

The Amazing Jonah P3

A Severe Mercy

Exploring My Strange Bible Podcast

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Tim:

Hey everybody! I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, Exploring My Strange Bible. I am a card-carrying, Bible, history, and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have.

On this Podcast, I'm putting together the last ten years' worth of lectures, and sermons where I've been exploring this strange, and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can be helpful for you too.

I also helped start this thing called, The Bible Project. We make animated videos, and podcasts about all kinds of topics on Bible, and Theology. You can find those resources at thebibleproject.com.

With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

We're going to continue on in this series, Exploring the Book of Jonah. This is a teaching series I did back in Door of Hope back in 2013 when I was a teaching pastor there. If you haven't listened to parts one and two in the previous podcast, I'd recommend doing that for context. We're jumping into Jonah Chapter 2 this week and we're going to explore that very strange and beautifully intricate poem that Jonah utters while in the belly of this marine beast. So strange. But this is actually a very powerful moment in the story. I'll address some of the oddities about this man being in a fish, and what's going on there. But whatever you think about what's happening there in terms of history, this poem represents a moment when one of God's people is at crisis, hitting bottom. And it's actually God's work in their life to bring them to the end of themselves. And so Jonah's experience and his prayer, which may be genuine, it may not be, becomes a way for us to think about similar moments of crisis in our own stories, and how to navigate through those on the journey of faith. So I hope this is helpful for you, let's dive in.

The word of the Lord involves vomit. Did you know that? That's interesting, yeah. We're continuing cruising through the series in the Book of Jonah and you recall, I'm trying to say this every week because I think it's really a bigger thing that I kind of use series like this as kind of like a rescue effort from the Veggie Tales Factor that has over ground some of this really familiar stories of the Bible that were mediated to us through maybe when some of us were kids or at least probably through children's media of some kind. And so know what I think I'm rediscovering, and as I talk with people the story of Jonah is very much a story written to adults and you have to be an adult to really get what's going on in this

story because it's surprisingly sophisticated, and actually really disturbing, and challenging. And it's this comic satire story of this rebellious, religious hypocrite who runs from his own God, and his sin and selfishness turns him into as we saw last week what I call the relational wrecking ball. Just ruining his sin and spilling over his life into the lives of other people, and he's so tuned out to God and to his own emotions in life, he can't even see what he's doing. He's a wrecking ball. And so where we ended the story last week was that he's thrown over the side of the boat, and he's sinking down into the depths of the sea. And if Jonah were a one-chapter story, if the story ended right there, you would think that he is done. He's dead. This is a tragic, tragic story.

And we are going to pick up right at this moment where you think he's dead, but you would never read any story that ended, "And a huge fish swallowed him in the belly of the fish, three days, three nights." You know you're supposed to think, "Oh, bummer. That's a horrible way to die." But the story doesn't end right there. It surprisingly... It surprisingly takes its twist. So this is the crazy, crazy thing that we're going to see this week. Jonah has this encounter with his own death down the mouth, literally and metaphorically, of death itself. It swallows him up. And so you're thinking, you know, this is a guy, he's getting what's coming to him, God's allowing him to deal with the consequences of his decision. But then this is the gospel in this story that it's right when he hits bottom, and he's swallowed up by the consequences of his silly, foolish, selfish behavior. The God of Israel turns that vehicle of death into this bizarre vehicle of grace. Then all of a sudden, gives him another chance at life by opening his eyes to what's happening. And so what you end up with in this strange story is I think, one of the most kind of arresting images of any story in the whole Bible.

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We'll work our way in the story again.

Chapter 1:17. "Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah's in the belly of the fish, three days and three nights." And from the inside of the fish, he's not dead. What is he doing? He's composing a beautifully intricate Hebrew poem that represents his prayer to God. Which is I'm sure what you would be doing if you were in these circumstances, right?

This is so bizarre! Now if you have just been hearing this story for so long, it's not bizarre to you anymore. Like this is really... wake up. What a such a strange story.

You're surrounded... imagine it's actually quite tight surroundings, whatever. There's squid beaks, and other things, whatever. You know, he's fooling around with, and obviously no oxygen there. And it's this crazy image. Now remember this fits with the story-telling style of the story so far. And this image especially, I think, raises the question for us of like, whoa, what kind of story is this? I'm going to not going to re-visit and unpack the whole thing again. Spent quite a bit of time on that in the first message, and you can go back online and listen to that again. But remember the picture was that among even Orthodox, just a wider spectrum, but just Orthodox, Christians, scholars, teachers, and so on. There's two views.

