

Salvation Belongs to the LORD Jonah 1:17 – 2:10

Have you ever found yourself in a place that you didn't intend to be? When I was 17, a friend and I were heading down a familiar road in my sleepy hometown. As we approached the intersection, Sammy, a fellow high school student, flagged us down. My friend Ryan and I thought nothing about it—Ryan stopped and Sammy, holding his arm to his side somewhat awkwardly, slid into the back seat. We quickly knew the *why* of his arm when a weapon came into view through the rearview mirror, coupled with an angry demand that we take him to a nearby apartment complex.

I don't need to explain the horror I felt during those ten minutes of him holding us hostage, all while realizing that with red and swollen eyes, and language akin to that of the mariners in Jonah 1, Sammy was not in his right mind. Substance-ridden and seized with fury, small talk wasn't an option. And the fear that we may have been living in our last moments seized us. Being a believer, albeit malnourished in many ways, I remember uttering a prayer to the Lord—certainly not in the form of a psalm. But I also remember pleading and trying to reason with Sammy. Maybe I could talk him out of whatever he was planning for us and for those that were on the other end of his rage. I certainly tried, until what he held was pointed in my direction with the specific instruction to stop talking.

Similar, visceral fears gripped these sailors as the sea itself, sloshed and blown about by the God of creation, expressed its own crescendo of instability. And there was only one solution. With an expression of neighbor-love, the idolatrous sailors initially refrained from hurling Jonah into the stormy waters. But as providence would have it, they listened to Jonah's death-wish counsel and cast him overboard. Afterwards, the calm waters into which they gazed upon with astonishment spoke something of the calm they now knew through Jonah's LORD. They reluctantly concluded that man had to lose his life so that theirs might be saved. Of course, it matters whether one flees the Lord's purposes or whether one runs headlong into them. Yet, it matters most that God's purposes can't be thwarted or exasperated. He has marked out a people to rescue from sin's dominion in this world, and somehow, notwithstanding any and all reluctance on the part humanity—redeemed or not, He will exert His own dominion and do all that He intends to do despite opposition. He may place us in situations that never made our tight schedules, but His counsel stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations."¹

I. A different appointment

And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. When we read a story, we often find ourselves flipping back to a previous page or scene in light of newer information given. Conversely, if you're a reading purist, you convulse at the thought of ever taking a sneak peak of what lies ahead. As this saga of Jonah plays out, and as we light upon this prayer, I found myself doing both things as I tried to understand the cries of this man from the ocean depths. One of the questions that kept coming to me, "Did Jonah really prefer death to doing the will of God?" Backtracking to verse 12 of chapter 1, Jonah seems to fancy death by telling the mariners to throw him into the sea.

In ancient thought, the sea was a symbol of the unknown, which closely tied it to death itself. In the book of Daniel, apocalyptic beasts come out of the sea, and John the Revelator draws from Daniel to write about the blasphemous and rebel powers of the world meeting their Maker in the last days,

¹ Psalm 33:10-11

overmatched and destroyed by Him.² The sea is considered the place of the dead and was, of course, the primary location of the world's idolatrous trade activity in the time of Jonah, Daniel, and even the apostles of the New Testament.³

Jonah, the evidence seems, was committed to his own demise. And into the sea he goes, a merciless, reluctant prophet hurled into the deep-blue by pagans reluctant to do so in mercy. If only Jonah would have been teachable! The God of the sea resolved to save many from destruction. The men of the sea sought to save Jonah from the same. But as we learned last week, Jonah's heart is misaligned with Yahweh's. And we see that in his preference for a watery grave over-and-above fields white for harvest.⁴ And in one way, God obliges Jonah's resignation. For, ***the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah***. This was not a large fish making good in on an opportunity to supplement its diet of plankton and anchovies. The word here, ***appointed***, is one that speaks to Yahweh's absolute sovereignty. The fish, unlike Jonah, did the bidding of its Creator and LORD.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus initiates a conversation with Peter about paying taxes. He knows that the Roman *IRS* has come knocking, and that Peter was approached by those charged to collect from individual citizens. Jesus then proceeds to teach Peter at least two points of wisdom. First, sometimes it is wise to comply with the conventions of a society so as not to create an offense.⁵ Second, it's always wise to entrust your needs to a God who freely provides according to His abundant goodness. To give Peter a teaching aid, He concludes by telling Peter these words, "...go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to [the tax collectors] for me and for yourself." We're not told whether Peter followed through, but the point is that the power expressed in Jonah 1:17 is same power exerted at the end of Matthew 17. The God who assigned a fish for Jonah is the God who arranged a fish for Peter. There are no rogue creatures in all creation.⁶ God moved and moves upon creatures great and small to achieve His ends.⁷

