

## **Jonah 1:17—2:10 Jonah's flight is ended**

VOTC # 3 August 2021

Hello dear listeners,

Jonah 1:17 introduces the most famous aspect of this book, that a great fish swallowed the prophet. This has attracted an abundant amount of attention. People wonder whether this is miracle or myth. Those wanting to prove it's a miracle try to document accounts of fish swallowing men who yet lived to tell the tale. But if there are all sorts of these instances, then what is described here is not so much a miracle as it is just one of those odd events that sometimes happens. And I would hasten to add that too much concentration on the great fish can distract from examining what actually happened on Jonah's remarkable voyage.

To kick things off, we note the prominent feature of the *sovereignty of God*. This text is *framed* by demonstrations of the Lord's sovereignty over nature. Verse 17, "And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah." God commissioned the fish to take care of his prodigal prophet. And so the question whether a fish could provide a safe habitat for a man for three days is really beside the point. For even if such a fish could do that, the chances of the fish being handy in the Mediterranean at the right time are slim to none. It's quite simply a miracle!

And then at the end of the passage, this fish *obeys* God again. After three days and three nights, the LORD "spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land." The fish obeys every time, in contrast to the stubborn disobedience of the one it was sent to save.

In the Bible, water is a very threatening and dangerous element. Think of the great Flood, where the sea displayed its power to judge, swallow, and destroy. He who is plunged into them is plunged into death and the grave. Sheol, the dark home of the dead. Away from the presence of the Lord. That's where Jonah has been trying to go from the start. And now it looks as though the Lord is giving him what he asked for! But this is where the *surprise* of God's sovereign grace comes. Even there, in the depths of the earth, in that watery grave of Sheol, even there God is sovereign to save.

Jonah needed to see the extent of God's grace, to make him a better servant of the Lord, a bona fide preacher of grace to lost sinners. The question is, did Jonah get it? What does Jonah's prayer say?

Well it becomes very clear that Jonah, though in dire straits, does not recognize his sin and so utters no word of confession!

The first part of the prayer offers a brief summary of Jonah's trouble, and the Lord's deliverance. 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." Sheol is the dark place of silence, where those who rebel against God deserve to end up for judgment. Now Jonah was not just in Sheol, but in the *belly* of Sheol. He saw himself as virtually dead, in the deepest part of that dismal dungeon.

And then he offers up what seems to be quite an orthodox confession of God's sovereignty. 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." Vs. 4, "Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight.'" But to say this is to say much too little. If this were a prayer of repentance, it would have been more *accurate* for Jonah to say, "*I have fled* from your sight." That's what he did. But here there is no admitting his own responsibility for his brush with death.

And then he proceeds to drop altogether the connection between the Lord and the threatening waters. Vs. 5, "The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me." The sea takes him by the throat and casts him down. Before long, as he says, "weeds were wrapped about my head." His chances of escape are reduced even further by the depth of his descent. "At the roots of the mountain I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever," he says in vs. 6. Far from the Lord, Jonah sees nothing but death.

And then we hear about his amazing, unexpected deliverance. Jonah's demise has been averted, and he has only God to thank for it. Which he does, but he is shockingly brief. "You brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple." It's striking that the one who is praying for deliverance is more prominent in the prayer than God. It's not like the Psalms, which are very much God-centered. Jonah dwells on Jonah and his details. He is not repentant for running away; we really get zero indication that his heart has changed.

And this is *most* evident at the end of the psalm, in verses 8–9. He talks about "those who pay regard to vain idols"—they "forsake their hope of covenant love," and he *contrasts* them with himself when he says in verse 9, "But I with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay." Who pay regard to worthless idols? Jonah is thinking about the pagan sailors, about the Ninevites. Jonah sees himself as a faithful worshipper who enjoys the Lord's faithfulness, while those who worship false gods have no hope of experiencing this.

And so his final words, “Salvation belongs to the LORD,” are words not well understood by him. Since salvation is the LORD’s, it is something that can come to pagan idolaters, turning them into Godfearers just as easily as it can come to runaway prophets. But no, Jonah is better than they.

Jonah’s heart is not in the right place. He knows his Scriptures, but he does not know his God. And so it is little wonder that at the end of this psalm, the great fish *vomited* him out onto the dry ground. Divinely induced vomiting suggests that the fish (and God) have had quite enough of Jonah.

Is it possible that our behavior is often not all that far off from Jonah’s? Absolutely! We can have correct theology. But not live up to it. Jonah is absolutely right when he says, “Salvation belongs to the LORD.” And yet he can’t bring that theology to bear upon his own heart. He thought that being part of God’s chosen people was a matter of ethnicity and outward conformity, not heart submission to God. As long as he continued to say the right things, and offer the right sacrifices to fulfill his vows, then he deserved God’s faithfulness.

In other words, he saw the world in terms of insiders and outsiders. And as long as they stay clear of really big sins like idolatry, insiders could mess up and still look to the Lord for help. But outsiders...? Salvation belongs to the LORD, but the LORD belongs to *his* people, not to outsiders. So long as Jonah maintained his theological orthodoxy, he couldn’t possibly be a great sinner.

We often do the same. We divide the world into insiders and outsiders. Those who deserve grace, and those who don’t. But in this process, we become idolaters, with a very low understanding of God’s grace. The shocking thing we learn from Jonah’s prayer is: in our hearts we *can* turn our church, our membership, our doctrine, into idols preventing us from cherishing his *grace* that he gives freely to all kinds of sinners, even us. We tend not to see our sin as all that bad, and so I don’t really see God’s grace as all that amazing.

What’s the answer to our problem? It’s found in that glorious statement Jonah uttered, but didn’t grasp: “Salvation belongs to the LORD.” God is sovereign over our salvation from beginning to end. And that means that if I am part of God’s chosen people, it’s not because I’m a particularly “choice” person. Otherwise, salvation would belong to *me*. But it is the Lord’s alone. And yet in spite of our slowness to cherish his grace, his steadfast love remains equally sure, enduring forever.

But how can it be that the Lord would show such steadfast covenant faithfulness to anybody? The answer is found in the one to whom Jonah points. How did the Son of God view sinners? He loved them from his heart. He welcomed in the despised and the outcast. He reached out to despised tax-collectors and prostitutes.

But the pathway of his obedience, through which outsiders could come in, meant for Jesus a profound separation from the Father for *our* sins. Christ went to the belly of the earth, past the gates of hell into hell itself, driven away from the Father's presence into utter darkness. He actually felt the full measure of God's hellish torment. It dragged him down into its deepest depths, where all of our self-righteousness and pride and idolatry, all of our rejection of those unlike us was all laid upon him. And when the Son cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" the Father did not appoint some beast to rescue him. Instead, he turned out the lights. But Christ experienced all this in order that his place of death would become our place of deliverance. His death became our place of undeserved mercy. The cross, like the belly of the fish, is good news.

And he didn't stay there. For the Lord would not abandon the soul of his holy one in Sheol (Ps. 16). Up from the grave he arose, also on the third day. The earth did not vomit him out. Death simply could not hold him. And so he triumphed once for all over sin, death, and hell on behalf of all his people.

Come to this Saviour, and receive full and free salvation that belongs to the LORD. We are all idolaters. We have all forfeited our rights to the Lord's steadfast love because we are all great sinners. But Jesus Christ is a great Saviour for great sinners. Salvation belongs to the LORD, which means that he can save anyone. So cherish his salvation—it's far more than we comprehend, and infinitely more than we deserve.