One is that the author is putting forward this story with a claim that it's historical, narrative. And this part of the story of course then would have to come from some kind of personal testimony of Jonah himself, his experience. That's one view.

The other view also held by Orthodox, Bible is God's words believing, you know, scholars and teachers, and so on, is that the author does not intend that. The author expects us to see this story as a parable and has left all kinds of clues. Taking a known historical figure, putting them in a parable setting. And so I won't unpack that anymore, you can go listen to the first message. Strengths and weaknesses of each view and they're both held by lots of different people that I—everybody, regardless of your view, agrees on this comic book feel of the story's style, and that everything in this story is over the top, and you have these stereotype characters, but everyone is the opposite of their stereotype and how they behave and everything's extreme, and big, and intense, and whoa as Jonah. And surely this image fits right into that. A man composing beautiful poetry cramped in the confines of a fish's stomach. I...And so this is not about like, "Oh if you think it's a parable, you don't really believe in miracles or something." No, it's ridiculous.

So we're a community whose foundation is based on the conviction that God raised Jesus from the dead. That is, in my mind, far more difficult that was made to believe a guy can survive in a fish's stomach, you know what I'm saying. So this has nothing to do with that. This has to do with submitting myself to the scriptures, not making them into something that I think they ought to be. But allowing the author to shape, to tell me what kind of story he's telling. And whatever your view is, it's a crazy story. And you're supposed to go, "Whoa. What's happening here?"

Here's what I want to do, I want to fixate on the fish a little bit more even though I said the first week the fish is not the thing. I want to fixate on it because it has such a big part of what we associate with the book. And I just want to ask the question this way: What on Earth does the author of Jonah, what does he expect us to see in this image, in this moment of the story of a man swallowed up by a fish because of his own stupid sin. And then praying as we're going to see a prayer of repentance and transformation from within the fish. What would the first readers of this story—how would they understand the meaning of this? And so—tackling two steps.

One is, what is the meaning of this image in this part of the story, in its biblical, ancient setting? Then ask the question, what then, how does it speak God's words to us? Here's the problem that we have with the Bible: We have lots of problems with the Bible, by the way. So it's a difficult book to read. And because it's a difficult book to read, I think most of us get into this mode of like reading the Bible, and not getting it, not getting it, ooohh that's a cool sentence. I like that one. I'm going to make cross-stitch out of it, put on my wallet or something, you know. And then move, okay, don't get it, don't get it, okay, that's a cool bumper sticker, or something. You know that's pretty much how most Christians operate with the Bible. And what that leads to is a view of the Bible that it's just this collection of kind of individual, self-contained, cool little sentences that I use for personal inspiration or to warm my heart or something. And so, but here's the problem with that. The problem is that if you began to just read the Bible as a little grab bag of individual sentences that tells me God's will or do this, you can find a sentence in the Bible if you just take it out and read it by itself to say almost anything.

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You can make the Bible say anything you want if you read the Bible like that. This is not even a religious thing, this is just the first rule of being a good listener of any act of communication, is context. And so—what on Earth is the story about a rebellious Israelite prophet getting swallowed up by a fish, and then praying, and then getting vomited out? What does that mean? Well it depends on the context. If you just read the book like never reading any part of the Bible, and you thought the Book of Jonah just fell out of heaven, then I don't know you'd say it's a story about like you should obey your God, and you know... I don't know... learn poetry just in case you ever have time in the fish's belly. It's just kind of

bizarre. And so what we have to do first of all is just say, what is the context of it? The same exact word, the same story or even the same sentence can have many different meanings depending on the context. One silly example, and then a more serious example.