What we considered with praise and gratitude two weeks ago on Easter Sunday morning sufficiently answers the voices of Jonah-naysayers. Many through history have decried the viability of a man surviving for any length of time inside of a large sea creature. But believers have no issue with what is *highly unlikely* or what seems *absolutely impossible*. Our starting point is that God raises the dead. Where's the challenge in God moving so upon the largest of sea creatures to engulf a man and sustain that man's life for any amount of time? I understand any of us wrestling over *why* God might decree this or that, but not that He indeed *does* decree unnatural and miraculous events in this world. Resurrection from the dead and creation spoken into existence make all the other supernatural acts of God tame by comparison.

This was a different appointment for Jonah—to be imbedded by the hand of God inside of an animal, in the ocean. It was an uncommon providence inside of a common response to God's Word—hard-headed rebellion. But instead of Jonah getting what he deserved—a place of death and decay, the fish's *belly* was used as a preservative for Jonah's life. And verse 17 tells us that he was afforded

² Daniel 7, Revelation 13:1ff

³ G.K. Beale, *NIGCT: Revelation*, 1042.

⁴ John 4:35, "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest." A few verses down, Gentiles believe in Jesus, who is the willing Jonah-type.

⁵ R.T. France, *TNTC: Matthew*, 172.

⁶ Psalm 104:24–26, "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. [25] Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great. [26] There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it." Psalm 107:25, "For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea."

⁷ Further examples: a donkey in Numbers 22, ravens in 1 Kings 17, she-bears in 2 Kings 2, birds of prey in Isaiah 46, netted fish in John 21, etc.

three days and three nights to reflect on his error in judgment and to do what many would do in his waterlogged sandals—cry out for help!

II. A dying prayer

Last week we noted that Jonah went down to sea-level Joppa. Then he went down into the inner parts of a ship for nap time. In terror and with reluctance, the mariners then cast Jonah down into the sea. And in our text, we'll see him plummet even further. One commentator calls this prayer a Psalm of Descent.⁸ The designation is a helpful reminder of how low God is bringing His prophet for His purposes.

Verse 1, *Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish*. Envision the scene—he hits the angry waters and soon finds himself in complete darkness, yet, able to breath. We're not told whether Jonah witnessed the large mouth closing in over him, or if he was clueless of being swallowed whole from the sheer disorientation of it all. What we can gather is that after the initial shock, after the transition of being exposed to the tumultuous elements to sitting in the hot stench of an animal's insides, Jonah is afforded some time for reflection. And this reflection, recorded in our Bibles, takes the shape of a prayer-psalm.

A. The desperation expressed

Look at verse 2, *I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice*. This verse serves as an overall perspective on the whole ordeal. He was exceedingly troubled—*distressed*. He *called out to the LORD* for help. God *heard* and *answered* him. Yet, even in the summary we pick up on the intensity of his desperation. The place *Sheol*, in ancient thought, was typically connected with judgment, or it was considered in more generic terms as the place of the dead before the final judgment.⁹ Expressing his distress, Jonah believed that he was a goner. This *call out* was not lacking in emotion or desperation—I *screamed* out to the LORD is an acceptable translation.¹⁰ The scream was warranted, verse 3, *For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me*.

