

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JONAH

“The Prodigal Prophet”

Jonah 2:1-10

STUDY (4)

By

REV (DR) PAUL FERGUSON



10 Bukit Batok Crescent, #01-01/02, The SPIRE
Singapore 658079

www.cornerstonechurch.sg

“A Fish Supper Reversed” (Jonah 2:1-10)

Despite his persistent rebelliousness, God is not yet finished with Jonah. He has infinite ways of bringing us to the place where He want us to be. Throughout the narrative, the Lord is working to save both Jonah and the city of Nineveh. Jonah now finds himself spiraling downward in the water. Death seems almost certain, but still there is no repentance. The writer of Proverbs tells us, “*He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy*” (Prov. 28:13).

This great fish sent from the Lord then swallows him. It is the most maligned fish in history, as sceptics have written tomes doubting this great fish. There is no difficulty in believing God can do this. If you can get past Genesis 1:1, then there should be nothing in Scripture that is incredulous for us to believe. More significantly, after this act of mercy, will Jonah pray now?

Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, (v1)

After the physical shock of the icy waters, the first spiritual shock to Jonah must have been that he was still alive. He knew he was not in heaven! This must have made him think! This chapter 2 is what Jonah prayed while still conscious in the fish. We are not told when he prayed this prayer. It may have been at the end of the three days he was in the belly of the fish.

For the first time in this narrative, this man begins to pray. During his rebellion, Jonah's focus was on self. But this was a personal prayer to “*the LORD his God.*” There is no divorce in God's family. We may be unfaithful but He is always faithful to His covenantal promises. In fact chastisement is evidence of a faithful Father (cf. Hebrews 12:5-13). Jehovah is still “*his God*” in the depths of the ocean. Jonah deserved nothing but salvation never depended on our worth from predestination to glorification. This is the truth that will burst out of Jonah's thankful heart when he is restored into full fellowship, “*Salvation is of the LORD*” (v9).

Backsliding is always characterised by a neglect of the place of prayer. It is a futile attempt to run from the presence and authority of God. Previously, Jonah had tried to run from the Lord, but now he is running to the Lord for help. Crying to God in prayer is the first step in repentance. In doing so, you are recognising you are under the Lordship of Christ. He is King in your life and not self. Jonah at least starts down the path of restoration. It is one of the strangest places a prayer is ever heard in the history of this world. However, a sovereign God can hear our prayers anywhere on this planet. This is a truth Jonah found out the hard way. As the Psalmist notes,

If I ascend up into heaven, Thou *art* there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou *art there*. If I take the wings of the morning, *and* dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me. (Psa. 139:8-10)

The sad thing is that it takes all this before this man will pray. He refuses to do so in the storm and even in the water. It is one thing to acknowledge God is judging you for your sin, but quite another to repent. Only when every option has been exhausted and he has hit rock bottom will this man pray. The power of pride and the flesh is very powerful. But at least Jonah does eventually pray. Richard Phillips points out,

What has changed in Jonah's life so that now he prayed? Back on the great ship, he refused to pray even when the captain implored him. But things are different inside of the great fish. What has happened? The answer is that God in His grace has brought Jonah low. Now brought to the ultimate destination of his foolish flight, Jonah is faced

with the real consequences. He is separated from God, from the fellowship of God's people, and from the witness of God's Word. For many of us, the journey that Jonah took will involve the whole of our lives – a slow but steady descent into darkness. But God in His grace gave Jonah a sudden experience of where he was heading. Call it a sneak preview of coming attractions. Cast overboard, Jonah is encased in the living grave that is the belly of the fish, deep beneath the surface of the waves. And there he found grace finally to pray.

This incident shows the wisdom and mercy of God. He knows what it takes to break the stubborn heart of Jonah, and He has the wisdom and power to use that knowledge to do so. If he will not submit above water, God will bring him below the water. If you refuse to surrender the easy way, then God will get you the hard way. However, God only uses enough pressure that is absolutely necessary, "*For He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men*" (Lam. 3:33). God will do whatever it takes to bring a rebellious saint to the place where we cry unto Him. This is only with the motive of restoration, "*For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness*" Heb. 12:10). John Bunyan once observed, "thou are beaten that thou mayest be better."

