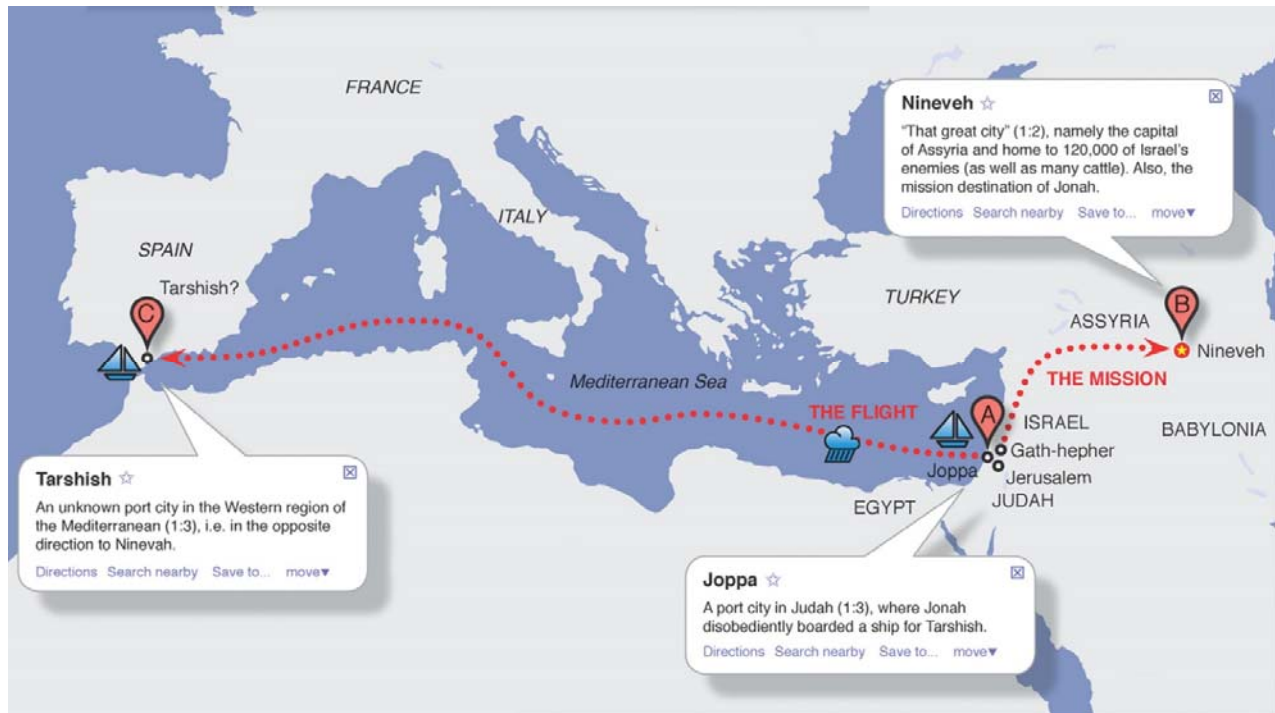


The Prophet's Repentance

Jonah 1:17-2:10

Pastor Russ Kennedy

Called and sent by God, a prophet. Reluctant to take a message of wrath 600 miles to Nineveh, he flees. He puts down his money for a ticket to Tarshish, Spain, 2,400 miles from home and 3,000 miles from his assignment. After putting out to sea, a massive storm hits. After great efforts, the sailors cannot save the ship. They discover Jonah is the reason for the storm. Beginning to fear the Lord, the sailors hurl Jonah into the sea. Immediately, calm.



Cast into the sea, a sure death for the run-away prophet. From raging tempest to immediate calm. Over the horizon the ship disappears as Jonah sinks beneath the waves.

This is the story. Our unknown author wrote to Israel to rebuke them. Oh, they had received and reveled in the mercy of the Lord. But that had not fueled a desire to see that mercy extended to others. In their national pride they saw themselves as uniquely God's people. The unbelieving pagans were outside and under a richly deserved wrath. Israel became the unmerciful recipients of God's mercy.

The book of Jonah is about this prophet and what happened to him. This story was also about Israel and her attitudes. For us, as God's people in the New Covenant, we read our Bibles through the lens of the New Testament. So, this story is about someone and something greater. This prayer, this lament of Jonah foreshadows the descent and ascent of Jesus in His death and resurrection. We learn something powerful about the wideness of God's mercy. Mercy comes as a deliverance. But that deliverance comes through a most unexpected way.

The Deliverance through Death (1:17-2:1)

This story is about a sovereign God who delivers through judgment.

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

A Sovereign God (v. 17)

All through the book of Jonah, God is at work. He is on the move. He is not merely reacting to what is going on. He is executing a plan. These events were orchestrated by God and were inspired by the Spirit for us (1 Corinthians 10). So God is not running to try and salvage a plan gone wrong.

