

JESUS CAN, SO I SURRENDER +++

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Well, good morning, church. Welcome back to Sinners Anonymous. I'm Zach, lead sinner in the group. It's good to have you back. We're in week two of a six-week Sinners Anonymous support group. Last week, we acknowledged that we were all sinful. We also kind of opened up two different things. We opened up the Word of God. For these six weeks, we're doing a deep dive into the book of Jonah in the Old Testament, and we're taking a unique look at it through the lens of Alcoholics Anonymous, specifically the 12 steps that are a part of this program that has helped millions upon millions upon millions of people.

And so last week, we introduced why the 12 steps are important for us, that they're not just for people whose lives are on fire, for those that are addicted, but actually these steps are really biblical principles that all sinners can use and be really helpful. And we introduced Jonah chapter one and landed in step one. So let's kind of review really quickly where we went. By the way, if you missed the message, you can watch it in its entirety on our website and on our YouTube channel.

So let's see how well you heard last week. God called the prophet to go to Nineveh. So God said, go, and Jonah said, wow, you didn't even need a prompt on the screen for that. Good job. God said, go east and Jonah went. God said, go to Nineveh and Jonah tried to go to, oh good, you even got some Tarshish in there. Very good. And he was running away from God and he got on a boat and there's this massive storm that came and in the midst of that storm, they realized that Jonah is the reason they're in this mess. And actually Jonah came to a point where he said, this is my fault. And the sailors didn't want to, tried hard not to, but eventually had to throw Jonah overboard as they made their way. And we left Jonah powerless, sinking, dying, but devoured by a great fish. Today we get inside of that fish and we see what happened.

So last week we got to the end of the message and we landed in step one of the 12 steps. And in this series, we're just replacing the word alcohol with sin. And so let's read step one together. It says, we admitted we were powerless over sin, that our lives had become unmanageable. If you boil it down to just two words, do you remember what those two words are? I can't, I can't, I can't control grit, power, and manage my way out of my sin. I need help. I know this is my fault. We landed in a powerless position, but in a place where we're admitting we need help. The truth that we learned is that the admission price into freedom, into healing, into recovery begins with an admission of our sin.

And so today we'll get into steps two and three, but really the life of a disciple is a complicated life and we're going to see that in Jonah. And where we're going to land is actually, I think a good summary, maybe the apostle Paul in Romans chapter seven, you know, Jesus has saved him, but he has this desire to want to do good. And yet the way he writes it is he says things like the good that I want to do, I don't do, but what I don't do that I do. And he lands the plane here. He says, what a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from the body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ, our Lord. And so that's where we're going to land today in steps two and three.

So if all we did was land in step one, okay. But now what? Right? I mean, cool. You're admitting you're powerless. Great. Now what? You're at rock bottom. Awesome to acknowledge that. It's good to be in a place where, where you're, you're thinking truthfully about things, but now what? And that's where steps two and three take us. And so let's read, let's read the steps one, two, three again together. By the way, if you ever find yourself in a recovery group, there is so much reading and out loud talking in these groups.

And so let's read it together. Step one, again, we admitted we were powerless over sin, that our lives had become unmanageable. Number two, came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. And number three, made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him. If step one is I can't, step two is Jesus can, and step three is so I surrender. That's where we're headed today.

But let's go back to Jonah. Verse 17 is where we left him. It says, now the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. I like that word provided, it makes it sound nice. And I think we like God's provision when it's nice. We like to talk about when God provides an open door. We like to talk about how God provides financial blessing when we were low. We don't like to talk about in testimony time about how God provided a storm that blew our life apart. God provided a fish. Jonah's drowning, he's dying, he's sinking, and God sends a dark, disgusting, smelly rescue opportunity his way.

But when you're at rock bottom, don't your prayers change? When you're not at rock bottom, it's like, God, just keep providing for me. I don't care. This is how I want you to provide and you kind of tell God how you want him to provide for you. Anybody ever been there? But then when you're at rock bottom, you're kind of praying prayers like, God, I actually don't care how you get me out, it's just please, or get me whatever you got to do. Break me if you have to, but just get me out of here. And sometimes God's provision doesn't look like God's provision because it arrives in packaging you didn't expect. A fish? A smelly, large fish? Really God?

When we are stuck in sin or compulsive behavior, sometimes, well, first off, we try to fight it, right? I can manage my way out. I can get out. Step one says, no, you can't. Sometimes the best provision comes with somebody willing to tell you the truth. In addiction circles, it's actually when your loved ones circle around you in an intervention and say, we love you too much for you to keep destroying your life. Sometimes his provision looks like you getting caught so that you can get well.