Again, the sailors, desperate to save themselves, used their muscles to throw Jonah in, but Jonah knew the source of his current plight. God was the caster—*for You cast me into the deep*. He was the Maker and Proprietor of every swelling surf and swirling current—*Your waves and Your billows passed over me*. Death by drowning seemed unescapable. He continues to describe the harrowing scene in verse 5 & 6, *The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains*.

Years ago, I took a rafting trip over to the eastern part of the state. It was hot and the river was perfectly frigid. The water meandered along until some of the shallower parts. At one point, one of the larger rafts flipped over and stuck under an old tree stump submersed under the water. To free it from the stump, a few of us had to leverage ourselves completely under the water to dislodge it from the stump. The current seemed manageable, so I thought. As I positioned myself under the boat to push upwards, both of my feet became pinned against the stump while under the water, under the

⁸ I borrowed this title from an observation by OT scholar Kevin Youngblood, *Exegetical Commentary: Jonah*, 109.

⁹ Daniel Timmer, *A Gracious and Compassionate God: Jonah*, 83.

¹⁰ Kevin Youngblood, *Exegetical Commentary: Jonah*, 105

boat. For about ten seconds, I struggled with freeing my feet and with thinking the worst. Of course, I popped up out of the water eventually. Fear flooded the whole of me in that situation. If that was me then, what of a raging ocean, being entombed inside of something that is alive, and knowing that it was clearly God's displeasure that ordered my dreadful steps?! Trapped and struggling for breath—that's the sense in his description of *weeds* being *wrapped about* his *head*.

The utterly humbling descent of Jonah continues. Down to Joppa, down into the ship's lower deck, down into the ocean, down into the belly of a beast, now Jonah descends to the *roots of the mountains*—down into the depths of the Mediterranean.¹¹ His use of the expression *I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever* express further his estimation of what he thought was about to happen—imprisoned with no escape from the inevitability of a watery graveyard, the finality of *forever* was before him, and any optimism of living was all but dead. His physical body could sink no lower, nor could his hope of life itself.

At this point, our dial of justice might be pointing more in the direction of justifiable punishment towards Jonah. He is undoubtedly derelict in his prophetic duties. In fact, in this very prayer we see little evidence that he's taking personal responsibility for his brush with death. You might even conclude by examining this prayer that while he rightly implicates God for His sovereign discipline, he fails to look in the mirror and why he's in this mess in the first place.¹² He simply doesn't reflect on his sin of disobedience to the degree which you might expect from a prophet of God.

Regardless, we're not left with wholesale neglect on his part. What you certainly would expect from a prophet of Israel is what should be expected from anyone who knows God and is desperately fearful—a drawing upon God's Word for help. Specifically, Jonah draws from the Psalms. Verse 3 is essentially Psalm 42:7 in the original Hebrew script.¹³ Verse 2 has many of the components found in Psalm 120:1 and Psalm 18:6. He would have recited these Psalms in their totality hundreds of times before being justly submarined. He quotes himself talking to the LORD in verse 4, *I have been driven away from Your sight, yet I shall again look upon your holy temple*. Referring to the temple was an expression of longing for God's presence, which would surely be accompanied by God's reply to Jonah's dire situation. Again, from his initial flight, Jonah has digressed downward away from God's presence, far from His temple where He chose to manifest Himself to Israel through the ages.¹⁴ He echoes this longing in verse 7, *my prayer came to You into Your holy temple*. And any of us can note the staggering irony of what Jonah is desiring desperately, as he suddenly finds himself counting on the attention and care of God whom he has carelessly ignored until now.¹⁵

And wonder of wonders—God will hear him and answer his cries for help by first encasing him inside of the stomach of this creature. Jonah miscalculated and wound up saved rather than condemned.¹⁶ God brings his *life from the pit*, and he adds the personal touch to his prayer, *O LORD my God*. Yes, there is a blatant omission of naming his disobedience. Yes, there is a sense in which he celebrates his own devotional movements inside of this traumatic experience that almost snuffed out the light of his very life—*I called to the Lord...I cried...I shall look again upon your holy*

¹¹ We know from the world of ocean cartography that the deepest parts of the Mediterranean are found in the Ionian Sea, located between Greece and Italy, around 17,000 ft. deep. For reference, that's about six-and-a-half times as tall as Burj Dubai, the tallest man-made structure on earth. <https://www.worldatlas.com/seas/ionian-sea.html>

¹² Timmer, 85.

