

## Jonah 1:17-2:10

Jonah 1 dramatically displays both the wreckage that sin causes and God's determination to reach his people (both individually and nations). Sin will not stop Him. God even used Jonah's disobedience to display Himself to a group of pagan sailors who would never have worshipped Him were it not for Jonah's sin that put him on their boat.

When we left the story, however, the sailors were worshipping the Lord on the boat and Jonah was underwater, on his way to a watery death as the just punishment for his sin.

But God...

**And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.**

This is the famous moment—a giant fish swallows a grown man. Is it myth or truth? We mentioned in the last section that Jesus' reference to this story as history is convincing evidence that the story happened. As to whether it is possible for a fish to swallow a man, research has shown that various sea creatures, such as a sperm whale, certainly have the mouth, throat, and stomach size necessary to hold a man and have been known to swallow whole squids that are larger than men.

At the same time, however, it is helpful to remember that the God who created all creatures and the entire universe with a spoken word would certainly not have trouble creating a single fish for this purpose. If you can believe Jesus rose from the dead and made blind men see in an instant, you can certainly believe a fish can swallow a man. Let's not get so focused on the great fish that we forget the great God whose care is so great that He will task a fish to rescue one of His people.

The word "appointed" is clear in this sense. Just as the Lord sent a storm, He sends a fish here to swallow Jonah. To ancient Hebrews, the sea was chaotic and uncontrollable. They spoke with mystery and awe about the great sea creatures like the Leviathan (cf. Job 41:1). God, however, directs what seems chaotic and uncontrollable. All things perform his bidding.

**Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the stomach of the fish**

In all likelihood, the recorded prayer is Jonah's post-fish summary of a series of prayers while in the fish. (If you were in a fish, you'd probably pray more than once, too). Note, however, that the entire prayer we read was offered inside the fish. This is not a prayer of deliverance once he is safely on dry ground, but a prayer of deliverance that he is not dead in the water but alive in the fish. At this point he has been saved from death but not yet saved to life.

Still, Jonah is willing to pray. Back on the boat, the pagan sailors were praying and had to awaken Jonah to pray with them. Here in the fish, however, Jonah is finally struck to the core enough that he prays. In most cases, distress will push you to prayer much more quickly than its much-appreciated cousin prosperity will. What about you and me? Do overwhelming situations push us to pray and does great care push us to thanksgiving?

Jonah will spend three days and three nights in the fish—a fact that is significant for two reasons. First, ancient people often believed a journey to the underworld took three days, so it was as if Jonah had gone to death and back. Second, and more significantly, Jonah here foreshadows Jesus, who said he would spend three days and three nights in the darkness of death as well. It is a foreshadowing because Jesus experienced true death, and he went for the sin of others, and not for his own sin.

One appropriate way to read this prayer is from the perspective of Jesus. Just as one can read Psalm 22 (“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”) in its entirety to see something of Jesus’ experience on the cross, we can read Jonah’s prayer here to learn something of Jesus’ experience in the tomb. It is not exact, of course, but there is foreshadowing here. Closing in on the depths of death, Jesus spoke confidently of God’s salvation.

**And he said, “I called out of my distress to the Lord, and He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice. For You had cast me into the deep into the heart of the seas, and the current engulfed me, all Your breakers and billows passed over me. So I said, ‘I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple’.”**

Jonah begins his prayer with the back and forth that will typify the entire prayer. The prayer sets a very clean contrast between what was and what is. The cry of “I called out of my distress to the Lord” is balanced with “He answered me.” Five times in eight verses a contrast is set up (“Nevertheless I...”, “But you...”, “But I...” )

Jonah describes the terror that overcame him as he sunk under the waves. He was in “distress” and in “the depth of Sheol” (Sheol is the Hebrew term for the place of the dead). He was engulfed by the seas as the waves went over him. Imagine the panic of drowning; this is what Jonah felt.