This was true in my story. I'll read a little bit about this, but maybe not details, that when I graduated from college, I was 21. My wife and I had been married for four months and we moved to St. Louis. And eight months later, we would start, I would start seminary. And I really lost my way in those eight months. I loved at college playing poker with some friends, and I no longer had friends. And Allison didn't really want to play poker with me, heads up. And so I, it was kind of a new thing, but I got into the world of online poker and at first I started winning and that feels really good. And so I started playing for more and then all of a sudden I'd stopped winning and you know what happened? I started losing.

And in order to kind of get back to even, that was always like, let me just get back to even. And I was praying for God's provision. I was like, God, here's how I want you to provide for me. I know I'm not doing what I should be doing. I know I'm wasting some money. So why don't God? Why doesn't your

provision like, let me get back to even, and then I'll stop doing it as if I had the control to actually do that. And I didn't have control. It was really competitive and I would lose more and more and all of a sudden after a month or so, I had lost \$10,000 as a 21 year old, brand new married. And I wish I could tell you that I felt really guilty and I confessed and I sought forgiveness but that's not true. I was caught. I was confronted. And I remember having to share the embarrassment, the deep guilt, which I should have felt because it was wrong. The hiding had to confess up to the embarrassment. The person I felt the worst for was my wife of like four months in and this is already, this is what you got. We made vows to one another. And as I was caught and did come to confession and hear their words of forgiveness, I then got into more conversations with my family, talked about the things I did and was ashamed and was embarrassed. I wish I could tell you that I came to that on my own, but I didn't. I was caught and I didn't like getting caught.

Sometimes God's provision doesn't look like his provision because it comes in packaging you don't expect. I now view that as God's grace looking after me, that I was caught and thank God I was because who knows where I would have kept going had I not, because I couldn't control it. I couldn't manage it. I'm grateful that I got caught and that there were things and people in my life that cared about me enough. Sometimes you get so far down that I don't care how you save me, God, just get me out of this. Maybe you've been there. That's the fish. The fish smells terrible. It looks like death, but it's life.

So what happens inside the fish? Before we get into that, chapter two is, well, I want to address something because this is where people really get hung up on the story of Jonah. You've maybe heard it from others, really a fish swallowed a guy. I'm not sure that scientifically that can happen. And some of you like, you're even like, I don't know, pastor, this, this story just sounds fishy to me. It's what's hard for me to swallow. Sometimes expect me to kind of just sit back and take it hook line and sinker. This feels like a whale of a tale.

I had to add the fourth so that you knew it wasn't chat GPT. They only give it in things of three, but I probably shouldn't do too many fish puns. Otherwise this sermon and me will just flounder. And that's not what I want. My point is I understand why people struggle with this story. It's ridiculous. Some think it's allegory. Some think it's a parable. Some think it's simply a religious story kind of taught to design and teach a lesson. And so I love how Martin Luther says it because it's real. Martin Luther says the story of the prophet Jonah is so great that it is almost unbelievable. Yes, it even sounds like a lie and more full of nonsense than any poet's fable. If it were not in the Bible, I'd consider it a silly lie. Because if one thinks about it, Jonah was three days in the huge belly of the whale where he could have been digested in three hours and changed into the flesh and blood of the whale. In comparison with this miracle, the wonder at the Red Sea was nothing.

It's hard to believe, but let me tell you why I believe and why I believe you should believe in the story of Jonah. And it is simply this one reason, because Jesus believes in Jonah. Did you know that when they were looking for a sign and they asked Jesus for a sign, here's what Jesus said in Matthew chapter 12. He said, for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Jesus connects his ministry to this fool named Jonah. And let's think about it, right? Our faith, yeah, it's a little ridiculous, but our faith, does it not ask us to believe in pretty outrageous things that we are called to believe that the God who created the world stepped into this world, into his creation and most miraculously conceived in a virgin named Mary and lived a sinless life and died and was crucified and was buried. And somehow actually like Jonah was spat out of a whale, kind of himself erupted out of the grave on the third day. Do you

believe that? You're crazy. Why do you believe that? Because the Holy Spirit has given you the faith to believe in Jesus. And if you believe in Jesus, you believe in Jonah.

So how many of you believe that this is real? A few of you are still, I'm not sure, scientifically, I don't know if the diameter of the, anyway. I think there's like a major motion picture coming out later this month called like whale something that's going further into this, but anyway. My point is we believe in some pretty wild stuff because God gives us the faith to believe. And I'm okay believing that the same God that can create the world can handle a large fish and one of his unruly prophets inside of that fish for three days.

