

# Book of Jonah

## Week 2: Church of the Rock Bottom

### Jonah 2

Dr. Jeremiah Ebeling ---- May 5, 2024

The early church in Rome, some of the earliest followers of Jesus, used to meet for church in a place called the catacombs. What were the catacombs? They're tombs. They are these underground burial places.



The early Roman church had to meet in these catacombs for worship for a time. How about that for a church growth strategy? “Join us for Sunday worship at the cemetery!” Kind of a tough way to start. But that’s where the early church met in Rome. And the reason they did that was a good reason: it was because of persecution, because the Roman Empire did violence to the Christians and to the church, and so they had to meet in hiding. And so, that’s what they did.

They would go to these catacombs where the dead people were, and that is where they met together for worship. They were the first real “underground church.”

Centuries later, when archaeologists discovered these Christian catacombs, what they discovered is that there were etchings and drawing and paintings on the walls of these catacombs.



And these paintings and drawings were from these early believers, these Roman believers. And they were these early expressions of their Christian faith in God. And what they found was that on these drawings in these catacombs, there was one biblical figure who showed up more often than anybody else. And it wasn't Abraham, the father of faith. It wasn't Moses, the Old Testament prophet and lawgiver. It wasn't King David or Queen Esther. It wasn't John, the beloved disciple, or Paul or Peter. It wasn't even Jesus. The biblical figure who showed up more often than anybody else was the prophet Jonah. More than half the drawings that these Roman Christians made in the catacombs involve Jonah and this story of Jonah.







And why is that? Why Jonah? What is it about this story?

There are several reasons why they chose Jonah and why that was such an encouraging and inspiring story for their faith. But certainly, one of the reasons is because the story of Jonah gives us profound insight into who we are and who God is. The story of Jonah shows these two truths. There's a truth about us and there's a truth about God that we have to know as believers, as Christians. There's something in this story about Jonah that showed them two truths. And the first truth is about us and the life of faith, about the Christian life, even the life of faithfulness and what it's going to involve. And it also shows us this beautiful truth about God and about what He does and how He works and how He operates, in light of who we are.

We're going to see these two truths this morning in our passage in Jonah chapter 2. We're going to find this truth about us that we won't expect. And we're going to find this wonderful truth about God that we can't forget.

And so, we're going to be in Jonah chapter 2 this morning. Everyone turn over in your Bibles or wherever you read your Bible. And I want to look at this truth about us that we see in



Jonah chapter 2, this second chapter of the Book of Jonah. I want to see this truth about us that's embedded in this story. I want to see this awesome truth that, again, we may not expect.

And what we're going to do is work through Jonah chapter 2 chronologically. That's not how the verses come to us, that's not how they were written. But we're going to walk through the story chronologically, because it's going to help us see these truths most clearly and effectively.

And what we find as we read Jonah and discover this truth about us is that, starting in chapter 1 that we looked at last week, Jonah is on this downward spiral. He is headed down. In Jonah chapter 1 we see—we learned last week—that God loves the lost. **“And therefore the Lord told Jonah, “Get up and go. I want you to go to Nineveh.”** *Go to these people who are violent, who hate Israel, and it's mutual.* He says, *I want you to go and I want you to preach. I want you to go and call them to repentance.* And so, Jonah gets up and literally goes in the opposite direction. He does the opposite of what God tells him to do and where God tells him to go. And he hops on a boat. And soon there's a storm and it's threatening the boat and the lives of the other sailors and Jonah himself. So, Jonah says, “Throw me overboard.” And reluctantly, the sailors choose to do that. Four times in Jonah chapter 1 we will see that Jonah is going down. That word “down” is used several times in chapter 1. And what we find in chapter 2 is that this downward spiral, this downward descent that Jonah is making, continues.

Look in Jonah 2:3. Jonah says, **“You ...”**—he's talking about God—**“...hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.”**

After Jonah is tossed into the sea, we see that Jonah is trying to keep his head above water. He's trying to keep his head above water because waves are crashing down on him. But his downward descent continues.