We must also note another lesson God is teaching the rebellious prophet. He will show Jonah mercy before God will let Jonah witness His mercy to Nineveh. This man will embody the message he is called to preach.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRAYER

This is one of the Bible's great prayers. Not just because of its circumstances, but the prayer's structure reveals some remarkable things. It is the cry of a man who clearly knows God through His Word. It seems to have multiple quotations and allusions to God's Word throughout it such as Psalms 3, 5, 16, 18, 31, 42, 50, 65, 88, and 120. Every line of this prayer echoes the hymn book of the OT. This fact should encourage us to immerse ourselves in the Word of God. So Jonah's trials led him back to the Bible and prayer.

This prayer of Jonah illustrates the importance of the Word of God to prayer. It also shows that Jonah had a mind that was saturated by the Word of God. Most of us could cite parts of Psalm 23 if pushed, but few could correctly saturate our prayers with references to multiple Psalms. There is also a warning here. Jonah may have known God's Word, but that did not protect him from falling into such a great sin of disobedience. The Word of God must be known, but it also must be obeyed, "*But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves*" (James 1:22).

And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and He heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and Thou heardest my voice. (v2)

Affliction can often be good thing for us, "*Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept Thy word*" (Psalm 119:67). This trial in the water is more than merely punitive for the prophet. Jonah explicitly links his chastisement with his cry unto God, "*I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD.*" That causal link should not be ignored. It proves that the Lord was using this ordeal to restore this man and not to destroy him. Jonah had deserted God, but God had not deserted him, as His love is an everlasting one (cf Jer. 31:3). The story of Jonah is a classic illustration of the perseverance of the true elect saints of God. That is where we derive such comfort in the sovereignty of God. Paul points out the unbreakable chain in his wonderful words,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

The object of Jonah's cries must also be observed, "*unto the LORD.*" This man is not looking at self but to the Creator. God alone is sovereign. We do not rule. This is where we all need to go for not help. The prodigal prophet, like the NT namesake, has come to his senses! When we truly pray, the Lord will hear us, "*and Thou heardest my voice.*" Jonah is learning the truth of what God promised, "*And call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me*" (Psa. 50:15).

For Thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and Thy waves passed over me. (v3)

Jonah fully recognises that the desperate circumstance he is in was not coincidental or bad luck. Nor does he blame the pagan sailors for throwing him into the sea. He does not complain about his present surroundings, but acknowledges that a sovereign God was behind it all, "*For Thou hadst cast me into the deep.*" Jonah now sees that God has been after him all along. The Great Shepherd has caught up with the runaway sheep. He confesses God's sovereignty over him and nature. He feels the weight of his sin and God's judgment upon it. This is not some paragraph he has memorised from a Theology textbook, but this is something that is imprinted deep in his soul. In the darkness of the deep with the waves going over his head, he now sees God.

Then I said, I am cast out of Thy sight; yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple. (v4)

Jonah recounts the greatest agony of this whole experience, "*Then I said, I am cast out of Thy sight.*" That is the bitterest fruit of backsliding. This rebellious prophet wanted to get away from the Lord so he now gets a taste of the reality of that. It does not prove to be the relief he thought. Yes, God is omnipresent but we can go so far in rebellion and sin that we can feel that God has forsaken us. David clearly experienced that in his great fall with Bathsheba and cried in his penitential Psalm,

Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit" (Psa. 51:11-12).

"YET" – this word breathes a sweet aroma of hope in this verse. Jonah has hit rock bottom and he then remembered he was still this side of eternity and that there is always hope in God. Jehovah is the God of the hopeless cases. As the smitten prophet recalls the great temple he draws encouragement, "*yet I will look again toward Thy holy temple.*" There are a number of possible reasons why this thought changes his focus. Hugh Martin notes,

Jonah thought of 'the temple;' and why? Because God had placed His name there. Because there He gave the symbol of His presence as a God of love, and especially a God of propitiated favour; a God dwelling between the cherubim, God on the blood-sprinkled seat of mercy, on the throne of grace.