Here's a silly example, just to illustrate the point so we're all in the same page. That if you treat the Bible like a grab bag of sentences, you can make it say anything you want. So let's say you're sitting in any of the 183 coffee shops, there's probably more, I don't know. You're sitting in one, and you're reading something and there's a woman, another sitting, having coffee next to you and you all of a sudden, you just tune in to their conversation when you hear the words, "I'm going to kill him. I just know I'm going to kill him." Now how are you supposed to something like that, right? So you could—I hope you would be alarmed, first of all, to some degree, and that you might have a legal responsibility to do something about what you just heard. So why? Because how are you supposed to understand that sentence when knowing you just dropped in that conversation. It could be that you are witnessing the plot of a murder, it's entirely possible. So you need to intervene, you need to do something. That's possible. It could be that she just came from a knocked-down, drag out, you know fight or argument with her husband or with her boyfriend, or something like that. So she's speaking metaphorically about what she's going to go verbally slaughter him or something like that. I don't know. Or really, really have a doubt with him. It could have nothing to do with human beings. The him could refer to a dog for example. It could be that she is really angry at her dog, just pooped or peed on the carpet. It could be that—it's actually she's not angry at her dog, she's nervous about her dog, and she's really insecure about being able to care for it. "I just know I'm going to kill him, I don't know. I'm not going to be able to..." There's option number 4, so silly illustration. You guys get where I'm going here. The other, I try to think, the other one that maybe your brain would go to is like, maybe she's a fiction writer, and she is processing killing off one of her novel's main characters or something like that. I don't know. So just... you probably think of a couple more. For some of you, you can think of many more. But here's the same exact words, five very different meanings. And how do you know which is the right one? Well you need to say, "Excuse me, this is really awkward. I might have a legal obligation with that you're saying, are you actually plotting murder here?" And she's going to tell you. But anyway, so you need to get to know her, her story, what, where did you just come from. That's context. And it's the same exact thing with the Bible. In any sentence or passage that you read and so, let's just ask the question here. If the Book of Jonah didn't just fall from out of heaven,

it occurs in a context. And what is that context? And we ask the question the very first thing we read. So the book says, "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah." The Word of the Lord comes to what kinds of people in the Bible? Prophets. It's good. I'm sure we did learn something in week 1, so that's okay. So prophets, prophets. Jonah occurs among the prophets of the Hebrew Bible of the Old Testament. That is its context. And so you have to back up and you just have to say, what are the prophets about?

Now if you try to read the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, I'm sorry, I'm sure that was a very challenging experience because some of the most difficult books of the Bible to read. I think what they're about ultimately, the basic plot line is really easy. And I would normally draw this on the white board, but I just got lazy, and I thought PowerPoint was easier. So here's the basic idea: The prophets... it's the story of Israel. God redeems His people out of Israel, out of slavery in Egypt, He brings them into a covenant relationship with Himself. He gives them His instruction, His Torah about how they are to live as a holy witness to the nations. And so He brings them into the promise land, and how do they do at living in a covenant relationship with the God who redeemed them? Not so great. Not so great. And so this is where the prophets stepped on to the scene. So the people of Israel abandoned Yahweh, they give their allegiance to other gods or idolize things that they turn into gods, whether that's like military power or wealth or something.

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And it leads them to injustice, and sin, and abandonment, and faithlessness to Yahweh. And so the prophets come on to the scene. All the books of prophets is what they're about. They accuse Israel of their sin and their faithlessness and they warn Israel that if they don't turn their ways, they're going to deal with the consequences of these decisions. The ultimate consequence was the big bad empire Babylon sweeping in and besieging the city of Jerusalem, capturing the city and hauling Israelites off into exile. And that's a huge theme in the prophets. Here's what you're doing, here's how you've abandoned the covenant, here's what's going to happen if you don't turn. But Yahweh's commitment to His promises is even stronger than Israel's rebellion and sin, and the prophets always looked forward to this time on the other side of Babylon, He's going to preserve

a remnant and continue Israel's story. A new future out the other side. There you go. That's the prophets. So now you don't need to read them. You should read them, but this basically is what they're all about.

Jonah occurs among the prophets. And the prophets are about a rebellious covenant people of God, who are faithless, and abandoned their God, suffer the consequences. But God's grace redeems them and brings them out the other side. It's like, "duh." That's the first story of Jonah. And so while the other books of the prophets are a collections of words, poetic words of the prophets that are about this. The Book of Jonah is the only story among the prophets. A story about—and it's actually the storyline. Okay that one's for free. So this is even more interesting then. When the books of the prophets—you really immerse yourself in them. They're all writing poetry. They develop metaphors and poetic images to talk about Israel's sin, about that the exile is going to be like, about rescue and restoration. And one of the earliest prophets for example, the prophet Hosea. He developed a whole bunch of real stock. Powerful poetic imagery to talk about this story. And just—here's one kind of random sampling from chapter 8.

