

## **Raised from the Mire**

By Natalie Warner

*“Out of the lowest pit....  
You have heard my voice.”*  
(Lamentations 3:55b-56a NASB)

While reading the book of Jonah recently, I found how similar I often am in my daily struggles to Jonah in his willful disregard for God’s plan and desires. Much of Jonah’s recorded physical actions obviously stemmed from fleshly decisions; my emotional responses produce fleshly actions. Jonah’s blatant acts of disobedience can be easily overlooked and regarded as “his problems” – we, after all, would *never* even *think* to go against God’s wishes. The further I read, however, the clearer the application to my own life became.

Interestingly, the account of Jonah is a significant type of the blessed rising of our Savior. It is because of this resurrection of Christ that we can live our lives in assurance, trust, and hope. Jesus Christ Himself connected the testimony of Jonah to His own resurrection. He told this to the Pharisees and Sadducees: *“The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Jesus, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. But He replied to them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” And in the morning, “There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.” Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.’”* (Matthew 16:1-4) Four chapters earlier, Scripture records Jesus telling the scribes and Pharisees that *“for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here”* (Matthew 12:40-41).

I also see the account of Jonah as picturing the Lord raising *us* to life in Him – a different type of resurrection unto life from a fleshly grip on sin which we who trust and repent experience. Throughout the life of a Believer, he or she falls back into fleshly desires and actions once and a while. We can get stuck in the mire and pulled down into hopelessness and would stay there if it wasn’t for the eternally secure, unconditional love of the unforsaking Father.

So what can we learn from the small book squished in the Old Testament? It begins, *“The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.’”* This wasn’t what we may be tempted to call a difficult interpretation of the Spirit’s leading. This was a direct word from God to Jonah, and it was detailed! Jonah’s excuse was not ignorance. He knew where to go, when, and what to do there. And yet, *“Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish”* (Jonah 1:3a).

I wonder how much thought he put into his actions. The Word doesn’t tell us how much time passes, but I know for myself, I am apt to disobey (by action and thought) on impulse, and that’s dangerous. On the flip side, we do know that Jonah planned his getaway, at least to the point of going down to the ships, finding one heading as far away as he could get from Nineveh, and paying for his fare. He wasn’t a stowaway, guiltily hiding on a ship he scurried aboard. He wasn’t a plain ole rat ducking behind the barrels and ropes. He was a rat who paid his fare and went with a plan in his head.

In any case, he was deliberately attempting to avoid the Lord. In fact, twice in verse three of

the book of Jonah, it says that he was fleeing “*from the presence of the LORD.*” I presume it isn’t hard for us to dismiss this as naiveté, because who would bet his life on thinking we could leave and avoid God’s being everywhere? I think, however, that we can (in a way) look at His omnipresence as not always being the same as when we are “in His presence.” He is present on earth, but because of sin, the unbeliever is out of His presence and is separated from Him. God’s omnipresence still is real: the unbeliever does not have power to cast Him away. Through repentance and the Spirit’s work, they can be brought into His presence. Those who are still unbelieving at their death will also be fully “in His presence” when they are judged. To us as Believers, He is not only the Ordainer of our days and the Author of life – He is *everything* to us. He is our Life. He is our King. Fleshly sins will creep in, though, as I have felt, and as a result, we can also be away from His presence – even though He is all around us. The Holy Spirit convicts us then, and through repentance and His forgiveness, we draw nigh once more to Him. There is a greater depth to being *in the presence of the Lord* than we may at first think. Is it so far-fetched, then, to realize that all of us are Jonahs at times – fleeing willingly from the Lord’s presence? I believe it is easy, and the reality of this danger should not be overlooked.

After Jonah set sail, “*the LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up*” (Jonah 1:4). If He chose to, God could have easily stopped Jonah from going on the ship, and He could have made Jonah go directly to Ninevah. Instead, He used His power to teach Jonah – to bring him to a knowledge of his sin. I wish God would intervene and show me *why* I have to go through certain trials – and then let me avoid them...but I have to submit to the thought that He may be letting me learn a lesson though I may mentally follow what Jonah did. God desires obedience — not a robotic following but a *willingness* and a *desire* in US to follow and obey His Word when He speaks.

Amazingly to me, while this is happening and the lives of the shipmates are threatened, Jonah “*had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep*” (Jonah 1:5b). Sound sleep is a characteristic of a clear conscience. I would think that if Jonah was troubled by his disobedience, he would have had fitful – if any – sleep. How often do we ignore our consciences? How often do we beseech the Lord to prick our conscience, and how much do we pray “*create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me*” (Psalm 51:10)? A conscience kept clear is tender and easily troubled. A guilty conscience needs to be tended to – the weeds in its furrows removed by repentance so that good fruit can grow again. If it isn’t dealt with, the weeds overrun it, and now we have a dead conscience. A dead conscience is dull to sin and can result in a life lived in deceit until by His grace, God awakens us with a trial. I’ve found that if I haven’t felt convicted in a while, I need to pray for it, because I’m in danger of nursing a dead conscience.

