



Jonah - Chapter Two

Summary of Chapter Two

Jonah finds himself in a perilous situation, being in the belly of the large fish. However, Jonah's poetic prayer is not a request to be saved from the fish but is thanksgiving for being saved by the fish. Verse 2 summarises the prayer: Jonah called for help and God answered. Verses 3-6a then expand on Jonah's call for help; while vv.6b-10 expand on God's answer, which results in Jonah being returned to dry land.

1:17 But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Jonah 1:17

Verse 1:17 is Jonah 2:1 in the Hebrew text, and 2:1-10 are numbered 2:2-11.

But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah. Provided is also translated 'appointed' and 'prepared' in Jonah 4:6-8. This is the first of four uses of this word that underscore God's sovereign control over creation.

A large fish, Hebrew *Dag*, is not limited to what is called fish today, generally cold-blooded vertebrate sea creatures with fins and gills, but is a general word for an aquatic beast, which cannot be identified further. However, a large whale such as a sperm whale could easily swallow a man whole.

Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Although this may be a symbolic expression for a time of dying and rising, as in: <<*After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him*>> (Hosea 6:2), it more likely describes the actual number of days, or parts of three days, according to accepted reckoning of days at that time: <<*In the open country they found an Egyptian, and brought him to David. They gave him bread and he ate; they gave him water to drink; they also gave him a*

piece of fig cake and two clusters of raisins. When he had eaten, his spirit revived; for he had not eaten bread or drunk water for three days and three nights>> (1 Samuel 30:11-12), and: <<Turn back, and say to Hezekiah prince of my people, Thus says the Lord, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; indeed, I will heal you; on the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord>> (2 Kings 20:5). In either case it has associations with return from death or near-death, which perhaps is why Jesus likened the time between his own death and resurrection to Jonah's time in the fish: <<When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, 'This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation>> (Luke 11:29-30). The fact that Jesus referenced the account of Jonah indicates that the story is a true historic record.

II. Jonah 2:1-10 - A Psalm of Thanksgiving

Jonah's prayer (2:2b-9) is framed by an introduction (1:17-2:2a) and a conclusion (2:10), both of which mention the fish.

¹ Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish,
² saying,

'I called to the Lord out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

Jonah 2:1-2

Finally, Jonah prayed. Jonah is still in the belly of the fish but he knows it is enough that the Lord has heard his cry, i.e. you heard my voice. He did not pray for God to save the pagan sailors, but he did thank God for saving him. In faith, Jonah knows that he will be delivered. Jonah knew God heard him before the answer came. This shows that Jonah had faith and that God can give believers a total peace and assurance that their prayers are answered, even before the actual answer comes.

I called to the Lord out of my distress. Realising there was no hope in his situation other than to turn to the Lord, Jonah cried out as many do in times of distress: <<I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit>> (Lamentations 3:55).

In this and the rest of the chapter, Jonah's prayer incorporates many phrases and figures of speech from the Psalms. This shows that Jonah was a man who

knew God's Word, and knew it by heart, because there were no copies of Scripture and no candle in the fish's belly: <<In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears>> (Psalm 18:6), <<I had said in my alarm, 'I am driven far from your sight.' But you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help>> (Psalm 31:22), and: <<Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me>> (Psalm 42:7).

Sheol refers to the realm of the dead, which one would enter by going through a gate made of bars (v.6). This can be found also in: <<Will it go down to the bars of Sheol? Shall we descend together into the dust?>> (Job 17:16), <<Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?>> (Job 38:17), and: <<Be gracious to me, O Lord. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death, so that I may recount all your praises, and, in the gates of daughter Zion, rejoice in your deliverance>> (Psalm 9:13-14). Jonah did not literally pray from Sheol but describes his near-death experience inside the great fish: <<O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit>> (Psalm 30:2-3).

3 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.

4 Then I said, "I am driven away
from your sight;
how shall I look again
upon your holy temple?"

Jonah 2:3-4

You cast me into the deep. Although it was the sailors who had hurled Jonah into the sea in Jonah 1:15, he knows that God was working sovereignly through them, and so he can say that it was God who had cast him into the sea. Jonah sees that he has never been out of God's hands, even though he had tried to run from him.

