

Singing in the Belly of the Beast

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Jonah 1:17-2:10

As we continue our study of the book of Jonah, we come to chapter 2. Now, if you were to simply put the text of the book in front of you without looking at any of the words, you would immediately notice that chapter 2 is different from the rest of the book. It is written not in prose, but in poetic form. The rest of the book is written in prose. Chapter 2 would more closely resemble a psalm than a narrative or prophetic content. And indeed, the content will be consistent with that. What we have before us in chapter 2 is a recitation, a song about a prayer of deliverance.

It is written in past tense, meaning it is a song of reflection on events that occurred as Jonah was in the sea before the fish swallowed him. It gives us Jonah's perspective on what happened. And it is quite different from what we read in the rest of the book! In chapter 1, we have this stubborn, rebellious Jonah, prophet of Yahweh but steadfastly refusing to obey God. In chapters 3 and 4, we have this obedient and yet disgusted Jonah who does as he is directed by God but is ticked off in doing so. But right here in the middle, chapter 2, we have a totally different Jonah, one singing about his salvation in the context of having been swallowed by a giant fish. It is the most unlikely of songs, whether in content, context, perspective. It seems on various levels to be out of place. But clearly it is not, it is perfectly placed.

Think of it this way: this is a book about mercy. In chapter 1, who receives mercy? The sailors. In chapter 2, who receives mercy? Jonah. In chapter 3, who receives mercy? The Ninevites. In chapter 4, God teaches Jonah the bigger lesson about mercy. God is the One who decides who receives mercy and we ought to just be thankful He has been willing to extend it to us! If He is willing to extend it to us, how dare we be offended when He chooses to extend it to others! That is the basic point.

So, hear these words from a man of God who at least for the moment has recognized the gift of mercy he has received from his God. READ Jonah 2.

Main point: Receiving mercy is a good cause for singing!

Being reminded of just how gracious and merciful God has been in saving us ought to prompt us to sing in celebration. And such singing can be experienced regardless of present circumstances. You can sing in the middle of a storm, trapped in the stomach of a huge fish, while suffering through a pandemic. Contemplating mercy puts all else into perspective. That's what we see here in Jonah 2.

So, trust me, I know what we are going through. I've had to preach this sermon to myself before I can stand and preach it to you. And yet, preach it I will, because it is not just the story of Jonah's life, it comes to us as the Word of God, meant to change our lives. Hear the word of the Lord.

I. Sinking to the bottom is intended to cause us to look up. Vv.
1:17-2:6a

Or, put another way, the view from the bottom is upward in every direction. Or, what we view as the worst, God intends to use to lift us up. But first, He has to have our attention, and experiencing disaster with no way out tends to do that!

1:17- 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.

We pick up the text at the point, the last verse in prose until the end of ch. 2. Here, the storm has stopped its raging, the sailors are worshipping the God of Scripture for saving them, committing themselves to follow Him. Meanwhile, Jonah has been thrown into the sea, sinking like a rock. So, the sea on the surface is calm and as it should be, while below the surface things are happening.

Notice as we have seen throughout the drama, the LORD is in charge. He appointed, or caused a great fish to swallow Jonah. Now, normally, having a great fish swallow you would not be a good thing, right? What if you are swimming in the ocean and someone yells, "Shark!" But here, it is indeed a very good thing. The term here for great fish is just the generic term for fish, only huge. It is not Leviathan, the sea monster, nor some specific fish like a whale. Instead, it is just a fish, a really, really big fish, a fish large enough to swallow Jonah whole. So, God directs this fish just as He directs the storm, the lots. God is in charge and it is told as if it's just another day at work.

You can't help but notice how matter-of-factly this story is told. We see this as an unbelievable tale, but the text is written as if reporting on a city council meeting. And yet, Jesus quotes from this verse in Matthew 12:40, but again told in strict matter of fact form. Just as this happened, so that will happen. There is no hype, no hint that what is being described is beyond belief. Instead, it is just another day at the office for God. He sends a really big fish to pick up Jonah and deliver him from the depths of the sea to the seashore. Ho-hum!