¹³ Youngblood, 105.

¹⁴ David Baker, T. Desmond Alexander, Bruce Waltke, *TOTC: Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 128.

¹⁵ Youngblood, 106.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 114.

*temple...When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord...*¹⁷ Jonah should be a red flag to us all. We can be the sharpest theologian, the keenest memorizer of scripture, have a family pedigree of faith, be enjoying the benefits of the sweet community of a sound local church, yet we can miss our most prominent sins.

However, sitting as final judge and juror over Jonah and his stubbornness is not a healthy landing pad for the reader of this story. How many self-absorbed prayers has God endured from this heart? How many times have we fallen to our knees in prayer without addressing the center of our deepest points of disobedience? I can't count that high. Yet the patient Father, has He not listened, even answered, some of our weakest offerings of prayer? At the same time, we don't presume on such profound kindness. Daily seeking to understand ourselves and seeking to have the right motives and aims is the kind of heart-work that we're called to do. Proverbs 20:5, "*The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.*" Yet it's worth remembering that even in our inability, our ignorance, and our immaturity, God hears the saint with the weakest faith in Christ.

This was a prayer of desperation inside of gripping fear. Jonah indeed shifted from bolting prayerlessly away from Nineveh to drawing near to the inescapable **LORD his God**.

B. *The gratitude extended*

He was snatched from the jaws of death. The word *pit* in verse 6, like *Sheol* of verse 2, signifies the realm of the dead.¹⁸ Again, the psalm employs hyperbolic language to communicate the deadly situation Jonah faced.¹⁹ He assumed that death was knocking and that soon, the door would be opened...*but God*. God, who brings lives up from the pit. This God acted for Jonah, and before the unceremonious regurgitation of verse 10 happens, Jonah confesses his only glory and hope. ***But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to You...***

I'm not sure layaways still exist but growing up I remember around most Septembers/Octobers my mom would begin her Christmas shopping. She would go alone, pick out most of our gifts, give the department store a small percentage of the items to place in their in-store storage, with the idea of making payments until she paid the balance in full around mid-December. This is, in principle, what Jonah is voicing through his thanksgiving. The present gratitude to God for sparing his life in the belly of fish was only the first installment. In other words, the magnitude of grace was such that a one-time expression of thanks wasn't nearly enough. How very true for us being in Christ! Hebrews 13:15, "*Through [Jesus] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.*" Ceasing to praise God is not an option for those who have gained Christ.

Before Jonah's crescendo-confession at the end of verse 9, we have the orthodoxy of verse 8, ***Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love***. Jonah may have the mariners in mind a couple of days back on board the ship. The captain expressed his idolatry to a groggy Jonah in the previous chapter (1:6). Perhaps Jonah was already thinking about the sure-to-be idolatrous Ninevites as a part of a renewed resolve to finally do the will of the LORD. Whatever is happening inside our complex character, the truth was fixed into God's economy of salvation—in Jonah's day,

¹⁷ To remind us how best to pray, note that the prayers of God's people throughout the Old Testament nearly always confess that God remembered them rather than vice versa. See Samson in Judges 16:28, Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:11, Hezekiah in 2 Kings 20:3, David in Psalm 25:7, Jeremiah in Jeremiah 15:15 and Lamentations 5:1.

¹⁸ Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea-Jonah*, 477.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

in Jesus’s day, and in our day—if Jonah’s God is not the LORD we *pay regard* to by faith in His Son, then there is no hope of knowing His *chesed*, or His *steadfast love*. God demands that we worship Him alone, through His Son alone, by His Spirit alone.