You'll see the connections here really quickly. This is Yahweh speaking through Hosea, the prophet. "Israel has broken my covenant. They have rebelled against my instructions, and they cry out to me, Oh God, we acknowledge you. But they've rejected what is good." I'm just going to stop right there. So you have Israelites crying out, "Yes, we acknowledge our God, Yahweh." But actually they rejected, and rejected what is good. Does that sound like anybody you know from Jonah chapter 1? So what's going to result then? An enemy will pursue him. Here's more examples of their faithlessness. They set-up kings without my consent. They choose princes without my approval, with their silver and gold, they make idols for themselves to their own destruction. And so what's coming to Israel because of their sin and so Israel is swallowed up. Swallowed up. Now she's among the nations like something nobody wants. They've sold themselves among the nations, now I'll gather them, they'll begin to waste away under the oppression of a mighty king. Now just look at how the poetry works right here. What's he talking about? He's saying, A nation is coming, a mighty king is coming, he's going to take over Israel as a result of their, you know, foolish decisions that you just talked about. And so what's the metaphor that he uses? It's like they're going to be swallowed up. Now Hosea was one of the earliest of the prophets and lots of the prophets who came after him often picked up some

of his images, or picked up lines that Hosea used in develop the metaphors even more.

This is a good one. So Jeremiah for example. When he's describing Babylon coming to town, look at how he describes it. He says, "Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has devoured us. He's thrown us into confusion, he's made us like an empty jar, like a sea monster. He's swallowed us. He's filled his stomach with our precious things and then spewed us out." I mean come on, come on. So he's developing this image of God has raised up even or allowed this beast to come and swallow up God's own people as a result of their faith. Now the prophets didn't only speak like this.

Last passage, I'll show you. When the Book of Psalms for example, we spent our summer in. It contains prayers and poems of like David and Solomon and other people who lived before the exile, but it includes a lot of poems that are written by people who are on the other side of exile. And so look at how this Psalm, Psalm 124 looks backward on this story. Look at the metaphors they used.

It says, "If the Lord had not been on our side-when people rose against us. They would have swallowed us alive. When their anger flared against us; the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us, raging waters would have swept us away."

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In other words, among the prophets and the poets of the Old Testament in the Hebrew Bible, the very common way to describe Israel's sin, they're suffering the consequences, exile in Babylon. The restoration was used of drowning in the flood or becoming swallowed by a great sea beast. And the author of Jonah comes along, and he turns these parables into a narrative about one Israelite who threw their life story and through experience actually lives this whole story in this narrative form before us. Are you guys with me here? In other words, the biblical author knows exactly what he's doing. And this image of being trapped, I think first and foremost in the readers' minds, they would have seen their own story as Israelites told through the story of Jonah. The story of their own faithlessness, their own suffering of the consequences, and then the big question mark at the end of, is God going to be faithful to redeem us out on the other side? And that's what we're talking about today. Are you guys with me? How are you guys doing?

That was a longer side than I normally do because the fish is such a misunderstood item in the story. You now see the power of this image.

Here's what this is about, and back in the story of the world of Jonah. So here's Jonah, and he's quite proud of himself. So here he is, he's been able to run from Yahweh. I don't know, he was able to do that before. And so here is, you know, the breeze in his hair, you know, you can just imagine. He's sailing for Tarshish, right. And he has—and if you've ever, you know, been in the open sea or something, just these wide open horizons, huge open space of his freedom. He's declared his autonomy from God and here we go. Wind in the hair. And all of a sudden, it all catches up with him. His selfishness, his sin, it all catches up with him and then it's like this great snowball effect, his decision leads him down, down, and down to the ship. Down into sleep, down into the ocean. And now all of a sudden, he's at the bottom. He can't go any farther, and he's the exact opposite of this wide open horizon. He's now confined in the belly of the beast. And this belly of the beast is this image of being trapped in seasons of hardship or suffering or pain or confusion and in Jonah's case, it's a mess of his own making. What do you do when you're here? How do you pray through this, how do you process through it? And so really what this prayer is, it's an invitation for us to see Jonah's experience of praying through his hardship and his suffering. And the fact is, it's this image of being swallowed up by the beast, this is such a powerful image in the story. Now, so Jonah's here as a result of his own decisions, right? He doesn't have a lot to cry about. He can't blame anybody but himself. But God's people end up in the belly of the beast. Not always as a result of their own decisions. For example, the Book of Daniel. He's a pretty stand-up guy. And he's exiled to Babylon because of his parents' sin and selfishness. So what do you do with that? How do you pray through when you're sitting in the belly of the beast when there's no discernible reason you can see it, it's actually someone else's sin that's spilled over in my own life. How do you do that? What do you do when you're trapped in the belly of the beast in life's circumstances that are dark, and that are confusing, and you can't see that it's your fault, and you can't pin it on anybody else. It's just a tragedy's ahead. What do you do? And so these times of being in these dark confined spaces, it's what this prayer is about. And so here's what I invite you to do. I think this is how this ancient biblical image speaks to us is I would invite you as we go through the prayer to just use it as a set of glasses to think about your own story. There might be some of you who, you're in one of these spaces right now and you might be there because it's a mess of your own making. You might be there because someone else's foolishness has spilled over into your life or there might be no reason you can discern, you're just—your

