



The Sloping Back of a Question Mark

Jonah 2:5-6

TO: NEBRASKA STATE SENATORS

FROM: REV. PERRY M. GAUTHIER

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Nearly 30 years ago, Dr. Haddon W. Robinson was the professor of homiletics at Dallas Theological Seminary. Homiletics is the art of preaching, and Dr. Robinson could really preach. Nearly 30 years ago, I was excited to find out that he was coming to preach in Central City, Nebraska. At that time, I had just become a Christian. I was impressed with and drawn to Professor Robinson's wisdom, depth of Bible knowledge and eloquence.

It feels like only yesterday when I sat as close as I could to the front row in that Central City auditorium. I heard Dr. Robinson preach from God's Word about the fall of Israel's chief political leader, King David. Dr. Robinson waxed eloquent about the complexity of problems that David's wrong choices had brought into his political life, his married life and his family life.

During the course of that sermon, Dr. Robinson explained how he himself had spent decades in the study of God's Word and found many thousands of answers to life's multitude of questions. What surprised me most is what the good Doctor said next. "Sometimes I feel like I've spent most of my life on the sloping back of a question mark."

Perhaps the reason I remember that as if it were yesterday, is that I can relate so well to that experience. I am thankful for the thousands of hours that I have read, studied, meditated upon and sat under the preaching of God's Word. Nevertheless, I can still relate to Dr. Robinson's statement. Sometimes I too feel like I have spent most of my life on the sloping back of a question mark.

Life is hard. Life is messy. Situations are, shall we say, "Complicated?" Nevertheless, today in our study of Jonah we will see that sometimes we bring messes into our own lives. Sometimes we are in the midst of self-induced pain. When that happens, we need to realize that instead of things getting better, they sometimes just get worse. When we pursue a life of sin, we put ourselves onto a slippery slope.

I. SIN'S SLIPPERY SLOPE: TRAPPED, OVERWHELMED, ENTANGLED

Jonah 2:5 "Water encompassed me to the point of

*death. The great deep engulfed me; Weeds were wrapped around my head."*¹

In Jonah 2:5, our praying prophet is giving the blow-by-blow details of his sinking in the sea. In verse three, Jonah proclaimed to the Lord (for every Bible reader in human history to hear) "God, You threw me into the ocean!" But finally, Jonah confesses his sin and admits to the reality of his own chastisement. Jonah has gotten himself into quite a mess here. He is on sin's slippery slope.

Jonah 2:5a "...Water encompassed me to the point of death..."

TRAPPED: Jonah says the water had encompassed him to the point of death. He senses the depth of trouble that he is in and realizes it could be the very end of his life. He feels and fears that he is just moments away from drowning in the cold salt waters of the Mediterranean Sea. This is a natural consequence of his running from the Lord. Realize that sometimes we feel trapped because we have gotten ourselves into the muck and muddy messes of sin. In the language of John Bunyan's classic work *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Jonah has gotten himself into the Slough of Despond. Jonah did it. Not God. No question.

Jonah 2:5b "The great deep engulfed me..."

OVERWHELMED: Jonah describes the terror of his drowning experience further, saying that "the great deep" had engulfed him. The Jews of Jonah's day were particularly afraid of deep darkness and deep water.² Jonah's fears were intensely overwhelming. Panic attack.

Sometimes we are in deeply overwhelming pain due to the actions of others. During one such season in my life, I accepted a doctor's advice that I take an anti-depressant for a short season. It would take the sharp edge off the deep pain I was experiencing. The overwhelming sense of depression was engulfing. The cold pull of melancholy was strong. I was engulfed in pain.

However, there are also times when we are in deep pain and melancholy due to our own poor choices. Natural consequences. Jonah is not blaming the ocean here, nor is he blaming the sailors, nor is he blaming God. Jonah is to blame. Not God. No question. That leads us to our third point:

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Jonah 2:5 "... Weeds were wrapped around my head."

OH! WHAT A TANGLED WEB WE WEAVE WHEN FIRST WE PRACTISE TO DECEIVE!

