



# How Pain Makes Us Better

# Jonah 1:17

TO: NEBRASKA STATE SENATORS

FROM: REV. PERRY GAUTHIER

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*On Saturday May 27, 1995, American actor Christopher Reeve (Superman: the Movie), fell off Eastern Express, his thoroughbred horse. He broke three vertebrae in his C-spine (Cervical Spine--the first 7 vertebrae in the human spinal column). Two months before that, on a cold March Saturday morning, I also broke three vertebrae in my C-spine, in a full speed car wreck at 40th and South Streets here in our capital city. If Christopher Reeve were still alive today, I'm sure he would verbalize agreement with me that the horrifically painful accidents we each experienced 14 years ago are among the best things that ever happened in our lives.*

*I have repeated it often through the years--"I am so glad that happened to me that I'd ALMOST ask God for something like that again in my life...ALMOST." Reeve, "The Man of Steel" suffered quadriplegia, confined to a metal wheelchair. I became a home-bound invalid confined to a metal neck brace, and dependant on an aluminum walker. The differences in our stories are many. But studying his story I have learned that we share something in common.*

*We each learned intense lessons about the real value of life. Reeve and I, each made progress in our lives--major progress. We both learned about how pain can make us better. It forces us to grow.*

## I. THE LOVING LORD—APPOINTING PAIN

**Jonah 1:17** *And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah...*<sup>1</sup>

Let's note first that it's the LORD Himself who appoints the pain for the prophet in our passage. The Lord will never harm His children, but if He has to, He will hurt us—so He can help us.

There are two kinds of pain in the lives of God's children. First, the pain of chastisement (brought on as correction for sin). But there is also the pain of testing and trial (brought on to test faith and character, with a goal of proven success).

There are many instances in the Bible where people suffer the pain of testing, that is NOT related to chastisement for sin. Famous examples are Joseph, Job Jeremiah and Jesus. Often pain comes into the life of the believer not because he has done something wrong but

because he has done everything right. Job and Jesus are the classic examples of this. A woman of God can be tested and tried, feeling great pain, not as a punishment, but as a means of proving and improving the good faith and good character that are already hers.

But the pain in our passage is not 'testing pain'. It is 'chastising pain'. God has been chasing Jonah. The hounds of heaven have been nipping at his Hebrew heels. Jonah is the prodigal prophet and the disobedient son. God perfectly plays the part of a pure parent--He perfects and corrects his son. We've already seen this classic verse on God's fathering and disciplinary role as the great chastiser:

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**FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES,  
AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.<sup>2</sup>**

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**How does pain make us better?** When an infinitely wise and loving God appoints the instruments of our painful chastisements.

## II. THE FAMOUS FISH—SWIMMING AND SWALLOWING

**Jonah 1:17** *...and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.*

Animals in the Bible are often instruments of God's service. Animals in the Bible are often used to show us creatures whose will is totally submissive to God--in contrast to human beings. A world full of animals marched two by two up the dry gang plank into Noah's ark at God's command. Baalam the prophet is rebuked by a donkey, enabled and willing to speak with the voice of a man, at God's bidding. In Jonah 4 the larva of an insect ("a worm") opens wide and chews at the roots of Jonah's comfort, at God's command.

Here in Jonah 1:17 the famous fish models a mouthful of obedience. Heeding God's voice, this animal contrastingly displays a readiness to do God's will. This is unlike the world of air breathing humans that God, in justice, was forced to destroy in Noah's day. It is also unlike Baalam the no good prophet for hire. And this is unlike

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PHONE: 402.770.6270 REV. PERRY M. GAUTHIER, V.D.M.





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## Jonah 1:17

Jonah, the iron-willed and disobediently prodigal prophet.

The great fish will obey the Lord again in 2:10, with much vomit, sending the chastised prophet to a beachhead of obedience. But here the famous fish teaches us that God can and will teach us through pain, even if He has to use His non-human creatures to do it. As surely as Jonah was running out of God's will, this fish was swimming in God's will. Since Jonah's prophetic mouth was clenched shut in stubborn willfulness against God's assignment, this fish's maw gapes wide in willful submission to God's appointment.

**How does pain make us better?** When our pain helps us see our disobedient willfulness clearly and in contrast with all creatures great and small when they choose to willingly obey God. That helps us.

### III. THE PUNISHABLE PROPHET—SUNKEN AND SWALLOWED

Jonah has disappeared, having been dumped down into the deep. When the great sea creature's jaws snap shut, "like so many white bolts, upon his prison<sup>3</sup>", Jonah is entirely enclosed in a cavernous, muscous, smothering jail cell. He now has time to think.

**Jonah 1:17** ...and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

A critical truth to be gleaned from this verse is the two-fold nature of God's chastisement—it hurts and it helps, it pains us and it makes us better. It brings us both suffering and salvation. It brings both.

#### **JONAH--SUNKEN AND SWALLOWED FOR SUFFERING:**

Can you imagine the nightmare of being somewhere inside that creature's system of organs for three nights? One of the best Bible scholars in the world on Jonah says "there are *no days* in the belly of a fish". He also reports that the compound Hebrew word translated "in the belly"<sup>4</sup> (Hebrew (right to left) צַנִּיב = *bime`ey*) can refer to any of the internal organs of this leviathan-like aquatic creature.

This immense creature of God's chastisement intrudes into Jonah's world and actually *becomes* Jonah's world. It saves but also imprisons Jonah. Swallowed! Straight-jacketed. The cramped, cold, smelly, inky blackness compounded the claustrophobia Jonah felt in his palpitating prison. Jonah is now alone. Very. Alone with God.

God's chastisement is always painful. One child asked his disciplining father before a spanking, "Daddy will it hurt?" The wise father answered, "My dear son, if it did not hurt it would not be a

spanking". As a son of God, through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, I can give first-hand testimony to the "hurts" administered to me by my wise heavenly Father. They remind me of a favorite seminary professor speaking of his own earthly father's frequent spankings of lovingly hard and disciplined correction—"He applied the 'board of education' to the 'seat of knowledge'."

**VERY OFTEN MY FATHER APPLIED THE 'BOARD OF EDUCATION' TO MY 'SEAT OF KNOWLEDGE'!**

Hot tears often fill the eyes of the chastised child of God. But those same tears are designed to cleanse our souls and clear our eyesight.

**Pain makes us better**, forcing us to really see the reality of our sins.

#### **JONAH--SUNKEN AND SWALLOWED FOR SALVATION:**

In the coming weeks of summer and in our satellite Bible studies, we'll study in depth Jonah 2:9—"...Salvation is from the LORD!" Jonah joyously finds this famous fish to be a source of salvation!

The wise and loving LORD has used this famous fish to chastise Jonah for his sins. But He has also used it as the very vehicle of his salvation. God has saved Jonah from drowning in the green, deep, salty cold Mediterranean Sea. But this fact is vital--God saved Jonah from "himself". God is God, and God saved Jonah from his willful, sinful choices of disobedience. All sin brings death into human life, at one level or another. All sin always brings death at some level.

So to save us from our sins and "save us from ourselves" is one of the best things a loving heavenly Father can do. Jonah learns this great lesson in 2:9 just before the great fish's great belch in 2:10.

**How does pain make us better?** When it's pain administered by a wise and loving God, it delivers us from sin and selfishness. God-given pain gives godly sorrow but also salvation. And **that** is better!

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Version 1995 Update unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 12:6; see also v. 5—"and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons. "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM;"

<sup>3</sup> From Father Mapple's sermon in the classic Moby Dick, Herman Melville.

<sup>4</sup> Jack M. Sasson, Jonah, © 1990, Doubleday.