life is falling apart and you don't know why. And so I just encourage you, we're going to go into the prayer and just use it as a way to sink through your own experience and your own relationship to God and how do you process through it? How are you guys doing? Are you with me? Okay. Let's jump into the belly of the beast.

Verse 2. He said: "In my distress I called to the LORD," remember, the Lord in all capital letters means Yahweh in Hebrew. "In my distress I called to Yahweh, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead," or some of your translations have ship hole which is a Hebrew word for a grave or the realm of the dead.

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"From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry." I kind of listed the movements of the poem here on the screen behind me. We're going to move through these different—the flow of the poem. So first thing that this hardship causes in his life, is it causes him to cry out. To yell out for help. We then, "Oh yeah, yet another Psalm crying out for help." Like a—but not really, I mean stop and think about this. And really, I would encourage you. Can you find any moment in your past, there might be some of us here, where you literally had to cry out for help in the moment of danger? And if you've ever been in that experience, it's out of control. I can't do anything right now and you're not ashamed because it's the only thing you have left to do, it's to cry out. And if you haven't been in that experience, I'm not sure what to say. I don't wish it upon you. But for some of us, have been there, and actually for me ironically, not in a funny way, but the one experience that my mind can hew, it goes to was my one experience of nearly drowning a few years ago. And there was no shame in calling out for help. And the waves were crashing, and I was swimming. It was probably dumb, it was kind of a mess of my own making. But anyway, that's the story I don't need to tell. Anyhow, I had to cry out for help, and it took two people getting involved in my mess to help get me out. But again, that's a different story. Here I am, almost telling it, even though I'm trying to sound that I'm not going to tell it. Anyhow, I'll never forget that. It's one of those things where, you know, you forget a lot about the day to day of your life. You never forget the day that you almost drowned and cried out for help, you know. And it's just this visceral experience of like, I've got nothing. I need help. I have no

resources right now to save myself. And so this hardship brings him to a place where he has to cry. We'll come back to that.

But notice what he says about God here. He just says it right, "You listened. You're listening." Now this is interesting because I think most of us, when we end up in seasons of life that are like this, where things are falling apart and we feel confused or alone or trapped in our life's circumstances, many of us, our default understanding what's happening is that God's not listening to me. He's nowhere to be found. He's abandoned me or something and Jonah draws exactly the opposite conclusion. He says, "I'm in this scenario where I have no help. Everything's like there's nothing left for it. I'm at the bottom, and you're right there." He draws the conclusion that it's precisely in those moments that God is closest and most involved and attentive. That's interesting. Why does he draw that conclusion? Just keep going.

Look at verse 3 where all of a sudden this experience, it's actually heightening his awareness of God's presence. That's what happens right here in verse 3. He says, "You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the current swirled about me; all your waves and breakers they swept over me." Now just pause right here. This is super interesting. Whose waves are crashing over him? Who does he say? Who's the "your?" Your waves and breakers are doing me in right now. And who's the "you?" It's God. Now this is very interesting.

From chapter 1, who threw him over the side of the boat? The sailors. But who does he say here hurled him into the sea? It's Yahweh, it's God. This is a hard pill for us to swallow. This is very disturbing. And some of us are going to get ticked off right now. But that's okay. Read the Book of Psalms, there's lots of people who are ticked off and frustrated and confused about how God relates to their lives. Yes of course the sailors threw him over. But he sees all of a sudden these circumstances that have brought him to the bottom where all he could do is cry out. He sees God's involvement and hand in it. Now you have to stop, and you have to think, what's happening in the story? So who ultimately is responsible for Jonah ending up in this whole mess? Is it God's fault that Jonah made stupid decisions? Is that God's responsibility that Jonah made horrible decisions? What's the answer to that question No. Of course not. God's not responsible for Jonah's sin.