So now, Jonah is riding around inside a fish's stomach for the next three days. Chapter 2 is a record of what was going through his mind during those 3 days. They were productive days. He will have no way of keeping track of days and nights. He is completely under the control of the fish who is under the control of Jonah's God. He's got the time to think, ponder, write poetry perhaps. Everything has been cleared from his calendar.

2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,

Aren't those sweet words? Finally, Jonah does the right thing. Just as the sailors were crying out to the LORD, so now is Jonah. This is a really, really good thing. The difference is just location. The sailors are on the deck of their sailing vessel. . .and Jonah is in his cabin in his sailing vessel. Huh, maybe they aren't as different as I thought! Jonah's quarters just might be a bit more of a squeeze.

2 saying, "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.

Notice the tense of the verbs. It's all past tense. It is not that Jonah was swallowed by the fish and then he cried out to the LORD. No, as we see here, he sank to the bottom of the sea, and there cried out to the LORD and then after the LORD sent the fish to rescue him, as he was riding around in the belly of the fish he writes this song about what happened. This is a song or prayer about a prayer. While in distress, he cried out to the LORD, just as the sailors did, just as the Ninevites will do in chapter 3. The distress was not the fish. The distress was dying at the bottom of the sea.

Just as we saw in ch. 1, there are directional clues in the text. Jonah is sinking down, here getting all the way to Sheol, which can either be the grave or the place of the dead, hell. I'm not sure which it is here. Clearly it is the place at the bottom, the lowest place there is would be, Sheol. But there, at the lowest place, the belly of Sheol, the LORD heard his cry. I don't take this as the belly of the beast, but as the bottom of the sea as we will see made clear in the next verses. The important part here to notice is that in his distress, Jonah cried out to the LORD, who heard his cry.

Can you see the irony of God hearing him at the bottom of the sea? What was Jonah attempting to do when the storm hit? Flee from the presence of the LORD. Where can you go to flee from the God who made the land and sea?

You can't...thankfully. He cried out from the bottom of the sea and the LORD heard him, responded, saved him.

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.

Jonah was clear that God was the One who caused him to be hurled into the sea. It was not the sailors, but God. And yet, this time it is not such a bad thing. Oh yes, it was uncomfortable, unpleasant, terrorizing to be sure. But since God did it, this means that God is there, in control, involved in the situation. All of a sudden, God's presence is a good thing! He here recognizes that God was orchestrating an attitude adjustment! Yes, there were waves, floods, feelings of being trapped, but God was there! These were HIS waves, HIS billows.

4 Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'

Did you catch that? There is hope, a future, a glorious future. As bad as the situation might be, a sense of despair over the lack of control and inability to do anything about it, Jonah has confidence that he will some day be in awe once again at the place where God resides. This sounds a lot like Job when he was at the bottom. Interesting!

5 The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head 6 at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;

Here we have a description of life at the bottom of the sea: closed in, trapped, suffocating, as low as you can go, imprisoned with no hope of escape. This was his perspective of life at the bottom. This is as low as you can go and still be (barely) alive: trapped with no way of escape.

And yet, as I've suggested, there is still the sense that God is there. From this point at the bottom, Jonah looks up!

II. Being shown mercy changes your perspective! vv. 2:6b-10

Can you see why God sometimes takes us to the bottom? He takes us there so we will appreciate His deliverance, salvation, grace, mercy and all the rest. Sometimes we have to be reminded of where we would be without Him!

2:6b- yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.