His greatest concern, however, was that God had turned his back on him. As one commentator notes, the man who turned his back on God is now terrified that God has done the same to him. He recognizes that it was God (not the sailors) who had ultimately cast him into the sea and he cries out, fearing that he had been “expelled” from God’s sight. Even though he had sinned against God, God’s presence was his only hope. God had sent him into this distress, and God is the only one who can rescue.

Jonah’s experience is new in one sense but simply a different verse of the same song. Job said, “Though he slay me, I will hope in him” (Job 13:15). The Israelites used to sing as they approached the temple, “If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.” (Psalm 130:3-4). Abraham, Joseph, Gideon, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many others voice these moments of despair to the Lord. People who follow the Lord have these moments (Jesus said his soul was sorrowful to death. Paul writes that he and his friends despaired of life itself), but the despair is paired a reminding of oneself that God is still our only hope.

In particular, Jonah’s prayer sounds similar to several psalms, most particularly Psalm 18:4-6 (“The cords of death encompassed me, and the torrents of ungodliness terrified me. The cords of Sheol surrounded me...In my distress I called upon the Lord.”) Living over 200 years after David, Jonah likely knew this psalm, and as Matthew Henry noted centuries ago,

what the psalmist David described metaphorically after a battle, Jonah experienced literally. The Word of God came alive to Jonah, and he used words and imagery familiar to him to describe his own situation.

**Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head. I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars was around me forever, but you have brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God. While I was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple.**

Again, there is a back and forth here, as Jonah recounts the despair he felt as he sunk beneath the waves countered by the relief and joy he experienced by God's rescue. The prayer poetically describes his descent and describes the fear that was over him.

There is good news, here, though. Jonah is as far from God as an ancient Israelite could go—separated first by sin and then by the great chaos of the sea, but God still hears his prayer. For when Jonah remembered the Lord, God did the opposite of Jonah earlier and turned to listen. In Isaiah 38:17, King Hezekiah prays, stating that the Lord keeps him from the “pit of destruction” only by casting his sins behind His back. In the same way, the Lord overlooks Jonah's sin here and chooses to rescue him, pulling his life from the pit. In all honesty, it is unclear how repentant Jonah was for his sin as he fell through the waves, but he cried out and the Lord answered.

This is good news for us, too. If God gives hope to Jonah, he will give hope to us. If God gave hope to Adam, who plunged the world into sin and death, he will give hope to us. Jonah did not want to extend mercy to Nineveh but God willingly extended mercy to Jonah, who had declared himself God's enemy. As Mark Dever notes, Jonah is in this sense a clear picture that God completely judges sin and also completely offers forgiveness.

In Psalm 51:17, David declares, “A broken and contrite heart You will not despise” and Isaiah 57:15 declares that God dwells on a high and holy place but also “with the contrite and lowly of spirit.” One of the things that we know God will do is answer the prayer of the repentant heart. Every. Single. Time. He cannot stay away from the repentant heart for to do so would be to deny his forgiving nature.

The image of the “temple” is obviously a significant one in the Old Testament. In verse 4, Jonah prayed that he would look again to the temple and here he says that God heard him from his temple. 1 Kings 8 recounts King Solomon's prayer of dedication at the new temple and he asks that the Lord answer the prayers of those who look to the temple in repentance and faith. Jonah is praying much more than “I want to go to church again.” He is stating that he knows God dwells in a powerful way in the temple and that he prays to the God who dwells there.

**“Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness, but I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the Lord.” Then the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.**

Jonah concludes his prayer by turning his gaze away from the deep. First, he makes a comment that extends to all humanity—“those who regard vain idols forsake their

faithfulness” (other translations say “forsake their hope of steadfast love” or “forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”)

If we’re honest, it doesn’t sound that bad to “regard” something. But these are “vain idols,” a title also translated “empty vanities” or “empty empties.” When men and women worship idols, they are, in a sense, worshipping emptiness. He is finally declaring the truth that God would call him to declare over Nineveh—“Turn away from your idols! Don’t forsake what could be yours!”

As for Jonah himself, it doesn’t seem he bowed down and worshipped a visible idol, but to some degree, his sin of disobeying the voice of the Lord was the equivalent of bowing down to an idol. When we pay heed to materialism or unbridled ambition or the approval of others, we are, quite simply, regarding an idol, and every moment we regard an idol is a moment in which we display disloyalty to the Lord and turn our back on grace He wishes to offer us.