And certainly related, the crescendo of the whole psalm is found in verse 9, *Salvation belongs to the LORD!* Underneath it all was a mercy which continues to have no letup—not with Jonah, not with those whom Jonah sought to avoid in that great city of Nineveh, not with the various peoples of the earth—God is saving and nothing can stop Him, nor will stop Him from doing so. If there is resistance or silence at His free offer of mercy given through Christ’s death and resurrection, then He would appoint the rocks to cry out in worship.²⁰

Salvation was His idea. Human intelligence couldn’t come up with it. He needed no help in designing His plan to save. Salvation is found in what God has done in Christ alone. The banquet of mercy has One host—the Lord Jesus, who single-handedly bore divine punishment in our place. The dead in sin cannot move a muscle in God’s direction. Salvation has but One Helper—the Holy Spirit, who gives spiritual life and vitality to sinners. He opens the eyes of the heart to see the value of Christ’s death, paying for the sin we deserved. Salvation belongs to Yahweh, Jonah’s only hope under the sea, inside the beast, and into eternity. If you have it, He gave it to you. Out the pleasure of His own will and out of the love from His own heart, He saves. John saw the a great multitude, from every nation, and heard their unified worship resound with these words, “*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*”²¹

III. A determined release

Yes, Jonah cried out for God’s arm to save him from the temporal circumstances. And yes, God rescued the mariners from certain doom. And yes, Jonah’s message in the next chapter will be a warning of God’s soon-coming destruction, with an appeal to turn. But what we must see in all these saving acts is that God’s greatest rescue has eternity at its heart. In His resolve to save, nothing impedes such holy, merciful determination. So, verse 10, *the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.* The Ninevites will hear from the LORD, and Jonah will be the muddled messenger. Providence used a fish to catch a man. Now God will once again prevail over that same stubborn man to be a fisher of others.²² God is determined to save the ends of the earth. Does that move you to desire the same?

Conclusion

It’s an engaging story with unique details in God’s unfolding storyline. The miraculous nature of a sea suddenly calmed, a sea creature gulping down a grown man, a man given the wherewithal and a sustaining to pray inside such conditions, etc. But Jonah and the creature are simply cameos that must bow to the greater amazement that God intends to meet the ruthless with kindness; that with repentance and trust, the One who can destroy both body and soul holds out life and forgiveness through Jesus Christ, who is a type of Jonah. The differences are stark: one man resisted God’s will, the Other lived and breathed to do it; one man cared not for his neighbor, the Other sought out His neighbor with tender healings and a message that could give life; one man a sinner tasked to speak for God, the Other a sinless Man tasked to speak as God in the flesh. The similarities aren’t

²⁰ As Jesus remarked to the religious elites in Luke 19:40.

²¹ Revelation 7:10

²² Matthew 4:18–19, “While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.’”

tangential: both men appointed for suffering, both in the heart of the earth for three days; both rescued from decay so that they might speak life to others. The Ninevites needed a life-giving word from the God of heaven, just like the Israelites needed it. Just like Memphians need it, and the Japanese, Turks, Yorubas of Nigeria, Dravidians of India, Kikuyus of Kenya, and a host of others God intends to pursue in mercy. John saw around the throne of heaven what Jonah resisted.²³

It's not as arresting of a question as it seems: Did Jonah prefer death to doing the will of God? Is there a higher expression of the will of God than this: believe the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ? How many hear that Jesus is life and wholeness, yet prefer to keep Him at a long arm's length. Hear this: life inside a sea creature will be preferable to God's justice on that great and terrible Day. Yet, His offer of life stands! His call to trust Him stands! The rich mercies that spill out of that trust-relationship over the span of life here and life in eternity will be worth every storm endured. Stop resisting God's kind petition towards you to repent of your sins and place your trust in Christ. Together, God's people in this room believe Romans 10:11, "*Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame.*" By trusting in Christ, you can hear through the gospel, even now, the declaration of being righteous in Christ. Don't forsake your hope of steadfast love by clinging to your self-rule and by living to please only yourself.

We're not promised deliverance from the dangers of this world—from sea squalls, sea monsters or from Sammy-types—but faith in Christ delivers from sin's wages...a that's a deliverance with depths we're still exploring with joy and worship.

²³ Revelation 7:9