

See Jonah Swim

The Prodigal Prophet – Part IV

Jonah 1:17-2:9

Introduction

Scott Wylie, our pastor of children's ministries, also serves as the mayor of Colonial Corners. This is our children's church program for third through fifth grade. It is led by an amazing cast of actors and actresses using original scripts that are produced each Sunday on an amazing stage with a post office, general store, railway depot, and much more. Once a year, Pastor Scott compiles the questions the kids have asked that he and the others have answered. It is pretty insightful and inquisitive stuff. Let me read a few of their questions.

- Does God celebrate holidays?
- Why do people think they can lie to God and get away with it?
- What does it mean that God has no beginning? He had to have a beginning!
- Why did God make Earth if He could make us and we go straight to heaven?
- What's so bad about the plague with the frogs?
- What's so bad about frogs? (This is an easy kid to raise!)
- If God knows what you pray before you pray it, then why do we pray?
- How old is God?
- Can I have doubts and still be a Christian?
- Do babies who die go to heaven?
- How do we know that the Bible is true?
- Will my cat be in heaven? (This is an easy one – no way! Everything in heaven is happiness, and everyone knows cats are just not happy – all they do is pout.)

These are great questions, aren't they? Aren't you glad Pastor Scott is answering them? Would you like him to email his answers to you? Contact him and he just might do it.

Of all the passages in the Bible that have raised questions about the truthfulness of the Bible, Jonah and the whale would have to rank high on the list.

A woman in our fellowship gave me her written testimony recently. Her own personal struggle with the truth actually converged at the book of Jonah. She wrote,

Twenty years ago, as an unsaved Catholic, I was preparing to teach my Sunday school class what the church calls "The Children's Liturgy of the Word". From this material I was preparing to teach "Jonah and the Whale," explaining to my children that the Catholic Church believed it was not a true story. "The Children's Liturgy of the Word" simply told it as a story used by God to teach a lesson regarding obedience.

By the way, when I read this, I could not help but wonder, just what would this lesson be? If you disobey God, do not go near the water? If you have sinned, you had better not go fishing?

She continues,

In the middle of explaining this to my children, my unsaved Presbyterian husband walked through and overheard me and said, "Of course that story is true!" [He believed it!] God planted in me a seed of truth that bothered me so much that I became desperate to know what was true.

I prayed and asked the Lord to show me the truth and several months later, while in my car, I heard a creation scientist explaining how the geology of the earth defended the great flood of Noah – something else I had been told was "just another story". My spirit was flooded by the confirmation that God's word is true – all of it.

This woman went on to tell that a few months later, again through Christian radio, she heard a clear gospel message and accepted Christ alone as her Savior.

Imagine – "Jonah and the Whale" became the point of crisis which led her to repentance.

The truth is that this whale is going to bring someone else to a point of crisis that leads to repentance – Jonah.

The Truth of Jonah and the Whale

In our last discussion, we saw Jonah treading water on the calmed sea waters and then, suddenly, he disappeared with a gulp and the lights went out. Let us pick up our study at chapter 1, verse 17.

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

Without a doubt, this is one of the most criticized verses in the Bible and this fish has been examined more than any other fish to swim the seven seas. In fact, I have been amazed at the imagination that many have exercised to keep Jonah out of the literal belly of a literal fish.

One author suggested that in actuality, another ship named *The Fish* happened to come by and rescue Jonah from the ocean before he drowned.ⁱ

Another author suggested that Jonah swam to dry ground and then stayed at an Inn named “The Fish” [where he recuperated for three days and three nights].ⁱⁱ

A generation ago, skeptics were arguing that the throat of a whale was too small to even swallow an orange without difficulty. For some whales, this is true.

However, the examination and observations of the *average* sperm whale known to swim in the Mediterranean, reveal it happens to have a throat twenty feet long, fifteen feet high, and nine feet wide.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is large enough to swallow an eighteen-wheeler or a mobile home.

Marine Biologists have also determined that a large fish would have enough air inside its stomach for someone to breathe, but the temperature would be around 104 degrees Fahrenheit.

I came across some research provided by the *Princeton Theological Review* in a 1927 issue, which effectively shut down the debate of whether or not someone could survive inside a whale. The article reported the verified case that occurred in 1891 on the whaling ship *Star of the East* which was hunting in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands. The fishermen spotted a large sperm whale and sent two smaller boats after it. One was able to harpoon it, but the second boat capsized in the process and one man drowned. A second sailor, James Bartley, disappeared and could not be found. In time, the

whale was killed and drawn to the side of the ship where it was secured and divided up. The following day, the stomach was hoisted on deck. When it was opened, the missing sailor was found inside – unconscious and bleached white, but alive. He was revived and after a time, resumed his duties on board the vessel.^{iv}

The truth is that Jonah did not get picked up by a boat named *The Fish*.

However, let me say that I really do not need to read a story about a man who was swallowed by a whale, reported by the *Princeton Theological Review*, to help me believe.

All we need is the record of scripture that without apology and – notice – without explanation, simply records,

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah . . .

This is the Lord’s doing. He prepared a fish for the job.

