

Jonah #2

In our previous study of Jonah, we saw how God called the Israelite prophet Jonah to preach against the Assyrian city of Nineveh. And how Jonah disobeyed God and got on a ship travelling over 2,000 miles in the opposite direction.

One of the themes of the talk was how Jonah made every effort to avoid doing what he knows God wants him to do. And I noted that Christians also regularly run away from what they know God wants them to do.

Of course, this doesn't usually involve us getting on a boat, but it often sees us avoiding anything related to our faith, including reading our Bibles and meeting with other Christians.

Another theme was how the non-Israelites in the story are more aware of and respectful to Jonah's God than Jonah is.

We have reached the point in the story where God has sent a tremendous storm that threatens to sink the ship that Jonah is on.

The crew have realised that Jonah is to blame for the storm, and Jonah has decided that his only option is to die, and has told the crew that the way to calm the storm will be to throw him out of the ship.

However, despite all this...

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the LORD, 'Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased.' Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

As we learned last time, the crew do all they can not to have to drown Jonah. But finally, in desperation they reluctantly throw him into the stormy waters.

And as Jonah sinks into the depths, the storm ceases.

The amazed and grateful sailors make sacrifices and vows to Jonah's God. And that's the last we hear of them in the story.

And Jonah, who thought that he had finally escaped from God... well, in a wonderful comedy turn, God provides a huge fish to swallow him.

The Hebrew reads more like 'God had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah.' You will notice in this story that God is always one step ahead of Jonah. There is no catching God by surprise.

When you say it out loud, it's obvious, but how often do we subconsciously think we can fool God? How often do we go about our lives doing things that if we saw someone else doing them, we'd be outraged?

The idea of God providing a fish to swallow Jonah troubles a lot of modern scholars. To some it proves that the Book of Jonah is not historical, that it is merely a fictional story.

Others spend a lot of time theorising whether it was a whale and not a fish. Apparently the only whale species with a throat wide enough to swallow a human is a sperm whale.

But whether a fish or a whale, what happens here is a miracle.

And for anyone who takes the God of the Bible seriously, this is just one of the many miracles that he has performed. He could have simply parted the sea and let Jonah walk back to the coast on dry ground. Or he could have let Jonah walk on the water.

But in this instance, God provides a fish. That a God who created the entire universe out of nothing could create an aquatic creature that could

swallow and sustain Jonah for 3 days is not something that should surprise us.

He might even have recruited Leviathan (remember Leviathan?) to do it, just to demonstrate how powerful he was.

The important thing is not what kind of fish God provided, but that God has rescued Jonah from drowning.

And when the amazed and confused Jonah realises that he is not dead, he does something he should have done a lot earlier.

Jonah prays...

*'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.
You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.'*

*'I said, "I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
towards your holy temple."*

*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 for ever.
But you, LORD my God,
brought my life up from the pit.'*

*‘When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, LORD,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.
‘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.
I will say, “Salvation comes from the LORD.”’*

Jonah 2:2-9

And at first hearing, it sounds pretty good.

There are echoes of portions of the Book of Psalms, where the writers thank God for rescuing them from danger.

But think for a moment about the person who is making these prayers.

In the light of what we’ve learned so far about Jonah, I’m going to suggest that the original hearers would have thought this was a terrible, inappropriate, hypocritical, self-righteous, dishonest prayer.

We know that not all prayers are good prayers. Jesus condemned the Jewish religious leaders for turning their prayers into showy displays of religious pride.

Too often we come to the Bible as a sort of ‘Dummies book on how to live the Christian life.’ We forget that it is a collection of books, written by different authors in a wide range of styles.

It features people, people who know they are imperfect, who serve as examples of how to live godly lives. And it also features people who think they have got things sorted, who serve as warnings of how not to behave.

And most of all it features a God who in all things ultimately works for the good.

The Book of Jonah is a story about a prophet who tries to run away from God, and of a God who is impossible to run away from.

With that in mind, let's examine Jonah's prayer more closely.

*'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.
You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.'*

Jonah 2:2-3

It opens with Jonah saying how he called to God when he was in distress. The second paragraph repeats the theme for emphasis.

But in the story so far, Jonah hasn't called out to God. He hasn't said anything to God. In fact, he has been putting as much distance as he possibly can between himself and God.

He continues with, 'You hurled me into the depths...'

Again, no.

Jonah told the crew to throw him into the sea.

It was Jonah's decision.