And so let's say you end up in the belly of the beast because of someone else's sin. So think about another biblical story. The story of Joseph and his brothers where his brother plot against him to kill him and they decided to be merciful

and instead just throw him in a pit and sell him into slavery. Right. As if that's a really better option. And so, and yes of course God providentially uses that whole story redemptively, but is God responsible for the brothers' sin that spill over into Jonah's life? No. They're moral responsibility. But yeah, Jonah sees that whether it's someone else's sin or whether it's his sin that lands him right here in this confined, difficult hardship.

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God's not biting his fingernails. God's not surprised. And there in fact may be times as Jonah's indicating where God is the one who brought him into this experience of hardship. Because You hurled me here. Or that somehow it fits into God's providential plan. Which doesn't mean that God is the author of my circumstances, but it does mean that nothing here surprises Him and that He is going to work this out redemptively for His purposes.

This is what's crazy. Really the best thing I know to title this is that brilliant title from Sheldon Vanauken's book is Severe Mercy. And that's what Jonah wakes up to here. He wakes up to the fact that God is dealing him a severe mercy. And this is very severe. How much more severe can you get than drowning and being swallowed up by a huge fish? And he sees God's fingerprints all over it. It doesn't mean that God's responsible for his decisions, but it does mean that now that he's made those decisions, God is present with him and God is not just going to be his little Genie in a bottle that will rescue him out of all his problems. God is with him but in a way that's different than many of us might feel comfortable with. And so here's why this is hard for us to hear. It's because most of us, we have this default assumption that we invited God into our lives to give us smooth passage to our chosen destination. And hopefully with a little comfort and security and safety along the way, right.

And what stories like this? Oh stories like the story of Abraham, and Isaac, and Solomon, and Genesis, 22, God test Abraham. What they show us is that if your idea of God is that His greatest priority is to make you safe and comfortable and happy. If you hold up that idea of that's who God is, then we'll all just save you the effort. Like please become an atheist now. Because your whole life experience is going exposed how naïve that view of God is. And that's not the God presented to us in the scriptures. In the scriptures, God's highest priority is to call up people to Himself and to mold and shape their character so that they come to

understand the truth of who they are as creatures made in the image of their creator and come to discover the truth that they're not God and that we make really poor captains of our own ship because we conveniently make the ship sail to whatever is best, you know, for me even at the expense of others, you know. In God's severe mercy, He may deal with us in ways that bring us to the end of ourselves. And we might hate him for it. But the paradox of God's severe mercy is this, it's that it could be the best thing that ever happens to us because we discover the truth of how broken and selfish we are, we discover the truth of I've been taking my life for granted, as if I can just do whatever I want and the only reason I exist is because someone else has made me. And I'm not the captain of my own ship. And it brings us to this place of dependence and humility and that's a crazy place to be. And so I don't have prophetic authority to look in at any scenario in your life or your past or something and say, oh yes, that was a severe mercy or something, like I don't know that. And none of us have the insight and say yes I can see what God was doing in that scenario in your life or my life. But what the scriptures are very clear is that there is no sin of my own, there is no sin of anybody else's that's beyond God's redemptive reach to do, to use as an opportunity shape me in a deep, deep way. And that is God's highest priority. To shape us into the image of His son as Paul says it in Romans Chapter 8. Again, that might tick you off because it might mean you get tossed overboard because of something stupid you did or something stupid someone else did. But there you go, how do you process through that? Let's keep going to verse 4.

Verse 4 is where his hardship then brings him to see his need for God. Look at what he says here for, it's interesting. Verse 4, he said,

I said, "I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple." He's talking to himself right here. That's very interesting. He saying, "Oh my gosh. I thought for a second that I really had gotten what I wanted. I wanted smooth passage to Tarshish and to run away from Yahweh and to get Him out of my life. And then he sees where that lands him, at the bottom. And then this is his forehead slap moment, he's like, "I realized I thought I had lost it entirely. I thought God gave me fully what I wanted and it was horrible. It was horrible. I thought I was banished—you can see a shift from his priorities here. All of a sudden the idea of going to Tarshish, and being his own god, and his own captain of his own ship, all of a sudden seems like the worst thing possible. It's like you get what you always wanted and you realize that it sucks in Tarshish.