So Jonah's inside of this fish for three days and three nights. That's a long time to be by yourself with your thoughts. I like the French philosopher Blaise Pascal 400 years ago said, all of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone. I don't think he thought about what it would be like to be in a fish alone. You got no iPhone, no Netflix, no Spotify. You don't even have a U version Bible app in there. How would you do? Nobody else to impress, nobody else to blame. And I think that's actually okay because at some point, and maybe it was early on and maybe it was often, but at some point Jonah prayed.

And so let's take a look at his prayer. Chapter two, verse one from inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God. He said, 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. And this is step two. Jonah has already discovered step one. I am powerless. But now he is saying in my distress, in my powerlessness, I called to what I called to the Lord. Jonah realizes I cannot rescue myself. I cannot pay my way out of this. I cannot, turns out the wheel didn't talk my language. I can't talk my way out of this. I can't swim my way out of this. And so I'm calling on the Lord. So I can't, but I know someone who can. His name is Jesus, the Lord.

Now did you catch this? It's a beautiful prayer that we're going to look in, but I need to tell you something before we get even deeper into the prayer that some of you may not quite understand. It's something that is really powerful that happens over and over and over and over, not only in the book of Jonah, but in your life, that some people think that the way God responds to us is like, I don't know, we fall into a pit big enough and we start yelling loud enough. And then God comes. But I want you to see that you have a God that provides first. That before Jonah ever prayed, God provided a fish. God provides first. This is the gospel. It's not, my life was a little bit messy or really messy and I cleaned myself up and I got my theology straight and then I said yes to God. No, no, no, no, no, no. God provides first. God provides first every time. You don't have to clean. This is the gospel. You don't have to clean yourself up. You don't have to behave a certain way. And then God comes to you and says, good job, son. You did great. Now inherit eternal life with me. No, God comes while you were still a mess. Romans 5 says, while we were still sinners, God demonstrated his love for us in this, that he would die a death for you and for me. God provides first. And maybe you thought that you being here today was something that you thought up. But I want you to know you're not here by accident. Because before you ever thought you'd come here today, God already had a message provided for you that you needed to hear.

So Jonah prays. He says, you hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me. All your waves and your breakers swept over me. He keeps going. 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. Words you just read were the deep, beneath, down, depths. That's what you need to know. That every time you sin, every time you run away from God, it may feel good in the moment. It might be easier in the moment. Sin often does make you feel good and often is easier in the moment to choose, but it always takes you down. And you do it enough, you'll be at rock bottom. And this is where Jonah is.

But then he says this, but you, Lord, my God brought my life up from the pit. Jonah goes down, but God, he's already brought him up and Jonah believes you can bring me up from the pit again. And that is really what God does. We have something incredible about our God that when we go down, God comes down to get us. He doesn't leave us on our own. Jesus comes down. Philippians 2, I love the down language that it gives us of Jesus. It says that, that God, Jesus did not consider equality with God, something to be grasped. So what did he do? It says that rather he made himself nothing by taking on the form of a human and not just a human, but a servant and not just a servant, but one obedient to death and not just any death, but even death on a cross. Our God goes down as far as he needs to go down in order to get you. And by the way, he would go even further down. He would descend all the way down into hell and for three days, he would proclaim victory even over that, that no matter how far down you've come, I've got rescue for you to come up. Anybody grateful for that? Amen. When we go down, God comes down to get us. He is the higher power greater than ourselves.

And this is where I think Christians can say something really beautiful about step two. Let's read step two. Again, it's come to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. And we know that that power has a name. His name is Jesus. And I understand that that language, I understand why that's there. It's got to be broad enough to meet a variety of backgrounds, to help people that are genuinely trying to find hope and healing and recovery. But our power has a name, a name that came down into this world. John says that the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. And that's one of the things that makes our higher power, our religion remarkable and stand out.

And so I want to be careful and respectful as I say this, because there's a lot of people that are sincere, that are believing in other higher powers. And every other way to get to their higher power or encounter or experience their higher power is far different from what Christianity claims. In Buddhism, the central question isn't how do you get to be in a personal relationship with the creator God, but the path is toward you becoming enlightened through how well you're awakened and how well you can overcome and kind of become this attached to this world and make it through suffering, that then you'll experience your higher power at a greater level. In Hindu traditions, there's many paths to ultimate reality, but essentially it's through how devoted you are, through knowing the right things, through saying the right things and doing the right things, then you'll encounter your higher power. Islam literally means submission. And so in Islam, it's a Muslim seeks to submit their life to Allah through the writings of the Quran and how you experience Allah and higher power is very much based on how well you submit to his teachings.