And when this happens in the life of a Believer, shouldn’t it be our heartfelt prayer to have someone near to care enough to ask, “*How is it that you are sleeping?*” (Jonah 1:6a) In this instance, Jonah, deadened to a stinging conscience and at that moment the consequence of his actions, awakes to the astonished ship’s captain. It’s an excellent question that could easily be asked of us all from time to time. As Believers, we should be able to – gently and lovingly – both reach out and accept another’s helpful boost back on track.

Jonah wasn’t at a loss for the cause of the storm. Likewise, we know (as does all mankind) and cannot forget the righteousness and holiness of our God. “Christians” can water it down, cushion it with love and giggles, and walk around hugging people bound for hell, but everyone will fall down before the throne of God, whether it be the Judgment Seat of Christ or the Great White Throne. I think Jonah knew without a doubt his sin and the consequence. When he told

his shipmates straight out, *"I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land"* (Jonah 1:9), they were struck with fear and *"knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them"* (vs. 10). And they asked a GREAT question: *"How could you do this?"* (vs. 10) How patient God is: to know precisely when and how we'll stray and yet never forsake us. We blunder through our sin and trials and wonder ourselves, *How could we have done this?* Yet His kindness is constant and unconditional.

How? His plan goes on despite our stumbles. His purpose is not usually clear to us, and that seems almost unbearable to accept sometimes. But in the case of Jonah, His ultimate plan also included the ship captain and his crew. After Jonah bid them toss him overboard, the crew tried to row to shore but to no avail. Then they cried out to God for their safety, adding, *"for You, O LORD, have done as You have pleased"* (Jonah 1:14b). They threw Jonah into the sea, and the Scripture says, *"Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows"* (Jonah 1:16). Despite Jonah's disobedience, the Lord used this for His glory and brought these men to belief in Him. It might help us as Believers that our trials may be for another's sake. Perhaps our struggle and resurrection from that struggle could point others to His power and grace. It's difficult to keep that in focus, and from personal experience, it's most often because struggles cause our focus to remain that way on US. Why is God allowing *me* to suffer this? Why won't He raise *me* from this?

The first chapter of Jonah draws to a close with verse 17: *"the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights."* Jonah's actions did not take God by surprise or cause Him to scramble for a second option. His sovereignty is evident here. He knew Jonah would disobey and used this to show Jonah His omniscience and to show the ship's crew His omnipotence.

The rest of Jonah's account is familiar to us all. After three days, God appointed the fish to spit Jonah out, and Jonah headed to Nineveh (though he had to learn another lesson there, too!). What I found extraordinary about the book of Jonah is that just in this first chapter, we find the essence of the Gospel and a foreshadowing of Christ's work – both on the cross and out of the empty grave. And just as God delivered Jonah out from the fish's belly, so He also raises us from the miry pit of sin we're in, whether it is a life of death in sin (as in the unbeliever) or in a trial or backslidden state (as in the Believer).

Indeed, no matter how entrenched in sin or how much we have strayed down our own path, God has the power and the desire to bring us back to communion with Him. It may not just be a gentle reminder. The call back to a right relationship with Him can be painful and humiliating beyond degree. Sometimes bringing us up from sin requires His disciplining us. Although it's easier said than done, we ought to be grateful for God's just discipline. The writer of Hebrews wrote, *"Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness"* (Hebrews 12:9-11). This is not to say that all trials we face are on account of sin we are being punished for, and we should not be as Job's friends to our fellow brethren who are struggling. We personally, however, upon encountering a trial, should be reminded to examine our relationship to the Lord. The Bible speaks about Biblical discipline – what would this be if not trials that draw us back to Him? Instead of being punished, however, we are being *chastened* – a loving reminder to set our focus on Him again.

Jonah had an experience that likely trumped all other experiences he'd ever had. It wasn't easy and definitely not pleasant, but it was worth it – because through God's direction and discipline, He drew Jonah back into obedience. His raising us from the mire back into a relationship with Him won't always be painless and most certainly will require humility on our part, but praise be to the Lord Who hears our cry and does not leave us wallowing in the muck!

*"I called on Your name, O LORD, ... You drew near when I called on You; You said, 'Do not fear!' O Lord, You have pleaded my soul's cause; You have redeemed my life"*  
(Lamentations 3:55a, 57-58).