He's not going to give you what you're really looking for in life. And so it's exactly at that moment that you realize is, "Oh my gosh. I almost got what I wanted, I almost banished from God's sight." He turns around, he says he looks to God's presence in His temple.

All of a sudden looking back and turning back to God becomes very attractive. It's crazy. You guys know this experience goes. He runs from the God that he thinks is like a kill joy, telling me what to do you know, and the commanding God or whatever. And then he sees we're running from that God gets him because He's actually trying to give life in the first place. And so it takes him to hit rock bottom before he realizes, "Oh my gosh. It was the God of mercy who's been chasing me the whole time." And it's just that strange place, and you know it in yourself, and you know it in other people where there's a lot of people who just don't need God. And they don't need God because their ship is going pretty good for now. And they may get to Tarshish, they may not. Whatever. But at some point, we're all going to realize that getting what we wanted is not going to give us life. And so there's a lot of people out there who just—they're not interested in anything to do with Jesus, and you will not be able to convince them. There's nothing you can do to convince them except be that presence. Be that presence in their life for when their ship goes down. Then all of a sudden everything changes and coming to Jesus looks attractive now. That's what he's talking about here. You kind of goes over this moment again in even more depths. Look at verses 5 where he says this experience made him realize that he not only needs God, but God is the only thing he has going for him.

Look at verse 5. He says, "The engulfing waters has threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around me head," that image has always made me chuckle. I don't know why. Just kind of a seaweed turban or something. So, "Seaweed wrapped around my head to the roots of the mountains, I sink down the earth beneath." You can see all these images. Down, down, down. "The earth beneath barred me in forever." Do these images or metaphors give you any hope that this is reversible? It's over. It's over. He's done. But then there's this little ski jump at the end. "But you Yahweh, my God, you brought my life up from the pit." But maybe you have a friend who has an experience like this or you know someone, maybe you, who's had a brush with death. Like you actually saw a circumstance happen and you're like that could have been the end of my life right there or if you spent time with anybody who's survived a serious, serious

illness where their life was at stake. Those experiences in life have a way of just dripping away the clutter in your life. Do you guys know what I'm talking about? And it just all of a sudden, what's most important to life gets very clear when you see the boundary line of your life, and it's not very far away. And that's like what he's experiencing here. He realizes all of a sudden, the only thing he has going for him is the fact that God is committed to him. Left to his own devices, he knows where he's going to end up. And so he's the only thing I have going for me, is the fact that God's committed to redeeming my life from something that I can't see any way out. And that's paradoxically the worst experience you could have, but also the best experience you could have because you discover the truth of who you are. A frail human whose creator is turned to in mercy, and grace, and faithfulness. Which is what motivates him to say what he says next, which closes. He turns the corner here. He all of a sudden is emerging with this gratefulness out of this hardship.

He says, "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Yahweh, my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple." So right at the moment he's at the brink of death and then all of sudden he has this very positive experience where he's like, "I remember Yahweh." Remembering in the Old Testament, it's a very common theme that you recall all of the gifts and the goodness that Yahweh has shown towards you up to this point, and he was on his way to Tarshish, he was just totally ignoring all of the things that God has done for him, the God that had given him life in the first place. And so all of a sudden, as he's at the brink of his own death, he's realizes all of this amazing ways God has shown favor, and mercy, and grace to him, and so on. And so here he is. He's having this prayer of remembrance and faith.

And where is he? Where has he not left? The belly of the fish. So he's in the belly of the beast as he's having this real positive turn to gratefulness. Now that's crazy. As some of us might think like it's clearly the lack of oxygen, you now at this point, like what on earth would generate gratefulness when you're in the midst of this circumstance.