Look at verses 5 and 6: **“The engulfing waters threatened me,”** Jonah says. **“The deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.”**

So, we see Jonah, and he's surrounded by the deep. He says that seaweed is wrapped around his head. He is at the roots of the mountains. He is as low as he can go. And for the Israelites, the sea was a dreadful place. It was a place of death. And Jonah is discovering that firsthand in this experience as he sinks to the bottom of the Mediterranean. He's discovering this.

And look how else he describes his descent. In verse 2 he says, “In my distress.” He says, “I’m deep in the realm of the dead.” And later in verse 6 he’ll say, “I was in the pit.” He’s been “banished from God’s sight.” His life is “ebbing away.” He is “turned away from God’s love.”

And the point of this passage, of all these verses together, is to say that Jonah is at the bottom. Jonah is at rock bottom. He couldn’t be any deeper in the sea and he couldn’t feel any further from God than what he’s experiencing and where he is right now.

### **The Christian Life Includes Journeys to Rock Bottom**

And that’s the first truth that we discover in Jonah’s experience, this truth about ourselves that we might not expect but that we need to see. And that is this: that the Christian life includes journeys to rock bottom; that our walk with God is going to involve trips to the bottom, to the very bottom.

You know, it’s easy for us to think of the Christian life as kind of this nice, easy, straight, upward line from conversion to glory. But that’s not the life of faith. Right? The real life of faith is this jagged, up-and-down, bumpy ride from conversion, from when we meet Jesus, from salvation, to eternity. It’s full of these amazing highs of spiritual transformation when the Spirit gets to work in our lives. And at the same time, it’s got these gut-wrenching lows at the bottom, at rock bottom. This is the reality of the Christian life, of the life of faith. Even the life of faithfulness will involve trips to the rock bottom.

And we see two reasons in this passage that we need to expect this, that we’ve experienced this and we will experience it again. There are two reasons in this passage.

**And the first one is that if it happened to Jonah, it could happen to us.** No—if it happened to Jonah, it will happen to us. I mean, think about this man who is plunged to rock bottom. Jonah is part of God’s chosen people. Even more than that, he’s a believer. He knows God and has a relationship with Him. Still more than that, He is a prophet of God. He is one of the very few men and women who have been hand-selected by God over the course of human history to be one who communicates and speaks directly with God, one who hears and receives messages from the Lord and then communicates those divine messages to others. That’s who this man is, this man, this spokesman from God who’s on the floor of the ocean with seaweed wrapped around his head, and lost, and nearly dead. If it happened to Jonah, we need to expect it’s going to happen to us. It took him just a few short days to get where he was, at the roots of



the mountains with seaweed wrapped around his head. We'll be there too. We'll be there more than once in our lives.

You see, we are all spiritually frail. Our bodies, spirits, souls are fragile throughout. We like to think of ourselves as towers of faithfulness. But really, we are all just sandcastles at high tide. That's who we are. As believers, we have a mind that is absolutely being renewed. And yet, it is so easily led astray. We have a heart that's being transformed by God, by the Spirit of God, and it's still so easily hardened by sin's deceitfulness. These are the hearts and the minds that we have. And you see, God understands about us. He's not surprised by this. He knows that this is true about us, and that's why when the Apostle Paul writes, Look, **"if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"** He says, *The tide is rising and you're just a sandcastle on the beach. Be careful. Be careful that you don't fall.* So, there will be times that we can see that, just like Jonah, we're going to hit bottom. But we're going to make a journey to rock bottom, and this is going to happen in our lives, and we can be sure of that. We don't want this to be true about us, but it is—that we are all prone to sin, more so than we think we are, and than we wish we were.

So, that's the first reality. That's the first thing, the first reason that we need to see, that the Christian life is going to involve journeys to rock bottom.

But there's a second in this passage. **That second indication that the Christian life is going to involve these trips to rock bottom is that we "cling to worthless idols."** These words are in quotes because they're from the mouth of Jonah. He confesses in verse 8 what got him to rock bottom. And he recognizes that he's been clinging to worthless idols. And he doesn't reveal what those idols are, but they have caused him and led him to defy the Lord. And so, we can be sure of this, that anything, all sin, really starts with idolatry. That's what it ultimately comes out of. Sin is born out of idolatry.