ENTANGLED: In verse five, Jonah recounts that he was entangled in seaweed, probably the brown kelp that is so abundant in the thick kelp beds of the Mediterranean Sea. In Jonah's flailing drop, he may have fallen and writhed through a kelp bed, causing kelp to spin around his neck and head just as spaghetti spins around a twirling fork. Alternatively, Jonah may have become tangled in a spin of seaweed because of a contorted panic inside the mucousy belly of the great sea monster.

Jonah is entangled in "Oh! What a web..." as Sir Walter Scott might have phrased it using the 1808 language of his most famous quotation. However, Jonah has not deceived God. He has deceived himself. Jonah wove a tangled web of deceit, but he is the one caught in that web.

Part of sin's slippery slope is its entangling nature. Sin, unrepented of, leads to more sin. One lie leads to another. Dabbling at the edges of sin will usually result in scorched fingertips. The political leader, King David of Israel, spent many years in a tangled family mess and a strangling political position. Why? How? It all started with a single inappropriate look at a bathing beauty named Bathsheba. Oh what a tangled web self-deception is.

II. SIN'S SLIPPERY SLOPE: AN ALL-TIME LOW

Jonah 2:6a "I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars was around me forever..."

The next sentences in Jonah's underwater confession tell us how Jonah had sunken to an all-time low. Having been blind-sided by billows and blasted by breakers (verse 3), Jonah is no longer able to tread water. His "dog-paddler's prayer" of verse four now had become a sub-marine supplication.

Jonah takes his last gulp of air before a strong salty wave slaps him in the face, sending him sinking down into the dark doom of the silent and sunless world of the Mediterranean Sea.

Jonah is going down, down, down. When we choose to run from God's will for our lives, we always go down. When we ignore God's Word in our lives, we always go down. When we ignore God's ways in our lives, we always go down.

The lyrics of the song "Jonah's Lament" express this well:

I WAS TOLD TO PREACH TO THE HEATHEN

THE SOON COMING WRATH OF THE LORD.

BUT KNOWING GOD'S GREAT LOVING-KINDNESS,

HIS WILL I TRIED TO IGNORE.

SO I WENT DOWN TO JOPPA,

DOWN TO THE SEA,

DOWN TO THE SHIP, 'LET THE WIND CARRY ME'

DOWN TO THE SHIP'S HOLD I LAY

DOWN TO SLEEP;

DOWN, DOWN, DOWN, FROM THE LORD'S WILL FOR ME. ³

Part of the problem with walking near the top edge of sin's slippery slope is that the gravitational pull of sin and the sin nature will tug the transgressor down, down, down.

Jonah not only laid down to sleep in the ship's hold, he has gone further down. He became a "man overboard" as he was thrown down into the sea. He sank down into the ocean, and this verse says he descended down to its bottom that he calls "the roots of the mountains." What mountains does he mean? Jonah is referring to the sub-oceanic mountain ranges and he is now sitting at their base. One man says, "when Jonah's 'Hebrew hincey' hits the ocean floor," then and only then does he finally admit his sin.

I picture Jonah at an all time low with one last bubble of air, one final precious pearl of oxygen in his pursed cheeks, imprisoned at an all-time low.

Jonah 2:6a "The earth with its bars was around me forever..."

I imagine Jonah's face like a puffer fish as he sits in the prison cell of what he thinks will be a suffocating sub-marine death. The ocean's powerful pressure and the cold grip of gravity have brought Jonah against his will to a prison from which there is no escape. He says he is 'forever' lost to his earthly life. He feels his time in this life is seconds away from ending at the base of the sub-oceanic mountains on the bottom of the ocean's floor.

Sin's slippery slope promises a deepening descent into death at *some* level. The Scriptures declare, "The penalty for sin is death..." (Romans 6:23). God told Adam and Eve that in the day they sinned, by eating the forbidden fruit, they would surely die. Did they die that same day? Yes. Though years



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later they gave birth to Cain, a farmer and tiller of the ground, something inside them died the day Adam and Eve ate the fruit. In addition, in their spiritual death, they sent all of humanity's future generations spinning down into the depth of the very same kind of death. Sin produces death—of some kind—always.