Whereas Christianity has an enormous difference to all of this that says, it's not about what you do. It's about what God has done already. And what did God do? God came looking for you. The heart of Christianity is not humans trying to figure out how to climb higher, just high enough so that we can reach God. No, the heart of Christianity says, no matter how far down you got, no matter how far down you are, that God's arm is not too short to save you, to rescue you and to pull you up and bring you to the place where he called you to be. That's our step to, yeah, we start with, I can. But we know through

the cross, Jesus can. We start with an I can't, that might feel strong, but Jesus's can is stronger and greater than your can't, amen? He is our higher power.

Jonah keeps praying. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Probably the only redeeming quality about Jonah in this entire book that makes him look like a fool is what's happening right now. He's praying and he's actually, if you read through it and study it, there's actually a lot of Psalms that he is quoting back to God in his prayer. And I think that's really cool. For all the knocks we're going to have on Jonah in this series, Jonah knows his scripture. And I think that's pretty sweet. And I just wanted to ask you, like when you're down, when you're out, when you're at rock bottom, or how about when life squeezes you, what comes out? I like that in Jonah, at least the word of God came out. He's crying out the Psalms. And I want you to know that no matter where you are and where your rock bottom is or where you're at on the path, you can cry out to God right here and right now. You can cry out from your seat. You can cry out from your hospital bed. You can cry out from rehab. You can cry out from wherever our God is. And again, his ear, the Bible says, is not too dull to hear your cries. When life squeezes you, what comes out? Do you know God's word well enough that when you got nothing, you got no Netflix, you got no you version Bible app. It's just you inside of a fish for three days. What's coming out? Let's get to know God's word.

He continues 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 and I will say salvation comes from the Lord. What Jonah is doing here is what we do a lot of times with God. When we start making deals with God, you know, God, however, you get me out of this. We start making vows and we start saying, God, if you get me out of this, then I'm going to man, I'm going to read my Bible every day. I'll never miss a Sunday at church. I'm going to, I'm going to read through the whole Bible in a month. God, I'll spend every hour. Just get me out of this, God. And I will do whatever it is you call me to do. Jonah's making vows. This is God. You get me out of this. I'll do. I will shout with grateful praise. I will sacrifice what I vowed. I'm going to make good on this promise. And I will tell people this salvation comes from the Lord. It's what you and I do. We make vows. And you know what happens to Jonah and you know what happens to you and me? We don't fulfill those vows.

We say what we need to, to get out of the difficult situation. And once we're out of it, it was like, well, you know, I mean, I didn't really mean like I'd read the Bible every day, you know, God, if you get me out of this, I will stop doing this. God, if you get me, I will start doing this. God, if you just get me, get me back to even in my poker days, I'll stop. Nobody has to know. Okay. Jonah wouldn't be faithful. He sounds like a really faithful guy at the end of chapter two, but we've got two more chapters to look at this buffoon in chapters three and four. They're coming and it's not pretty for Jonah, but he's got a really great moment where he's surrendering to God and he ends it really well. He says, I will say salvation comes from the Lord. Salvation comes from the Lord. It's beautiful. It's a great ending in recovery communities. They'll say things like one day at a time, one day at a time, progress, not perfection. I think some of us, we crave the moment and I'm not, I'm not not celebrating that you can have a moment, but what I am saying is a moment is not enough to sustain you forever. That there are times when God comes to you and you encounter God and it's a beautiful experience and his grace comes upon you and thank you, God, I surrender and I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that. That's beautiful. I love that your hearts get there. I love that your desire is there. I love that your intent is there. I've been there too. I've said the things and I've done the things and I know the very next day I'll fail. But it's not about perfection. It's about progress. That's recovery. That's discipleship.

And the final verse, and the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. It's one of the great endings of a chapter, isn't it? We got everything. We got some redemption in here. We got some repentance and we even got a little regurgitation at the end. So ironic reading through the book of Jonah, everybody and everything is really obedient to God throughout except for Jonah. You've got probably a whale, if not a whale, a really large fish obeying God. You've got the sea, the wind, the storm, even the atheist sailors from the first chapter become believers and obey God. And the only one that doesn't, and you're going to see this, especially in the weeks ahead is Jonah. But how cool that God rescued him at his rock bottom and regurgitated him out. And we're going to see what happens next in his story next week.