All your waves and your billows passed over me. This is the cry of a drowning man and can apply both to Jonah's physical and spiritual situation. It is how David had felt when he was being pursued by King Saul and other enemies: <<For the

waves of death encompassed me, the torrents of perdition assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares of death confronted me>> (2 Samuel 22:5-6). He, too, turned his situation into thanksgiving for God's salvation.

I am driven away from your sight. Jonah's greatest pain was not the calamity, but his separation from God, his feeling that he was cast out of God's sight, a situation that the pious should always fear: *<<I had said in my alarm, 'I am driven far from your sight.' But you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help>>* (Psalm 31:22), *<<And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim>>* (Jeremiah 7:15). Still he was determined, even in the belly of a fish, to turn his heart towards God and his temple. Simply, Jonah remembered the Lord (v.7).

Look again, or **look toward**, refers to the ancient practice of praying toward the temple as indicated by the words of King Solomon in Jerusalem when the temple was first built: *<<Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling-place; heed and forgive>>* (1 Kings 8:30), and Daniel's practice in Babylon several hundred years later: *<<Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously>>* (Daniel 6:10).

- 5 The waters closed in over me;
 the deep surrounded me;
 weeds were wrapped around my head
- 6 at the roots of the mountains.

 I went down to the land
 whose bars closed upon me for ever;
 yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
 O Lord my God.

Jonah 2:5-6

I went down. As commented on its use in Jonah 1:3 and 1:4-5, the inference is of going down to death. Jonah's descent to death is almost complete as he reaches **the roots of the mountains** at the bottom of the seas, where the gates of Sheol are located.

Since the **bars** refer to the gates of Sheol (v.2), **the land** refers to the realm of the dead: *<<But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of*

the earth>> (Psalm 63:9), and: <<For thus says the Lord God: When I make you a city laid waste, like cities that are not inhabited, when I bring up the deep over you, and the great waters cover you, then I will thrust you down with those who descend into the Pit, to the people of long ago, and I will make you live in the world below, among primeval ruins, with those who go down to the Pit, so that you will not be inhabited or have a place in the land of the living>> (Ezekiel 26:19-20), as does the Pit: <<Their souls draw near the Pit, and their lives to those who bring death. Then, if there should be for one of them an angel, a mediator, one of a thousand, one who declares a person upright, and he is gracious to that person, and says, “Deliver him from going down into the Pit; I have found a ransom”>> (Job 33:22-24), and: <<who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy>> (Psalm 103:4).

Yet you brought up my life from the Pit. Again, Jonah can praise God for the answer to prayer before the answer came, because God gave him assurance. Jonah had done nothing to deserve being rescued; his salvation was by grace alone: <<For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ>> (Titus 2:11-13), and: <<Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated, when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory>> (1 Peter 1:10-11).

7 As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the Lord;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

Jonah 2:7

As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord. Jonah believed his life was at an end and his natural response was to turn his thoughts to the God he had once so faithfully served as a prophet and had so foolishly tried to abandon.

My prayer came to you, into your holy temple. This was not the Jerusalem temple that Jonah had in mind but of God's dwelling place in heaven, where he hears and answers all prayers: <<Then the priests and the Levites stood up and blessed the people, and their voice was heard; their prayer came to his holy dwelling in heaven>> (2 Chronicles 30:27), and: <<Another angel with a golden

censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel>> (Revelation 8:3-4).

- 8 Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
- 9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!'

Jonah 2:8-9

Those who worship vain idols refers to the pagan sailors, who prayed each to his own god (Jonah 1:5), but it is also a message to Jonah's idolatrous fellow Israelites who forsake their true loyalty: <<They made me jealous with what is no god, provoked me with their idols. So I will make them jealous with what is no people, provoke them with a foolish nation>> (Deuteronomy 32:21), <<And Samuel said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart; and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless>> (1 Samuel 12:20-21), <<What use is an idol once its maker has shaped it – a cast image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in what has been made, though the product is only an idol that cannot speak!>> (Habakkuk 2:18), <<But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first>> (Revelation 2:4). Ironically, the sailors ended up experiencing God's steadfast love, while Jonah ended up in the sea. Jonah realises that resisting God, running from him, is like being an idolater.