What is an idol? An idol is anything that we put in the place of God. An idol is anything or anyone that we look to for security and significance that only God can provide. Do you know what Tim Keller said an idol was? He said an idol is any **"good thing that we make into an ultimate thing"**—any good thing that we put in the place of God and we look to, to give us security and significance. That's what an idol is in our lives. There's a quote by John Calvin. He knows this to be true about us. He says, **"The human heart is a perpetual idol factory."** How about that? We churn out idols from our hearts faster than Kohler can churn out toilets. They're

just always coming—a perpetual idol factory. That’s what our hearts are. And it’s not just Calvin who knew this. God knows this about us. Yahweh knows this about us. So, when He gives us the Ten Commandments and He says, *This is what it looks like to worship me, to follow me, to obey me*, what is the very first commandment He gives? **“You shall have no other gods before me.”** He says, *Don’t cling to worthless idols. Don’t put anything or anyone, even a good thing, in my place. Worship me, the one true God. Follow me, the one true God.*

And so, you see, it’s not just Jonah. No, we cling to worthless idols too, don’t we? Whether it’s a stellar reputation that we are committed to upholding, or maybe something else like being attractive. Maybe it’s wanting and demanding more control than God has intended for us to have. We cling to worthless idols too, and we find this idol and we put it in the place of God. Anything that is good that we make an ultimate thing, that we look to for security and significance that only God can give us, that only He is meant to provide—that becomes an idol in our lives. But the danger of an idol is that it’s like mold in a home. It eventually takes over. If you’ve ever talked to somebody who’s had a mold outbreak in their home, they will tell you there is no such thing as a harmless amount of mold in your home, won’t they? There’s no such thing as a harmless idol in our lives. It will eventually take over. They will sink us to rock bottom. That’s what they do every time. That’s what they did with Jonah, that’s what they’ll do with us.

So, the Christian life involves trips to rock bottom. It happened to Jonah and it’s going to happen to us. Our hearts are perpetual idol factories, and if we cling to worthless idols, they’re going to sink us to the bottom, just like they did to Jonah.

So, let’s take a moment. Let’s bring this home. Let’s apply this to us. I wonder, are there any trips to rock bottom that you’re thinking of right now? Have you made any journeys to the very bottom? Maybe are you there right now, by chance?

Because here’s what rock bottom is supposed to teach us to say. Rock bottom is supposed to teach us to say, “I’m stuck. I need to change. But I can’t change!” Those three things. “I’m stuck. I need to change. But I can’t change.” That is the anthem of rock bottom. That is where we’re supposed to get to at rock bottom. It’s what it’s supposed to teach us. And what does rock bottom look like? Rock bottom is not as low as you can go. Rock bottom is just as low as you need to go to say those three things: “I’m stuck. I need to change. But I can’t change! I can’t do anything about this.”



And so, rock bottom can be two feet down, or it can be two hundred feet down. It all depends on when we say those words. When do we admit that we're stuck? Do we want to change, we need to change, but there's nothing we can do to effect change.

So, maybe you've experienced this situation before where you have a spouse or somebody who loves you and comes to you and says to you, "Look, this sin in your life, this idol that's in your life, is hurting you. But it is crushing me. Would you please change?" And they're saying to us, "Look, you have seaweed wrapped around your head, and I don't think you even realize it." And what's our natural response to that? What do we say first, most often? We say, "Nah, I'm good. The problem's not me. The problem is you."