The question is not, “Is there a big enough fish?” The question is, “Is there a big enough God?”

If God is for real, this fish part is really easy.

Note the phrase,

. . . the Lord appointed . . .

This word can be translated “prepared, assigned, commanded, or appointed”.

In this verse, we have the first reference to a fish given an assignment.

It will not be the last time. Our Lord commanded a fish to gulp down a shekel – a coin about the size of a nickel. Then the Lord commanded it to take Peter’s bait when Peter put his hook in the water. The Lord had told Peter that the first fish he caught would have the money in its mouth needed to pay their taxes (Matthew 17:27).

Now, this is my kind of fishing!

The Lord commanded ravens to carry bread to Elijah, down by the brook Cherith (I Kings 17:6).

Fish do not carry money around in their mouths and birds do not give bread to strangers – unless they have been appointed by God.

Throughout the book of Jonah, God is assigning or commanding His creation. The same word – appointed or prepared – will appear five times. You should circle these in your text.

- The first appearance is in this verse as we are told “. . . the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow [and sustain] Jonah . . .” (1:17);

- The second time this word appears is in verse 10 of chapter 2 where we read of the same fish, “. . . the Lord commanded the fish [to spit] Jonah [out] . . .” (2:10);
- Then, thirdly, we see in chapter 4, verse 6 that “God appointed a plant [to grow] up [quickly]...” (4:6);
- The fourth time, in chapter 4, verse 7, we read, “. . . God appointed a worm [to destroy] the plant . . .” (4:7);
- Finally, in chapter 4, verse 8, “. . . God appointed a scorching east wind [to blow against Jonah] . . .” (4:8).

The same Hebrew idea is carried through all five occasions of God’s command and appointment over the creatures and elements of His created world. They were assigned; they were commanded by their Creator and they – what? They obeyed the command of God; they fulfilled their assignment from God.

Do you think Jonah will get the message?

Now, back in chapter 1, the text simply announces,

. . . the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1:17)

As Jonah drops down into the belly of this fish, feels the great heat perhaps, and breathes the putrid air, he realizes where he is, even though he is in the dark, and further recognizes that he is without hope and beyond help.

Ladies and gentlemen, God is allowing Jonah to experience a taste of what the Ninevites will experience in judgment – hopelessness and helplessness.^v

Jonah’s Underwater Prayer

Verse 1 of chapter 2 opens with these words,

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God . . .

I will bet he did!

We are not told exactly when Jonah prayed. Was it after he saw the fish coming, or when he swirled into the fish’s mouth, or when he slid down the fish’s gullet and landed in the dark cavern of its belly? We are not told.

Some scholars believe Jonah did not pray at first. In fact, some Hebrew scholars believe Jonah did not pray until the third day. We cannot be sure.

We do know that it is possible to become so fascinated with what happened with a fish that we

overlook what happened in the heart of a runaway prophet – a prodigal prophet who finally prays.

So, let us work our way through the only prayer in history to ever be recorded under water. We are going to discover three critical ingredients to true genuine repentance in Jonah’s underwater prayer.

1. The first ingredient of Jonah’s prayer is admission.

In chapter 2, verse 2, we read,

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 [the grave]; You heard my voice.”

Now, notice that Jonah admits this is God’s hand of discipline in verse 3.

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.

Hebrews chapter 12 provides a New Testament counterpart to this kind of admission. According to this paragraph, we have several options:

- we can despise God’s discipline and fight it (verse 5);
- we can be discouraged because of it and faint (verse 5);
- we can resist it and invite stronger discipline (verse 6);
- or we can submit to God and grow because of it (verse 7).^{vi}

At this point Jonah is no longer resisting the will of God; he is no longer rejecting the word of God – he is about to re-enlist in the work of God.

However, first, there is admission of his wrongdoing and the right of God to discipline. Now he is on his way to restoration.

2. The second ingredient of Jonah’s prayer of true repentance is restoration.

Notice verse 4.

So I said, “I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple.”

Up to this point, everything about the life of Jonah has been in the opposite direction of God’s authority.

In fact, one author pointed out that the word that best characterizes the life of Jonah up to this point is the word, “down”.

- Jonah rose up to flee and went *down* to Joppa – the seaport;
- Jonah paid the fare and went *down* into the ship;
- Jonah then gets swallowed by the great fish and effectively, goes *down* into its belly;
- Jonah is now going *down* into the deep abyss of the sea.

Warren Wiersbe wrote a great metaphor for our lives, “Whenever you run from God, the only direction you can go is down.”^{vii}

Now, however, Jonah is admitting his sin and turning back to the temple of God – a statement of recommitment for the Old Testament saint. In fact, it is taken from Solomon’s prayer of dedication when the temple was completed. Solomon prayed, in I Kings at this dedication,

whatever prayer or supplication is made by any man or by all Your people Israel, each knowing the [sin] of his own heart, and spreading his hands toward this house;

then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive and act and render to each according to all his ways, whose heart You know, for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men

(I Kings 8:38-39)

Jonah is literally clinging to this promise in repentance and faith.

And God moves. Look at verses 5-6a.

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 . . .

