, I bet God heard a lot of unfamiliar voices.”*

We cry to God in our storms, but do we follow through with our promises and commitments when the storm passes?

I wonder how life would be different for each of us, if we did what we promised we’d do, if only God did what we prayed for?

Let’s go back to our story, Jonah 2:10 & 3:1-3, *“And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.”*

## **Slide 5**

### Conclusion

If you don’t know the rest of Jonah’s story, let me tell you. Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches the message God called him to preach.

The people of Nineveh repented and turned to God, but Jonah wasn’t happy doing it, and he wasn’t happy with the result.

The people of Nineveh were the enemies of the Jews. There probably wasn’t one Ninevite that Jonah liked.

Jonah didn’t want to warn them of God’s wrath, and he was disappointed when they responded and got right with God. I hope we never feel that way about a person or a group of people.

It was Charles Spurgeon who said, *“We think that we do well to be angry with the rebellious, and so we prove ourselves to be more like Jonah than Jesus.”*

God wasn't concerned whether Jonah was happy or not with being obedient, He was concerned that Jonah was obedient. There are times that we're called to do things we really don't want to do.

Like, when we're called to make a relationship right. They hurt us, they're a jerk and we don't want to forgive them, but we're called to make it right.

Sometimes we know what the right thing is to do; we don't want to do it, but that's what we've been called to do.

Maybe there're things in our marriage that need fixing. We know what we should do, but it might mean swallowing our pride, or simply doing something that isn't our favorite thing.

We aren't always called to be happy, but we are always called to be obedient. In John 14:15 Jesus said, *“If you love me, obey my commandments.”*

Jesus didn't say, if it makes you feel good, obey my commandments, or if you agree with them, obey my commandments, He said, *“If you love me, obey my commandments.”*

God wasn't concerned whether Jonah agreed with either the process or the outcome. God was only concerned with Jonah's obedience.

God loves us, and when He asks us to do something, or not to do something, He's not doing it because He wants to ruin our fun, He's doing it because He loves us.

Sometimes we end up in a tough spot and figure that we're there because God's punishing us, but that's not always the case.

When Daniel was in the Lion's Den, he was right where he was supposed to be.

When Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego were thrown into the furnace they were right where they were supposed to be.

When Jesus was on the cross...

Phil Vischer, the creator of Veggie Tales, wrote, *"It's pretty clear in the Bible story that the whale swallowing Jonah wasn't meant as a punishment from God, it was God saving him from drowning. So, it was actually provision to give him a second chance. The whale itself was the start of Jonah's second chance."*