And when we say that, when we respond that way, when we close our ears and we persist in clinging to the idols that are in our life, or we make that decision that we're going to stick with that idol and we're not going to give it up—we're going to cling to it instead—then we can be sure that at some point God is going to move, that He's going to do something. And a lot of times—and I've heard this story many times—what God will do when we persist in clinging to that idol is that He will introduce you to you. Have you had that experience before? He might bring a boss into your life that is as controlling with you as you are with the people whom you love, the people who are close to you. Or He'll move a neighbor next door or a new colleague who is as arrogant as you are. And as you experience the pain of that and how awful that is, what you will hear is the Lord gently saying to you, *Listen, that pain that you're experiencing at the hands of a controlling boss, that weariness, that frustration with this colleague or this neighbor who is arrogant as you are—do I have your attention? Because, look, what you're experiencing from them—that's what your wife, that's what your husband, that's what this person who loves you so much is experiencing with you. That's what they're talking about.* And when we hear the Lord say that to us, then we have this opportunity, this chance, for us to say, "Oh, I hear you now, Lord. I hear You loud and clear. This is awful. And I don't want to do this to anybody else ever again. But, Lord, I'm stuck. I need to change. I want to change. But I can't change."

And as you utter those words for the first time, do you know where you are? You're at rock bottom. And that's the perfect place to be. It is the perfect place to be. Do you know why?

Jonah's going to show us why. Because with Jonah, in this story of this man and his response to God, we're going to discover what happens when he gets to rock bottom. We're going to see how God responds. There's this beautiful truth about the Lord and how He works

and how He operates when we get to rock bottom. So, I want us to see that in this story. Let's do that by turning to Jonah chapter 1, to the very last verse in Jonah 1. This is what happens when Jonah gets to rock bottom. "Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God."

There are two things I want you to see in these two verses here, that I don't want you to miss.

**First** is that there is a lot of scholarship and curiosity that has been spent on whether there is a fish large enough to swallow a human, and if a human could live inside of a fish or a whale or a shark (or whatever) for three days and nights. Is that even a possibility? The reality is, though, that doesn't even matter. **And the reason is because this is a miracle.** It's a miracle, right? I mean, if we believe that God spoke the world into existence and we believe that God spoke life into a dead body, then it's really not hard to believe that God spoke to a fish and ordained it to be Jonah's AirBnB for a weekend. He could do that. It's really no trouble at all for Him. It's a miracle. In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus refers to this story of Jonah, a true story, He says, *Look, Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of a fish. Well, that is God's opening act. It's just a warmup act for what He's going to do with me when I spend three days in the heart of the earth before I'm resurrected back to life.* It's a miracle, plain and simple. That's the first thing I want you to see in this part of this story—Jonah in the belly of this great fish.

And then, the second thing I want you to see is much more important. **The second thing for our purposes here this morning is that Jonah 2 is the first time that Jonah prays in this entire story.** In Jonah chapter 1 we hear from Jonah, but not a word of it is to God. He's not asking God for anything; he's definitely not listening to God. But in Jonah chapter 2 this prophet finally calls out to God, and this huge fish is God's response to Jonah's prayer. It's His response to Jonah calling out. Jonah has sunk to the bottom of the sea, to the roots of the mountains, seaweed around his head. And then he finally asks God for help. And then, as soon as he does, God responds. God responds to that prayer with this great fish. He spares Jonah's life. And Jonah experiences God's steadfast love. He experiences God's *hesed*. He experiences this steadfast love from God. And *hesed* is the word translated as "love" in verse 8. We looked at this word back in the fall. But *hesed*, as a reminder, is a covenant word. It's a covenant word for God's steadfast love for His people, Israel.



So, look at verse 8 where it shows up. Verse 8 declares, “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them.” They turn away from God’s *hesed* for them. And Jonah has clung to worthless idols, and he’s turned away from God’s steadfast love for him. But even as he stubbornly turns away, even as he runs away from God’s *hesed* for him, Jonah runs right into the *hesed* of God. He runs right into the steadfast love of God for him.

I had a seminary professor who defined *hesed*, this word for “steadfast love,” this way. He said, “God’s *hesed* is His persistent refusal to wash His hands of wayward Israel.” And that’s what Jonah receives in this story. He experiences God’s persistent refusal to wash His hands of this wayward prophet.

And then after Jonah experiences this steadfast love from God, what does he do? What’s his response? Well, that’s what we see he does inside the belly of this fish. He gives thanks. He praises God for saving him. I want us to see this whole prayer that Jonah prays from inside the great fish. It starts in verse 2 of chapter 2. This is what Jonah prays:

“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. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, ‘I have been banished from Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.’ The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But You, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered You, Lord, and my prayer rose to You, to Your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them. 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.’”