Therefore, Jonah is at an all time low. Physically, his body sits near death at the bottom of the Great Sea. Spiritually, he is just as low. The spirit can go no lower than when the body is chastised almost to the point of death.

Jonah has walked on the top edge of sin's slippery slope and has been pulled down, down, down into an all-time low. This is Jonah's fault--not God's. Jonah is to blame. No question. That brings us to our final point:

III. SIN HAS A SLIPPERY SLOPE--BUT THE SINNING PERSON STILL HAS HOPE

The political leader and French General Napoleon Bonaparte said, "Leaders are dealers in hope." After looking at our first two points, we could become hopeless. We know that we all sin. We each know our weaknesses and our areas of temptation, our Achilles' heels. So where is the hope? The hope lies in the heart of the Lord and in His power and grace to restore us when we fall.

The Scriptures say "For *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (*emphasis mine*; Romans 3:23)." All of us are sinners. The prophetic book of Jonah is not really about the *prophecy* of Jonah--which is only five words long in the original Hebrew text. The book of Jonah is about the *prophet* Jonah. The book of Jonah is about the failures of Jonah, God's chosen prophet, a true child of God, but in the book's four chapters, a prodigal son of God. I find great encouragement as a man and as a minister in this fact. For *I too* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. So where is my hope for the times in which I fail? In the same place Jonah found it—in the Lord. That leads us to the last sentence in our passage:

Jonah 2:6b "...But You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God."

The person who has fallen on sin's slippery slope is not without hope. The hope is in the Lord our God. We see a lightning bolt God in chapter one. He is thundering in holy displeasure at his prodigal son's disobedient defiance. He is chasing his prophet with the perfect storm. Contrastingly, we see the same God as a loving lifeguard in chapter two. It is as if He dives down into the deep to deliver Jonah from drowning. In mercy and grace, God brings Jonah's life up out of the pit of drowning to death.

Jonah thought his life was over. He thought he was doomed to a watery grave and locked in a prison of certain suffocation in seawater. Fortunately, Jonah realizes that the God who could have justifiably taken his life is the God who has shown grace to restore his life.

Was Jonah stuck on the sloping back of a question mark in this regard? Absolutely not. As sure as he knew, in verse three, that God threw him into the ocean, he absolutely knew that it was God who saved his life.

So what made the difference? Why does Jonah now offer up these underwater praises? The hinge point is Jonah's repentance. Jonah's stubborn will has finally been broken. As he held onto one last bubble of air, he cried out in repentance to God, acknowledging his sin and his need for deliverance. Moreover, God heard him. No question.

God is a stand-at-the-door kind of God, knocking and hoping for a restored relationship. He is ready to make eye contact and waiting for those who have fallen on the slippery slope of sin to see the error of their ways.

IV. THE SLOPING BACK OF A QUESTION MARK?

It has been nearly 30 years since I first heard Dr. Robinson preach about the sins of David, that preeminent political leader in Israel. I have learned many solid answers to life's pressing questions in those three decades of study. John 8:31 has become true in my life. "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The truth has set me free to unflinchingly know certain truths without question. Two of those truths are in this passage.

The first truth is humbling to admit, but I know and have no question in my mind that the slippery slope of sin is deadly. Whenever I have walked away from God, I have walked dangerously on the top edge of a slippery slope. Every time I have found myself on that slippery slope, I eventually realize it brings nothing but feelings of being trapped and overwhelmed. It deeply enmeshes me in a tangled web of self-deception. It always brings me down.

The second truth of which I am convinced is the restoring grace of God. His gracious and patient methods make Him the Savior that I have come to know and love, for almost 30 years. May we all be **unquestionably sure** of these two truths as we continue in our journey to become disciples of Christ.

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

² Note then the fitting word choices the Jewish Biblical authors of Scripture used for eternal punishment—eternal fire, outer darkness, a lake of fire where you cannot die.

³ Alan Hald, © 1999. Written in conjunction with the 18 week teaching series "Jonah, The Dude with an Attitude", by Rev. Perry M. Gauthier © 1999.