God has prepared a great fish. Our translation says, "Appointed..." They are trying to capture the idea of something existing be set to a purpose. We do not know what this great fish was. Some have thought it was a whale and translations reflect that. Whatever species it was, God had prepared and appointed it to this moment in this ocean at this place.

A Swallowed Prophet (v. 17)

As Jonah sinks beneath the waves, the great fish is directed towards him. We do not know if the sailors on the boat can see – it is doubtful. But the fish swims up with its great maw open and swallows Jonah. Down he goes into its belly.

Many have said this is not possible. There is no known fish in which a person could live for three days and three nights. So either the story is not true or it is intended to be accepted as an allegory. We believe that this is a true story telling a larger story. We believe that the impossibility of living three days in the belly of the great fish is exactly the point.

Whether Jonah is dead or alive, we know the story is portraying a death. But, maybe, just maybe, not Jonah's...

A Striking Response (2:1)

Then, after the three days, Jonah prays. It is a striking response. He has been talking about God but now he talks to God. He prays a lament and a praise.

The Deliverance through Prayer (2:1-9)

Jonah's prayer is the heart of picture being drawn. He describes his experience in evocative poetry that looks forward...

From the Depths, Looking to God's Throne (v. 2-4)

The prayer opens with the movement down into the depths and looking towards God's holy temple, His throne.

"I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the (depths of the grave) belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

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.

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

This is after the 3 days. This prayer is reflecting on what God had done. Jonah is interpreting the events in a God-centered way.

In the midst of distress, out of the depths, the Lord heard Jonah's call. He sought the Lord's help. Jonah called and the Lord answered. Jonah cried and the Lord heard. This is meant to comfort and encourage all of God's people. In the midst of chastening and trouble, God will hear, God will respond, God will answer our calls and cries to Him. The language here is echoed in the book of Hebrews where we are exhorted to "come to the throne of grace to find help in our time of need..."

What kind of distress and trouble is this? This is being drowned in the depths of the sea. It is going down into the belly of Sheol. Some translations, less accurately but more clearly say, "Out of the depths of the grave..." The depths of the sea, the pits of the great fish's belly were like going down into the darkness of the grave. The waves and billows of God's roiling wrath rolled over him. Down, down, down he sinks. But the grave is not the end...

Because of knowing the Lord responded, he has hope. He has hope to return to the land of Israel and see the temple. He will one day return to his homeland where God dwells in the holy temple. There God rules from His throne in the Holy of Holies. Though he will never see the Holy of Holies, he will see the magnificent structure Solomon built.

In the midst of the depths, in the deepest distress, maybe even near dying, he looks to God's throne. He seeks God's help. He knows he will be heard. He rises in hope. There is no trouble, no distress, do depths to which you can sink that you cannot look to God's throne. There and there alone, is true hope.

Out of Death, Praying before God's Throne (v. 5-7)

Down, down, into the depths of the sea. Down into the pit, the grave, the last darkness. But that was not the end.

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;

yet you brought up my life from the pit,

O Lord my God.

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

What Jonah experienced was a kind of death. The waters took his life. The seaweed smothered his face. He went down into the prison of death. He was closed in. He was helpless. It was hopeless. The end was near.

But he was brought up from the depths of death and given life again. God had cast him in the sea. God had prepared the fish. God had brought him down into the very depths like death. Now God has restored his life again.

He remembered the Lord. He run from God. He had run from the Lord's presence. He was separated from God. And, now having passed through death to life, he seeks the Lord's presence. He had looked to the Lord in His Temple. Now He sends is prayer upward. His prayer arrived at the Lord's door. It entered the Lord's throne room. His prayer bowed before the throne.

Is Jonah being punished? Is he suffering the anger of God? Or is Jonah being delivered? Are the sea and the great fish God's means of deliverance? The answer of this text, this book and the whole Bible.. both. God delivers through judgment.

The Deliverance through Salvation (v. 8-9)

The deliverance God grants comes through His salvation.

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!"

With Sacrifice to the Lord (v. 8-9a)

What is Jonah saying here?

Is this a reassertion of his reason to not fulfill his call? There is no hope of unchanging love to those who worship idols. Is Jonah saying that the repentance of the sailors is a sham? Is he affirming that Nineveh should be outside the steadfast love of the Lord? Is this object of mercy once again denying mercy to others?

Is this an affirmation of what true salvation entails? You cannot expect the steadfast love of the Lord if you persist in your idolatry. Only those who turn from their idols have any hope of mercy and God's steadfast love.