And then after Jonah has thanked the Lord, after he’s lifted up this prayer of thanksgiving, verse 10 concludes this part of the narrative: “And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.”

See, at the bottom of that sea, God was waiting for Jonah. God was waiting for Jonah. God’s *hesed*, His steadfast love, came for Jonah. See, Jonah had finally looked to God’s temple, and finally looked to where the presence of God is, only to discover that God’s temple had come to him; that God’s presence was with him. And Jonah found himself not only in the belly of a

great fish; Jonah found himself in church. And what he found was that the mouth of that great fish was really the front door to a church.

### **When You Hit Rock Bottom, You'll Find the Church of the Rock Bottom**

And that is the truth about God that we need to know, that we can't forget when it comes to our trips to rock bottom. We cannot forget this wonderful truth about our God, and that is that when you hit rock bottom, you'll find the Church of the Rock Bottom. When you hit rock bottom, you'll find the Church of the Rock Bottom.

In those journeys to rock bottom throughout our lives, we need to know that every time we get there, take a look around, because you're going to see this ... the Church of the Rock Bottom. It'll be there. It'll be waiting. God will be waiting.



You see, I think we believe, we have this view of rock bottom as a dark, scary, isolated, godless place; that it's this place where we land and it's kind of like a purgatory where we're supposed to suffer for a little while. And we probably in our mind's eye have this view of God, that when we're at rock bottom He's just kind of standing over us condescendingly, looking at us with His hands on His hips, now maybe shaking His head at us. But what we discover in this passage is that that's now where our God is. And that's now what He's doing. Because when we get to rock bottom, we find the Church of the Rock Bottom. We find a God who is persistent in

His refusal to wash hands of wayward you and wayward me. We find a God of steadfast love, full of *hesed*. And that *hesed*, that steadfast love, fills this place of the rock bottom. It's not void of God. It's full of His presence. And what we find out about Him is that He's not standing over us looking down at us. No, He's waiting there, looking up, with open arms, ready to receive. That's what He's doing. That's where He is, ready to receive you, ready to receive us. This is what we notice about our Lord, that He is ready to save us, ready to eradicate those idols that we are clinging to. And even if we hit the bottom, to take those, to release our grip from them, if we will just say, "I'm stuck. I need to change, I want to. But I can't. I can't change this about me."

That's what Psalm 139 is trying to convince us of. Where is God in these kinds of situations and circumstances? And look, the reality of Psalm 139 is that the psalmist is trying to tell us there is nowhere that we can go where God is not. There's nowhere we can go where God is not. Verses 7 and 8 of Psalm 139, the psalmist says, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?" Jonah wants to know. "If I go up to the heavens, You are there; if I make my bed in the depths, You are there." If I sink to the roots of the mountains, you are there!

And so, when we get there, when we get to rock bottom—and we will surely be there—God is there too. There's nowhere that we can go where God is not.

I want to apply this for a moment to the people in our lives who we love, that we're seeking to minister to. And I want you to know, if you're afraid, you're frightened, or just downright scared of praying for someone that you love who needs a rock bottom in his or her life—if you're frightened about praying that God would get them to rock bottom—I want you to know that it might be ... I think we have a misunderstanding about rock bottom and about what happens there and about who is there. It's not a godless place. It's a place that's filled with the presence of the Lord. It's not a curse. Rock bottom is not a curse. It's a blessing. It's a place that we go to meet Jesus, to experience Him. So, if you have somebody you love a lot who is clinging to worthless idols, somebody who has fled from the Lord, and they don't know or don't care, you're safe to pray that prayer for them. That's a loving and the safest place, maybe, that they can be—at rock bottom where God is waiting for them with open arms. We can pray those prayers. We can pray them confidently, knowing that God's *hesed*, His steadfast love, is what fills that place.



On the same thread, when we hit rock bottom, there's going to be the Church of Rock Bottom there.