Sacrifice and vowed recall the actions of the sailors: <<Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows>> (Jonah 1:16), whom Jonah is now like. Salvation belongs to the Lord is Jonah's confession that God is the sovereign source of salvation, although the rest of the story will show that Jonah believes God is free to save any, as long as they are 'us' and not 'them' - <<But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?'>> (Jonah 4:1-4).

Jonah repents for running away from God and he turns to God with sacrifice and thanksgiving. He will pay his vows to God, and do whatever God tells him to do. At one time or another, Jonah had probably said what many Christians have said: "Lord, I'll do whatever you want me to do." Now Jonah realises fully that he must stop resisting God and he should pay his vows to God. This was his solemn duty: *<<When a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth>>* (**Numbers 30:2**), *<<When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfil what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfil it>>* (**Ecclesiastes 5:4-5**), *<<Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah, fulfil your vows, for never again shall the wicked invade you; they are utterly cut off>>* (**Nahum 1:15**), and: *<<Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord">>* (**Matthew 5:33**).

Deliverance belongs to the Lord! This is more than a statement of fact; it is Jonah's triumphant declaration. God has saved and will save, and Jonah means it personally. Jonah's salvation comes from the Lord alone.

By the end of v.9 it is clear that Jonah has repented; but when did Jonah repent? There are indications of repentance when:

- Jonah said he feared the Lord and was honest about his story (1:9).
- Jonah allowed himself to be cast into the sea (1:12).
- Jonah called out to God during the three days and nights in the belly of the large fish (v.2, v.4, and v.7).
- Jonah renewed his commitment to his vow (v.9).

So, when did Jonah repent? The answer is found in seeing repentance as more than a one-time event. Although it begins at a given point in time, it must continue and mature. It is an event but it is also a process.

¹⁰ Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Jonah 2:10

Then the Lord spoke to the fish. The fish worked at the command of God. Just as much as the fish was under the command of God when it swallowed Jonah, it was under his command when it let him go. It also seems that the fish was more obedient than Jonah and, indeed, more than some Christians, for it obeyed God's command without question or hesitation.

Vomited or spewed can express disgust: <*They swallow down riches and vomit them up again; God casts them out of their bellies*> (Job 20:15), <*You will vomit up the little you have eaten, and you will waste your pleasant words*> (Proverbs 23:8), <*If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, or else, having too much, you will vomit it*> (Proverbs 25:16), and: <*So because you are lukewarm (spiritually useless), and neither hot nor cold, I will vomit you out of My mouth [rejecting you with disgust]*> (Revelation 3:16 AMP), and some interpreters see here an indication that God was still displeased with the hostility toward the Ninevites that was still in Jonah's heart, as revealed in Jonah Chapter 4, in spite of the obvious gratitude of his prayer. Nevertheless, the fish's action brought deliverance to Jonah, an indication of God's favour.

Jonah's deliverance came after Jonah's repentance was complete. Jonah was not just sorry for what he had done, he was now trusting God again. What work of God, or aspect of his deliverance, will remain undone as long as one resists him and refused to trust him? Jonah's deliverance came after three days and nights had passed, providing a foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus said: <*For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth*> (Matthew 12:40). Do the three days and three nights of Matthew 12:40 prove that if Jesus rose on Sunday, he must have died on Thursday instead of the traditional day of Friday? Not at all. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, around the year 100 AD, said: "A day and a night make a whole day, and a portion of a whole day is reckoned as a whole day." This demonstrates how in Jesus' day, the phrase three days and three nights did not necessarily mean a 72-hour period, but a period including at least the portions of three days and three nights. Jonah's deliverance came after a remarkable example of laying down one's life. Jonah gave his life to appease the wrath of God coming upon others. However, death did not hold him; after three days and nights of imprisonment, he was alive and free. In this way Jonah is a type of Christ, although his work can never be compared to that of Jesus.

Upon the dry land. It is commonly thought that Jonah was vomited out on the shores of Nineveh, but this cannot be the case because Nineveh is about 375 miles or 600 km from the Mediterranean Sea. If Jonah did walk into Nineveh right from the belly of the fish, that would have been some vomit!