But that is no longer Jonah. He commits to sacrifice with thanksgiving and fulfill a vow. (His vow may or may not be to go to Nineveh if he escapes the fish). What is truly astounding here is that Jonah’s heart is so changed that he will commit to thanksgiving *while still in the fish*. Surely, thoughts cross his mind that he is on his way to a prolonged death. He is in the belly of a fish, where the temperature ranges from 104 to 108 degrees Fahrenheit and he is constantly surrounded by fluid and other fish food. Perhaps you would excuse some complaining attitude? But Jonah dwells in thanksgiving because the Lord has remembered him and he knows what he has been saved from.

It is this thanksgiving that indicates that Jonah’s despair is rooted in repentance and not simply in a plea for rescue. He is living out the answer to the question of Psalm 116:12-13—“What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits towards me? I shall lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord.” We can’t “pay back” God for his salvation but we can give him thanks.

This is the great message of Jonah 2. We will be overwhelmed in our lives—sometimes by the effects of our own sin and sometimes by external circumstances—but we must take our confusion and despair to the Lord. We must add to our guilt by saying, “God can’t love me. I’ve got to figure this out myself. I won’t even look to him.” It is fair and normal to be overwhelmed, but we must never forget how great a salvation God has already given us and in light of this reality, we offer him great thanksgiving and cling to him for the future.

Re-read the prayer with the perspective of a believer in Christ who has been saved from a lifetime of slavery to sin and Satan and an eternity without hope of God. Imagine a life filled with despair and loneliness and lacking love, joy and peace. The Lord has saved us from that existence and has adopted us into his family.

Finally, Jonah closes the prayer with the sentence “Salvation is from the Lord.” The truth of this phrase rings out from all of Scripture. We should see in Jonah’s story a picture of our own descent into sin and towards hell, but just in the nick of time, God saved us, not because of any merit of our own but because He set His love on us.

Now, Jonah is ready to preach, which is good because the fish vomits him back onto the land.

## Suggested Study Outline<sup>1</sup>

- I. Pray
- II. Backdrop—What's come before (recall last week)
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
  - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
  - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
  - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
  - d. Do you think Jonah is repentant for his sin as the chapter begins?
  - e. Does God always answer the cry of distress?
  - f. Read one of these Psalms—18, 22, 69, 88, 120, 130. What similarities you notice that help you understand how God's people interact with him?
  - g. Any guesses why God didn't save Jonah through something more conventional (e.g. a piece of wood)?
  - h. Talk about what you think Jonah experienced while in the fish.
  - i. Why is it tough for us to remember that a changed heart is a bigger miracle than a man swallowed by a fish?
- V. Application Questions
  - a. Describe your experience of experiencing the despair of sin, crying out to God and experiencing His salvation.
  - b. How are you at calling out to the Lord for help?
  - c. How are you at thanking the Lord for what he has done for you?
  - d. What are the worthless idols in your life that you cling to?
  - e. Jonah's story is meant to foreshadow Christ. Read this prayer from the perspective of Jesus. What do you notice?
  - f. Read this prayer from the perspective of yourself as someone who has been saved from sin. What do you notice?
  - g. Jonah's great fear seems to be that God would forget him, turn His back on him? Should that be a fear for us?
  - h. What is an appropriate response to the salvation God has given you?
  - i. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is that...
  - a. God's people will experience overwhelming situations. The proper response is to cry out to the Lord.
  - b. God does not turn His back on His people.
  - c. Mature faith is marked by a contentment that God is present and sees. Contentment finds its roots internally rather than externally.
- VIII. Pray

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<sup>1</sup> The questions here are suggestions. Pick the questions you want to use or create your own. The goal is to: 1) Get at the true meaning of the text; 2) Engage the student; 3) Push the student to apply the truth of the text. In addition, use sessions like this to ensure the student believes the Gospel and could study Scripture for himself/herself.