We also know from chapter four that Jonah was aware of the character of Jehovah before he left on the boat for Tarshish,

And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. (Jonah 4:2)

When a man has backslidden and in despair, the first thing he needs to do is meditate on the revealed character of God. That is where he will find hope.

The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast Thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God. (v5-6)

In v5-6, Jonah gives us more graphic detail of his descent into the deep, “*the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.*” This was far from the romantic experience of the children’s story Bibles! We can only but imagine the terror and panic that gripped his soul as the water filled his lungs and the seaweed entangled his head. Doubtless, the smell, dampness, and darkness of the inside of the fish was anything but comfortable! It was probably a bit like getting trapped in a filthy dark washing machine! This is not a pleasant place to get his theology and life straightened but it is a good place.

When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple. (v7)

When everything about your circumstances is collapsing, never forget the Lord is there. Hudson Taylor, pioneer missionary to China once observed, “In every great work attempted for God, there are always three stages: impossible, difficult, done.”

David was at his wits end in Ziklag when he had lost everything and his men threatened mutiny. But the Scriptures tell us that at that lowest point, he remembered there was One who can make the impossible things possible, “*And David was greatly distressed; for the people spake of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters: but David encouraged himself in the LORD his God?*” (1 Sam. 30:6).

At the last moment, Jonah suddenly remembers the God of David is still on the throne, “*When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD.*” The wonderful thing about the Lord is that He doesn’t hold grudges. When we truly repent He immediately responds, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness?*” (1 John 1:9). Jonah receives the same gift of mercy that the Lord wants to extend to Nineveh.

They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD. (v8-9)

Now, Jonah sees the vanity of the idols of this world, “*They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.*” He is learning many profound lessons in the “Chastening College” of the fish’s belly!

In contrast to the world, Jonah heart is now echoing to a different drumbeat, “*But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed.*” This is the reaction of a truly repentant heart. It is one full of thanksgiving to the Lord for Jonah can now see that this terrifying ordeal was for his ultimate benefit. The vows are indicative of his desire to make

restitution by serving Him with the whole heart. This man is going in a different direction now. His focus is on God and God's will.

Jonah concludes with a great confession of faith, "*Salvation is of the LORD.*" He acknowledges that it is God who is sovereign in salvation. If the Lord wants to save Nineveh, He can do it. The first and last word is never with men, but with God's power. That is still true today. Salvation is all of God and damnation is down to our sin. God planned, effected, and perfected salvation without the help or advice of any man. Redemption is neither of the church nor of good works but, "*Salvation is of the LORD.*" All will be Calvinists in heaven praising God for this truth forever!

Believers are simply His instruments in His great purpose and plan of salvation. His will and not ours must guide our lives. Jonah must also have noted that God had spared his life in order to testify to this truth. This also proves that the sovereignty of God in salvation is not just a NT Pauline truth. Rather it is the eternal plan of God that runs right through the Scriptures. If salvation depended upon man, then no one would ever be saved as, "*There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God*" (Romans 3:10-11).

And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land. (v10)

No sooner had Jonah fully repented, than God exercised His sovereign power over the fish again. Spurgeon humorously observed that the fish must have been an Arminian as it could not stomach the sound Reformed doctrine of unconditional election coming from Jonah that salvation was of the Lord!

The Lord not only told the fish to expel Jonah, but directed it to throw Jonah out onto dry land. When God does something, He doesn't do a halfway job! The great subject of this book is not Jonah but the Lord. Now, Jonah is back where he started out from. The undeserving prophet has another opportunity to serve the Lord.

In spite of the fact that Jonah's trouble was the direct result of his repeated disobedience, the Lord was willing to forgive him. This story gives great hope to any reader in disobedience. If you are on the run from your Tarshish, you may wonder is there a way back? Will God have mercy on me? Look at the example of Jonah and take heart. If God showed mercy to Jonah and Nineveh, then His mercy is sufficient for you as well. Cry unto the Lord for mercy.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is Jonah's motive in asking to be thrown overboard?
2. What was the result of Jonah's disobedience?
3. Does this story give you hope in praying for a backslider?
4. Can God abandon or divorce His children?
5. What does this story tell you about the sovereignty of God?