

The Lakeview Lamp

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”-Psalm 119:105

August 22, 2004

The Belly of the Whale Bryce Embry

When the storms of life come and the days look dark, be prepared. Things may soon be worse.

That is the way it was for Jonah. It started with a very unpleasant mission from God, one he dreaded so much that he tried to run away from God to avoid doing it. Certainly, this was a low point in Jonah's life; and then it got worse. Trying to flee on a ship, Jonah soon found his boat being tossed around in a massive storm. Suddenly, that low point in his life had sunk even lower. The frightened crew of the ship did not know what was wrong, but Jonah knew; and he knew the only way to calm the storm was if he left the ship. Unfortunately, the only way to leave the ship was to be thrown into the water. Realizing this was their only hope of surviving the storm, the ship's crew relented and threw Jonah overboard. Jonah's life now seemed even bleaker than before. How could it get any worse?

And that was when Jonah was swallowed by a giant fish. The man whose life had gone from bad to worse was suddenly facing his darkest days, literally. For three days he was in the belly of that fish, surviving only by the grace of God. During that time he had no light, no hope, and perhaps a yearning to die and be done with it. Yet God let him live inside that whale, alone and desperate, until Jonah cried to God for help.

The same pattern seems to emerge among many of God's faithful. Joseph's life was always tinged with a degree of discomfort as he was despised by his brothers. Then things got worse, and he was thrown in a pit. His life became darker as he was sold into slavery and then reached bottom as he was forgotten in a cell in prison. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego went from being captives away from their homeland, to outlaws, to convicted felons being hoisted into a burning furnace. Daniel, Hosea, Jeremiah, Peter, and so many

others have faced similar times, when the storms of life grew progressively darker until they, too, found themselves in the belly of the whale.

It seems that all of us end up traveling this path during our lives. Our life takes a turn for the worse, and the storms of life start tossing us around. Maybe we cry out for help, maybe we don't; but we know that things are out of our control, and we are scared. Then things go from bad to worse. Suddenly we are not only caught in a storm, but are washed overboard into the water, and we are struggling just to stay afloat. It seems that life can get no worse, when suddenly we are swallowed by a great creature and dragged to the bottom of the sea. We are so low now, and so far from all that is familiar and comfortable, that we do not know how long we can survive. We cannot even see the light anymore, we are so wrapped in darkness, and we have no idea how long we will be in this terrible darkness or how long we can last. It is the belly of the whale, and we all seem to end up there at some time.

The belly of the whale is not a pleasant place to be at all. None of us desires to go there, and those of us who have sunk to that level only wish to get away from it. It is a truly horrifying place, and yet it is also an amazing place. It is there that God shows his power and works wonders. No human can survive in the belly of a whale, dragged down to the bottom of the ocean, sloshing around with seaweed around his head. Alone, a person would simply die shortly after being swallowed. And yet, Jonah survived. Not by his own power, but because God was there to keep him alive when there was nothing else that could. God did the same thing for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego when they were thrown in the furnace, and for Daniel when he was thrown in the lion pit. When we reach our lowest point, it is God who can sustain us, and pull us back up to the light.

Knowing God is with us does not make the belly of the whale more pleasant, or the pain any less real. But it does give us hope, the assurance that in due time God will give us glory again, and perhaps the comfort that there is a reason for us being in this belly of the whale. Perhaps, like Jonah, we need to stop running from God and turn back to him. Or maybe our pride needs to be brought low, or other impurities burned off. The belly of the whale, as deep and dark as it is, may be the method God uses to discipline us. God has told us not to despise his discipline, and not to lose heart when he rebukes us, for the Lord disciplines those he loves and punishes everyone he accepts as his son. Therefore, we may need to face the belly of the whale, and all its hardships, as God's discipline, remembering that God is treating us as true children. No discipline

seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:5-11).

For each of us, this belly of the whale is a bit different. For me it was a year in which I lost my job, took my eight month pregnant wife to live at my parent's house, and tried to find a way to start a new life, only to find myself unemployed and standing in line for an unemployment check one year later. I needed the lessons in humility that I learned during that period, and I am so thankful that God took me through it, but I do not desire to return there again. For others the belly of the whale involves physical illness, or losing earthly possessions, or any number of other forms. It is different for each of us, because God knows what lessons we each need to learn and how to best reach us. But no matter what form this dark time in our life takes, God is always there to support us and insure that we make it through.

Each of us will face storms in our lives. When they come, remember that these storms may get worse, and eventually we may find ourselves in the belly of the whale, in the deepest darkness, without light, without hope, and scared. There is little joy in these times, but comfort in knowing that God is with us, that God is in control, and that all things work together for good for those who love the Lord (Romans 8:28). Eventually the whale will vomit us back onto the shore, but, by the power of God, our lives will never be the same again.

“In You, O Lord, I put my trust; let me never be put to shame.”—Psalm 71:1

Lakeview church of Christ
132 New Shackle Island Road
P.O. Box 514
Hendersonville, TN 37077
(615) 824-1376

Bible Call: 824-1310
www.BibleSaints.com

Troy Nicholson
troyjenn@bigzoo.net

"This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24).