In other words, there was no escape. Jonah believed he was going to die.

Continue to verse 6b.

. . . But You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.

Did you catch this? Jonah would not pray before – he wanted to run from God; he did not want to speak for God. He would not even pray to God for the sake of these frantic sailors who were afraid of

drowning, “I’m not on speaking terms with God.” Now, however, Jonah says,

. . . But You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.

Jonah prays in verse 7,

While I was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple.

In other words, “I was without hope and I prayed to You!”

Sinclair Ferguson writes, “Isn’t it marvelous that God has mercy upon His servant Jonah *before* Jonah will preach that God will have mercy on Nineveh.”^{viii}

It is no wonder then that we have a third ingredient of repentance, in addition to admission and restoration.

3. The third ingredient of Jonah’s prayer is appreciation.

Listen to Jonah now pray in verse 9,

But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord.

Keep in mind that Jonah has not been given a promise of deliverance. He was not thankful because he was back on dry land. He was not thankful that he had not drowned. He was thankful that God had turned his heart from rebellion and had caused him to call on the name of the Lord once again. Jonah was thankful for his salvation.^{ix}

“Salvation belongs to the Lord!” This was not as much a theological declaration as it was a personal confession of faith and praise.

Did you notice that Jonah said he would sacrifice to God and pay his vows?

This is the same vocabulary used by the sailors who repented and claimed the God of Israel as their God. They sacrificed animals and vowed to serve Him (1:16).

What can Jonah sacrifice? He cannot sacrifice an animal – he has been swallowed by one.

So, what can Jonah sacrifice to God now? He has gone too far – what can he offer to God?

Jonah can offer to God the same thing we can.

When David repented and wrote Psalm 51, a great hymn of repentance, he wrote,

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)

No matter how far you have run from God; no matter where you are right now, the Enemy will say to you, “You’ve gone too far. You have nothing now to offer God. Why would He want you? You can give Him nothing.”

This is a lie. You can offer to God the sacrifices He loves most – the sacrifices of a broken spirit and a contrite heart.

As Jonah offers up to God the sacrifices of a repentant heart and a humbled spirit, God sends down the biggest case of indigestion any fish has ever experienced, and this fish spits up Jonah onto dry land. Look at verse 10.

Then the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.

God gave this fish the worst stomach ache it had had in a long time – he just could not digest a prophet. And he spit him up on dry land.

This must have gathered a crowd.

The prodigal prophet has returned, by whale express, home again.

Conclusion

In her book, Lois Krueger tells the story of her son Carl; something that happened when he was just 4½ years old. Lois and her husband had been having one of those hectic weeks and their son just seemed to be getting into more and more trouble – getting in the way and causing problems. He was sent to the corner for a time out and, over in the corner, he suddenly piped up and said, “I’m gonna run away from home.”

Lois stopped to remember that moment from her own childhood when she felt in the way – only able to do bad things; never in the right; even a bit unloved. She responded with unique wisdom. She said, “Okay, you can run away from home.”

He said, “I can?”

“Yes, you can. Come on, let’s pack.”

She got his little suitcase down and hers as well and began to pick out her clothes. He said, “Mama, what are you doin’?”

She said, “Well, I’m going to need my coat and my pajamas and my shoes.”

She packed her things and placed the suitcase by the front door with his and said, “Okay, are you sure you want to run away from home?”

He said, “I am, but where are you going?”

She said, “Well, if you’re going to run away from home, then Mama’s going with you because I would never want you to be alone.”^x

Is that not good? I remember when one of my little guys, years ago, ran away for a few hours. I did not think of this. I threatened him within an inch of his life, “Don’t you ever do that again!”

How wise of this parent.

How infinitely wise and gracious of our heavenly Father – Jonah ran away, but when he was ready to call out to the Lord, he discovered that God was ready to listen.

Even in his darkest moments of despair – the lights were out; the prison bars of the deep abyss were telling him, “There’s no way out of this; there’s no way back; you are alone for good . . .” – Jonah experienced communion with the God he had offended and the Lord he had spurned.

Jonah repents and is revived, restored, and re-enlisted.

No matter how long we stay silent, God will hear us when we are ready to talk. And we discover in these moments of reviving grace, that we have run away in sinful rebellion, but – imagine it – He has gone along too.

The most wonderful miracle in Jonah chapter 2 is not preservation inside a fish, but restoration inside the heart of a prodigal prophet. A prophet who – deep down in the belly of a whale – actually came home.

Jonah has come home. He is right with God – and this is truly home!

ⁱ William L. Banks, Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet (Moody Press, 1966), p. 44.

ⁱⁱ David J. Clark and Eugene A. Nida, A Handbook on the Books of Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah (United Bible Societies, 1978), p. 73.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Montgomery Boice, The Minor Prophets (Baker Books, 1983), p. 282.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 284.

^v Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Amazed (Cook Communications, 2004), p. 78.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 78.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 79.

^{viii} Sinclair B. Ferguson, Man Overboard (Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), p. 30.

^{ix} Boice, p. 288.

^x Trent C. Butler, Holman Old Testament Commentary: Hosea-Micah (Holman Reference, 2005), p. 276.