And, yes, God is ultimately in control of everything that happens, but Jonah has made it very clear that he's not interested in letting God being in control of **anything**.

And then he begins to pile on the agony, 'the currents swirled about me,' before invoking a verse that features in Psalm 42...

'all your waves and breakers swept over me.' (Psalm 42:7b)

The irony of this is that Psalm 42, the psalm from which we get the well known verse, ‘As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.’ (Psalm 42:1) is a prayer by a faithful Jew, exiled far away from Israel, lamenting the fact that they cannot worship God in the Jerusalem temple.

*‘I said, “I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
towards your holy temple.”*

*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 for ever.*

*But you, LORD my God,
brought my life up from the pit.’*

Jonah 2:4-6

And here is Jonah adopting the same stance.

The cheek!

‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple.’

Pur-lease!

Jonah banished **himself** from God’s sight.

Now, in fairness, the next two paragraphs do acknowledge that God has saved him from death. Which, of course, God has.

But then Jonah goes and ruins things again...

*‘When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, LORD,*

*and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.*

*‘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.

I will say, “Salvation comes from the LORD.”

Jonah 2:7-9

In the context of Jonah’s situation, this is pure, pious nonsense. There is no evidence that he prayed to God.

The ship’s crew, people who he says ‘cling to worthless idols’ did their best to save Jonah, and turned to God with sacrifices and praise when he stopped the storm.

Jonah’s whole prayer is just so ‘me, me, me.’

Jonah continues... ‘When **my life** was ebbing away, **I remembered** you, **my prayer** rose, **But I**, with shouts of grateful praise, What **I** have vowed **I** will make good. **I** will say...’

Jonah is pleased that he is alive, but he is still seeing everything from his perspective. There is no repentance here. No sorrow for disobeying God.

And there is no mention **anywhere** in Jonah that he **ever** made sacrifices to God. The pagan sailors did. Jonah the Hebrew prophet didn’t.

The final line of the prayer does at least say ‘Salvation comes from the LORD.’ However it rings rather hollow in the light of all that has just occurred. Jonah is grateful that God has saved him, but as we shall see, his vision of that salvation is severely limited.

God has saved Jonah, despite his continual disobedience.

The consistent theme of the story so far is of Jonah descending.

— He goes ‘down’ from to the port of Joppa.

— He goes ‘down’ into a ship.

— He goes ‘down’ to hide in the depths of the ship.

— And now he has gone ‘down’ into the depths of the sea.

And they are all as a direct result of Jonah’s decisions.

Meanwhile, the pagan sailors who he claims are clinging to worthless idols are making sacrifices to Jonah’s God while he composes a pious, self-centred, hypocritical prayer.

And the sailors who he says turn away from God’s love for them are busy making vows to Jonah’s God.

We need to be careful that we don’t emulate Jonah.

As I said earlier, Jesus has a particular dislike for self-righteous religious people. In the Gospel of Luke we read...

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

‘But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

‘I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

Luke 18:9-14

The irony of this story is that it is easy for us to look down on the Pharisee, confident that we are more righteous than he is. And yet there are times when we are more like the Pharisee than the tax collector.

Of course, the Pharisee was almost certainly a morally better person than the tax collector, and definitely more religious.

The Pharisee's problem is his attitude. His prayer is like Jonah's. It is performative and self-seeking.

“Look at me God (and anyone else who happens to be listening), see what an amazing person I am compared to this low life, good for nothing tax collector.”

Our prayers may not be as openly and outlandishly self-righteous as the Pharisee's. But if we are honest, there are times when our hearts are more like the Pharisee's than the tax collectors.

It is always good to thank God for the things he is doing in your life, and it is part of the Christian life to become a better and more moral person.

But we must never lose sight of where the power to do this comes from. We must never lose sight of the fact that we are dependent on God for all good things.

But, we are not perfect. And when we fail, and we will fail often, our response should not be running away from God, like Jonah. Or trusting in our good works like the Pharisee. Our response should be like that of the tax collector, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And so back to Jonah...

And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Jonah 2:10

This verse always makes me smile. God can't stomach any more of Jonah's self-righteous jibber jabber, so he tells the fish to puke Jonah back onto the shores of Israel.

And once again, this could be the end of the story. Jonah turned his back on God, and now God has turned his back on Jonah. All neat and tidy.

But the Book of Jonah is not a neat and tidy story. And next time we'll find out what God and Jonah did next.