But let's come back to the steps one more time. If step one is I can't. Step two is Jesus can. And step three is so I surrender. Here's the actual words. Let's read them together. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him. If you've been in Lutheran circles for a little while, this one's a little, you feel a little squirmish because Lutherans don't like that word decision. Because anytime anything spiritual rests on you and your decision, you know, that takes that takes it off of God and places it on you. And I want you to hear again. I've said it multiple times already in the sermon that you will not be saved by yourself. You can't, but Jesus can. But after Jesus saves you, it's not for your salvation. Salvation only comes from the Lord. Jonah said that too. Even Jonah said that right. Salvation only comes from the Lord. There's nothing you can say. There's nothing you can decide. There's nothing that you can do that will gain you salvation. God gives that to you as a free gift. In fact, remember how I said God provides first first Corinthians 12 verse three says that nobody can say nobody can decide Jesus is Lord except by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so what came first, your decision or the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit? It's a gift given to you by God. And that order is really important because if you mix that up and think that you decided without the power of the Holy Spirit, well now you've put your eternal salvation on you. And that's a really scary thing. The reason why it needs to stay in this order is because if it's God's gift to me, then I can be confident when I do good and when I do bad, I can be confident when I make great bold vows to God and I still fall on my face, I can be confident that my salvation is not from me, it's from Jesus.

But after we realize I can't and not only he can, but he did and he is, then it's, yeah, I want to give my life to this God. I want to surrender every, I do want to make vows. I want to be faithful. I want to follow you to the best of my ability. And so I'll do this and I'll do that and all, because I want to, because it's beautiful what you've done for me. And I think there's this truth that sometimes in Christianity we stop, but what we're going to see in Jonah is the same that's true for you is that God doesn't, isn't simply rescuing you from something. He's rescuing you for something. He doesn't just take Jonah from the fish and spit him out. He's got a job for Jonah to do. And you know what the job for Jonah to do is? It's kind of funny. We're going to get it next week. The same thing he said no to the first time. So Jonah's like, I want to give everything. I want to do it again. I'm, I'm for you. I'm with you. And then God says, okay, let's do what I originally told you to do. And Jonah's like, oh man, something else, please. But no, our heart is there. After God's been so good, we want to, we want to do everything that we can. God has saved you for something.

And that's really beautiful because the from something, the from something gives you the confidence to know that your seat in eternity is secured because of what Jesus can and what Jesus did do. Amen. But the for something is where so many people don't get to. It's like that, that, that not only that, that you sit now with, and you walk and you run in this world with that confidence that my heavenly seat is

secured. And so, so I'm, I'm built here. I'm, I'm made here. I was, I was fearfully and wonderfully designed and made for these days for such a time as this to, to, to my days matter. My, my years are important and what I do, I got purpose in this world to follow Jesus and to let everybody else know, everybody else who's walking around. I can't to let them know that Jesus can and Jesus did, and I want to do, and you want to do everything right. Possibly that we can to let people know that. Amen. Amen.

So I want to stand up here today and I want to go back to our posture of where we started last week. If you would put your hands to the side and if you would kind of roll those shoulder blades back just a little bit to get your hands a little behind you in a more powerless position, kind of stand with your feet at shoulder length. I can't. We started the series by saying, hi, my name is, and we put our name in that blank and I am a sinner. So I'd like to return there again and on the count of three, let's say that together. Hi, my name is Zach and I am a sinner. I can't, I can't. Raise your hands here, but Jesus can, go ahead and say that, but Jesus can. Raise them up here. So I surrender. Follow me here. Come on. I can't, Jesus can. So I surrender. I can't, Jesus can. So I surrender. I can't, Jesus can. So I surrender.

And so God, we love you. We thank you for what only you can and did do for us at the cross. And God, we do vow to do the best that we can, to make good on the things that we say we're going to do. And we thank you that even when we fail, we don't need to lack confidence that your grace won't find us and restore us again, progress, not perfection. One day at a time. God, we're, we're on this journey with you and we thank you that as we're on this journey with you, we don't ever walk alone, that your Holy Spirit guides us along the way. God, anyone that's fighting sin right now, anybody that's at rock bottom, may, may they hear these words even more today, that Jesus loves you, that you are not too far down, that God cannot rescue you, that just take his hand right now. Jesus can, Jesus did, Jesus saves you. God provided for you before you even knew it. His grace is for you. His can is stronger than your can't. So God, we love you and we thank you that you are here with us in this moment. We praise you, Jesus, and all of God's people together said, amen, amen.