You see, this is why images of Jonah, this wonderful story, are painted and etched on the walls of those Christian catacombs. This is the primary reason, and it's what Jonah ends his prayer with, that salvation comes from the Lord. And it was such a powerful reminder to these early believers, and to us too, that the salvation of God certainly meets us when we are converted, when we put our faith in Jesus, and we repent of our sins. But that salvation from the Lord continues in our lives over, and over again. We are absolutely born again, and we enjoy God's salvation. And then we are born again and again and again. God continues to save us as He meets us at rock bottom. That's why they filled the walls of those Christian catacombs.

And then there's one last thing in this passage, one last thing in this prayer, that I want us to see, that we'll need to remember for these journeys in our lives. I want you to see in Jonah chapter 2 that what Jonah is doing in these eight or nine verses—this is a prayer, no doubt. But it's also a psalm. It's a psalm of thanksgiving. Jonah has composed a song that he is singing to Yahweh, that He is singing to the Lord. In verse 9 it says, **“With shouts of grateful praise I sing to God.”** He's singing to God for meeting him with steadfast love, with this *hesed*, when he gets to rock bottom.

And I want you to know that God's going to do that same thing with us too, that on these journeys to rock bottom, God's very likely going to give you a song. He's going to give you a song that expresses the wonderful experience of His *hesed*, steadfast love, in your life. This song that depicts God in His persistent refusal to wash His hands of His wayward people. He will give us these kinds of songs.

And I bet you have a few songs like that. You have songs that came along at just the right time and that perfectly express that while you were running from God and His steadfast love, that you ran right into His love at rock bottom. He'll give us these songs. I'll bet you have those songs too. And I hope that you'll enjoy singing those songs, those psalms of thanksgiving, as you remember the salvation, the great work that He's done in your life in that church, the Church of the Rock Bottom.

The truth is, I've made several journeys to rock bottom, personally. What I've found in my life is that as I made the transition to my twenties and my thirties and then my forties, each of those transitions to a new decade coincided with a trip to rock bottom. And on one evening as I

was rounding the corner to my thirties, I found myself standing next to my wife. She was in tears, because of my critical spirit. And she asked me as kindly as I could ever hope for, “Would you please change? Would you allow God to work on this part of your life? Would you let go of this idol?” And it was crushing to me when I realized the full extent, or at least as much as I possibly could, the hurt that my harsh words had caused her. And as I stood there at rock bottom, what I found was the Church of the Rock Bottom. And the doors opened, and I was welcomed in. And I found a seat. And I sat down. And I sat down, and in that seat, I worshiped God and I prayed. And I said, “Oh, Heavenly Father, I am stuck. I don’t want to hurt my wife this way any longer. And I want to change, I need to change. But I can’t change. Would You change this in me? Would You make me new?”

And do you know what He did? He answered that prayer. He began a good work of changing, of helping me to let go of this idol, this sin, that was hurting those around me, and that was particularly hurting my wife. He helped me to let go of that.

And what I was left with was a song. And a new start in my marriage.

There’s a seat reserved for every single one of us at the Church of the Rock Bottom. And when you find yourself there next, can I encourage you, don’t fight it. Don’t fight it. Let God’s steadfast love, let His *hesed*, do the good work in you that He wants to do, that He needs to do. And after He’s done that, while He’s doing that, enjoy worshiping Him. Sing to Jesus, the Lord or our shame, the Lord of our sinful hearts. He is our great Redeemer.

Will you pray with me?

*Holy Father, what a gift this story of Jonah is because it tells us the truth. It tells the truth about us, and more importantly, the truth about You. Lord, it shows us that You already know that we are fickle, that we are prone to wander, we’re prone to sin, that we’re putting idols in Your place that have no business being there.*

*And Lord, You meet us, not with condemnation when we get to rock bottom, but You meet us with Your steadfast love, Your hesed. And You keep doing that over, and over again. Lord, You are persistent in Your refusal to wash Your hands of us. You are committed in Your hesed to us. I pray that we would know that to be true. I pray that we would cling to that truth, and that we would cling to You. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