I think here is Jonah's repentance. He is contrasting himself with the pagan idolaters. They cling to their idols. But he sacrifices and serves the Lord. This is personal. This sacrifice is the proper response to God in the Old Covenant. Everyone expresses their faith in God by sacrificing to the Lord. Jonah's response to his deliverance is the same as the pagan sailors.

With Submission to the Lord (v. 9b)

Here is the content of that faith. Here is what is believed. We hope it is not being said in the same prideful, Jewish way as before. And I think not. This is a recognition of two important truths:

There is no salvation except through the Lord. This is the constant message of the Bible. There is only one true God. Salvation is through Him and from Him alone. There is no alternative way. There are no multiple paths to God. All the gods of the nations of the nations are idols. There is only one merciful, loving, saving God.

God gives His salvation to whomever He chooses. It is not up to Jonah whom God saves. Since it is His salvation He chooses those whom He saves. It is not up to us. It is entirely up to Him. If He wants to save pagan sailors and the inhabitants of Nineveh, that is entirely up to the steadfast love and great mercy of the Lord.

With Life from the Lord (v. 6,10)

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

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

Here is a kind of resurrection. We don't know if it is a literal resurrection. But Jonah sees himself as being brought up from the pit or the grave. Yes, this language is a metaphor. It speaks out of his own experience. But the Holy Spirit is indicating something greater. How do I know that?

Trajectory:

Jesus connects this story with himself. Consider how the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees is recorded in Matthew 12:

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you."

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here."

In answering the demands for a sign, Jesus says that Jonah is a type of Himself. How does Jesus make this connection? How is Jonah a sign, a type and a lesson?

Jesus compares himself with Jonah in two ways:

Jonah was entombed in the belly of the fish (v. 40a), and so Jesus will be entombed (v. 40b) in the heart of the earth. Jonah's three days in the fish foreshadowed the death and burial of Jesus. The correspondence hinges in the three days.

Jonah was a preacher of repentance to Nineveh. But, one greater than Jonah has come preaching repentance. That is Jesus Christ. As Jonah and his preaching were a sign to the Ninevites, so Jesus and his preaching are a sign to the Jews of Jesus' day.

But what is the point of the sign? The Pharisees and the Jews were seeking a sign. How was Jesus going to authenticate His preaching? Of course, they had rejected the miracles He had been doing. Jonah's preaching was validated by the miraculous deliverance from the sea and the fish. That Jonah was alive after being cast into the depths and swallowed by the fish, a figurative grace was proof of the messenger and the message.

Jesus' preaching, His mission and message are proven to be valid and true, that is, they will be validated by a His resurrection, His miraculous deliverance from death. So Jesus' point is made with a forceful exhortation. Those who heard Him preach should repent even as

the Ninevites did. Why? They should repent because someone greater than Jonah is speaking to them. Jesus is a greater prophet than Jonah. Jesus and Jonah are both prophets. But Jesus is ever so much more. Jesus is greater because of who He is. But He is greater because through His own death and resurrection He brings the salvation that Jonah needed, received and celebrated.

Matthew does not stop with this. Jesus continues by making a comparison with Solomon (12:42). The comparison is moving beyond Jonah here. There is a greater prophet; He must be heard and heeded. But He is also a greater Wisdom and the greater King. He is the very wisdom of God. He is the true wise King of whom Solomon was but a dim type. But the force of the application is same. The Gentiles of Jonah's day and the Gentile Queen of the Sheba responded to Jonah's preaching and to Solomon's wisdom. How much more then should those who hear Jesus' words respond since someone greater than Jonah and Solomon is here. If the Gentiles repented, how much more should those who claim the Lord's name repent?

Adapted from *Deliverance through Judgement and Mercy*, (Estelle, 2005).

Reflect and Respond

As one author helpfully summarized it.

Jonah was a sign to the sailors, to the Ninevites and to all who heard of his deliverance. He was a sign that there is a God who raises sinners from the dead. Whether Jonah actually died in the fish, or, as is more likely, was miraculously preserved alive, is beside the point. His arrival in Nineveh was a resurrection from the dead that proclaimed to all a life-giving Saviour. This is what is made clear to us in the full light of the New Testament. It speaks of Christ, whose resurrection is the proof of his power to save his people and raise them from the dead also. Jonah's mission was an acted prophecy. It pointed to Christ who gave himself to death for sinners and who rose on the third day to be the risen Saviour of all who trust in him for salvation, repenting of their sins. The central meaning of the book of Jonah is not even in its missionary teaching about a message of life for all nations. (Keddie, 1986)

Three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish...

It is a sign of judgment...

It is a sign of salvation...

It is the gospel - God has brought our salvation through the judgment of His Son.

Will you then repent? If the Ninevites and the Queen of the South repented, if Jesus' preaching was to heard and heeded in His day, how much more should you repent upon hearing the Word of God, the Scriptures?