Isn't that beautiful? As Jonah reflects on his delivery, it is clear to him that God met him there at the bottom of the pit and sent to him salvation. In a very literal sense, the appointing of the great fish was that salvation. But in a larger and more important sense, the restoration of a right relationship with God was his salvation. He here recognizes that God acted on his behalf. This Yahweh, who created the sea and the dry land, personally saved him. Notice the directional clue: up from the pit. What a vivid picture of salvation! We don't crawl out of the pit, hoist ourselves out of the pit. He brings us up out of the pit. When we entrust our lives to Him, crying out to Him in our despair, He lifts us up.

Remember, as Jonah is singing this prayer, he is still in the belly of the great fish. He is not yet on dry land. I doubt any of us would look at that situation and rest at ease that the problem was solved. But Jonah did. Why?

Because he saw the hand of God. What was happening to him was not punishment but delivery. The fish was not a monster, the fish was his taxicab. He could now rest. Jonah had been delivered.

7 When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

Here he conveys the same message again using different terms. He describes it in terms of losing consciousness, losing the ability to think. But then he turned whatever attention he could muster in God's direction. It's as if at the last possible second he had a moment of clear thinking and he cried out to God, and that last faint desperate cry for help made it all the way from the bottom of the sea to the very throne room of God! It's as if God was there, anxiously awaiting that prayer so He could respond, deliver, save. Have you ever considered that, that if God is going to save, or rescue, He has to be willing to sit back and wait as we make a mess out of things until we finally look up to Him out of our despair. He has to patiently wait. A God who saves has to wait until we reach the bottom. I for one am so glad that He doesn't lose patience. I'm glad He is a merciful God!

8 Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. 9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

These verses offer a comparison between those who cling to false gods, idols, and those who cling to the God who is real. They look to their idols for salvation, for compassion, for mercy and grace...and receive nothing. Such people give up hope of receiving such love. But those whose God is Yahweh receive it all. Therefore, we worship Him, thank Him, commit ourselves to

follow Him. This is good theology! Notice that we do not do these things and THEN God saves us. No, He saves us and then we do these things. He saves, we return to give thanks.

Notice that the thought of these verses precisely parallels the experiences of the sailors. When they were crying out to their false gods, there was no deliverance, no salvation, no compassion from the God of the storm.

But once they cried out to the One true God, He saved them. He calmed the sea. AND THEN they worshipped, sacrificed, made vows. They were not saved on the basis of their acts. They were saved as an act of God's mercy in response to their cries for help. It was the same for the sailors as it was for Jonah. And as the sailors were worshipping aboard ship, Jonah is finally joining them in worship while riding aboard his personal submarine! But make no mistake, both were celebrating the mercy of God in saving them!

I wish it didn't take getting to the bottom to have our perspective change. But it does, by definition it does. In fact, I have often prayed for people in that way. "Oh Lord, whatever it takes, but may their bottom not be too low. May they look up before they crash all the way." May they not get to the point where the weeds are choking them, they are unable to breathe, losing consciousness, at the point of dying. Yes, it will be at the bottom, but may the bottom not be so low! That's my prayer for those who are running away from God. Why? Because I have learned the lessons of Jonah. I want to turn to Him before the bottom gets REALLY bad!

10 And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Once again, notice the choice of words. Yahweh here speaks to the fish in the same way He spoke to Jonah. The fish heard Him, the fish obeyed Him, the fish did what Yahweh asked him to do. Then we see the graphic description of Jonah's expulsion from the fish. The fish vomited him, or forcefully emptied

him onto the dry land. The impression of the text is that Jonah didn't even get wet. The fish did what the sailors tried to do and failed: deliver the cargo to dry land.

There, Jonah has been delivered. He has been rescued from the raging seas. He has spent some "alone time" pondering his relationship with God and has exited that time in a much better situation, with a much better frame of mind. Jonah finally understands mercy. Right? Everything from this point on will go smoothly, right?

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will remind ourselves that our God is sovereign over all things, all events, even the crises of life.

2) We will save ourselves much grief by crying out to Him BEFORE we sink to the very bottom!

3) We will see crises as opportunity to deepen our relationship with our God who saves.

4) We will worship Him from the belly of the beast.