[40:00]

And then again, this is this paradox when you discover the truth of who you are and that the only thing that I got going for me is God's merciful faithfulness to redeem me out of the mess of my own making or the mess of somebody else's

making. When I realize that, all of a sudden, my life doesn't belong to me anymore in the first place. And as a Christian this is even more sure. He turns, he says his prayer goes to the holy temple. He remembers God's presence and character as he looks to the hotspot of God's presence. And as a follower of Jesus where there's a hotspot of God's presence that I look to, to remember who God is to me. Even if my life is passing away. And it's Jesus of Nazareth. And so this is so important in these seasons because what we want to do is we want to look at our life's circumstances and use those as the reliable indicator of how God feels towards me. And what Jonah says, clearly he's come to the conviction that his circumstances has nothing to do with God's commitment. They are not a reliable indicator of God's feelings or commitment to him. We look to one place to understand and discover who God is to me. And that's in the life, and in the death, and in the resurrection of Jesus. And becoming a Christian, he's realizing that his life that was lived for me. His death that was for me and my sin and selfishness his resurrection of life that offers grace and a new chance at life to me. That's the only thing I have going for me. That's it. and when you can come to that place, you get to where Jonah is, it doesn't matter what happens in your life. I know who I belong to. I know the one in whom my identity is grounded and that regardless of what happens, my life is right there in His hands. And so there you go, I can be thankful.

You end up with a story like Acts chapter 16 and you have Paul and Silas and they're in prison because they've been talking to people about Jesus too much, and they're chained to the floor, and it's in the middle of the night, and they might not live through the night. They could get executed. And what are these two guys doing in the prison cell? What are the other prisoners here doing? They're singing poetry. Poems to Jesus of gratefulness and praise. These guys are insane. But there was lots of oxygen. They were thinking very clearly and rationally. And they were in utter conviction that my life doesn't belong to me anyway. And so if God deals a severe mercy through this experience, then I trust that He has my best in mind, He's shaping me through this experience. And so he ends up in a place of worship. He concludes the prayer.

Verse 8. He says, "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them." Some of your translations, that second line there is really dense in Hebrew. some new translations have "forfeit the grace that could be theirs," or "they forsake their faithfulness." It's this idea, it always kind of struck me as funny. Why is he talking about idols, right now? He has squid beaks around him and other fish bones or something. Why is he thinking of idols? This whole thing was

about him wanting to declare his autonomy from God and to chart his own course independent of God. And so it's almost as if he's coming to this realization like I idolize my own autonomy, and my own direction. So great that all of a sudden he realizes, "Oh my gosh. I forfeited the only thing I had going for me, which was the grace and the faithfulness and the mercy for God is the reason I exist in the first place." And so he's like this, "oh my gosh" moment. And so it leads him to this act of thankfulness and worship. He says, "But I, with shouts of grateful praise, I'll sacrifice to you. What I vowed, I'll make good. I'll say out loud, salvation comes from Yahweh." This is just pure, ecstatic gratefulness and praise. And he's still in the belly of the fish.

How is this the Word of God to you? And I cannot tell you that. And I can't tell you what's happening in your life circumstance and there's some of you very recently in this moment, you feel like you're in the belly of the beast. And this prayer invites us to consider that God be dealing us a severe mercy. And that's a crazy place to be. It's both the best, but feels like the worst thing that could ever happen to us. And it puts you in a basic position of trust.

Do I trust that God has my best in mind? And how can you know such a thing, you know? The world's crazy. Life is really hard, and where do you go for assurance that God's commitment is for your best. And as a Christian, as a community of Jesus, there's just one place that we point. We point each other towards—in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus. And if you belong to Him, you can look to the cross and know that you may not be spared being in the belly of the beast, but God can use that experience to do profound work in our lives that perhaps he can do no other way.

[45:00]

And so I don't have the authority to tell you that about your life. But we believe the scriptures do. And so as we can go in our time of worship, I just encourage you to sit with this prayer in front of you and some of us, we need to just be ticked off, you know. And frustrated at God. Some of us, you know, we're having oh my gosh moments of life like, "Dude, I know exactly why I'm in the mess that I'm in. And I need to turn. I need to turn, and I need to change, and I need to look back to God and the whole spectrum in between." And so, I'm going to close this in prayer, and I just encourage you in this time, you know Jesus said that He's

present in a unique way when we gather together. And so I'll just pray and just trust that the spirit will speak to each of us what we need to hear. Amen.

And thanks again for listening to Exploring My Strange Bible podcast. You can help me out by leaving a review on iTunes and letting other people know about the podcast if you find it helpful. And we'll have another episode up soon next week. Part 4, Exploring the Book of Jonah and the strange response of the people of Nineveh to Jonah's five-word sermon. See you next time.

[End of transcription 46:36]