

Jonah 2

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening, everyone. Please keep your Bible open at that passage. Let's pray as we come to God's word. We thank you so much, Heavenly Father, for the wonderful freedom we have to gather around your word.

We thank you for the scriptures in our own language. We thank you for the gift of your spirit. We pray, please, that you would give us understanding and help us to hear rightly what you are saying to us.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Do please have your Bible open at Jonah chapter 2. You'll find also a handout. It should have been given to you on the way in that will encourage you that we're making progress towards an end.

Jonah chapter 2 has been the cause of huge controversy over the last hundred years or so. In Western Christianity, we've been through a huge period of anti-supernaturalism.

And there isn't anything in the Bible, apart from perhaps the resurrection of the dead, that is quite as hard for the anti-supernatural mindset to grasp than a man lasting three days and three nights inside a fish.

[1 : 1 4] How does that work? And so some have said, maybe this is a metaphor for the state of Jonah's mind at the time, depressed, gloomy, smelly, or a metaphor for the state of the people of Israel at that time.

Others, more inclined to take the story at face value, have wondered, how could that happen? Such speculations are understandable, but simply not the concern of this part of the Bible.

One author puts it like this, what kinds of fish people can live inside is not an interest of the Scriptures. All we are told about this fish is in chapter 1 verse 17 and chapter 2 verse 10.

Five things. It was a huge fish. Two, God gave it the job of swallowing Jonah. Three, it did that. Four, he gave it the job of vomiting Jonah out on dry land.

Five, it did that. That's all we get about the fish. It might be a big fish, but it's not a massive player in this drama. Before we move on, can I just say that if the fish and how Jonah could possibly have survived in it is a huge problem to you, you probably haven't really thought yet how big the God of the Bible really is.

[2 : 5 5] He's the God who made and controls everything. He's not tied to impersonal laws of nature. He is the law of nature. It happens because he does it.

He rules everything every second. He maintains everything in existence all the time. You owe your present breath. The one you've just taken.

You owe your present thought to his sustaining power every second of your life. The fish is simply one of God's things, as is Jonah.

He uses it how he wants, and if he wants Jonah to stay alive inside it, he's well able to make that happen. He's that kind of God. He simply doesn't have a problem doing what he wants with the things he's made.

Now, the real puzzle of Jonah chapter 2 is not the fish. The real puzzle is the attitude. How can a man who sings a song of praise, having been rescued from the depths of the sea in chapter 2, be so angry at God in chapter 4?

[4 : 08] That's the real puzzle of chapter 2. It's one of the great conundrums of this book. It seems at first sight jarringly inconsistent.

How can a thankful man, praising God for rescue, be so angry in chapter 4 at the rescue of others? There seems to be a massive inconsistency there.

Second puzzling thing, of course, about this prayer is how do you get a song of praise in a fish? Why do we suddenly break into song mode in the middle of the story?

Do you notice that? It's in poetic mode, this. And the location is really weird. Can you imagine it? On the BBC on a Sunday afternoon, Songs of Praise comes to you today from the digestive tract of a large sea creature deep in the Mediterranean, first in outside broadcasting introduced by David Attenborough.

It's just weird, isn't it, that? Why would you make Songs of Praise from there? And the form of it is weird. I mean, I can imagine gratitude from the gut of a fish, but I can't quite imagine carefully constructed poetry, which this is.

[5 : 22] These words have an air of calm reflection about them that I think might be quite difficult to conjure up within the stomach of a large fish.

Notice the past tense in verse 5. The deep surrounded me, past tense. Well, in the fish, the deep is still around him, isn't it?

And notice again in verse 6, you brought up my life from the pit. Well, he's not in the sea, strictly speaking. He's in the fish now. But is the inside of the fish any less terrifying than being in the water outside?

What I think we have here are Jonah's words from later on carefully put together reflecting what was going on in his attitude at the time.

These are calm, reflective words. Bible narrative quite often has these poetic interludes in them.

[6 : 29] And the poetic breaks, the songs, are really important. They take you right to the heart of what's going on. And I think this one does too. I wonder if you noticed how joined up this song is to the rest of the letter.

Compare chapters 1 and 2 for a moment. Both are rescue stories. In chapter 1, the sailors are rescued. In chapter 2, Jonah is rescued. In both chapters, people get into trouble in the sea.

Chapter 1, the sailors. Chapter 2, Jonah. In both chapters, people pray for help to the God of Israel. In both chapters, God hears and answers their prayers. And in both cases, the people who've been rescued make vows to God.

Look at 1.16 for a moment. At this, the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

Now look at chapter 2, verse 9. I, with the shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will make good. Sacrifices and vows in chapter 1 and in chapter 2.

[7 : 38] Do you see there are very strong parallels between these chapters? They fit right together. So why is chapter 2 here? Well, I think it's a song of praise about a last-minute rescue.

At this point in the story, up to this point, Jonah has not prayed at all, as far as we can see. He's been stubbornly silent towards God.

Let's just remind ourselves of the story so far. God gave Jonah a command, go to Nineveh and preach against it. He deliberately disobeys the command. More than that, instead of being just a stay-at-home, disobedient messenger, he's chosen a positively anti-God thing to do.

He's headed for the sea, that great symbol of chaos and anti-God power in the Bible. It's almost as if he's opted for chaos and disorder and evil and death rather than continue in his role as the prophet of God's life-giving word.

In chapter 1, it's clear to the sailors and to him that God is against him. But in chapter 1, no mention is made of Jonah praying.

[8 : 59] And he doesn't turn around. He seems stubbornly determined to die in the sea. But what we find is, chapter 2, that as the waters close over his head, and as death approaches, in the end, his life is too precious for him to lose.

And he prays. And these words of praise, they're not the prayer for rescue. These words are words of praise after he prayed for rescue. These words of praise take us back to his mind, having been rescued.

Let's look at this prayer then, and we'll try and reflect on what it's doing here in this book. The prayer Jonah prays. In many ways, it's a typical Thanksgiving psalm. We had Psalm 40 a bit earlier on.

Very, very similar sorts of psalms. You can find a number of other poems like this in the book of Psalms. Usually, the person who's writing is thanking God for a dramatic rescue from some danger or other.

And this one has three parts to it. First, an introduction in verse 2. The introduction sets the scene for what follows.

[10 : 16] I called to the Lord. He answered me. I called for help. You answered my cry. He has cried to God for help, and God has answered him.

That's what the poem is about. He goes on. He talks to God about what God did. What happened? Here he describes his crisis in the sea.

How desperate it was. How he cried out to God and God rescued him. There are two parts to this story. It basically goes like this. You threw me in and you pulled me out. You threw me in, verses 3 and 4.

You brought me up, verses 5 to 7. Both of them end with a mention of the temple. Look at verse 4. I will look again towards your holy temple.

Verse 7. My prayer rose to your holy temple. So, here Jonah describes the rescue. God cast me into the water.

[11 : 14] God yanked me out of the water. Very strong emphasis on God having done it. The throwing in and the pulling out. And then, verses 8 and 9, we get a conclusion, a vow of obedience.

So, what have we got in this prayer? We have this. Hurrah! God has wonderfully rescued me. He threw me in. He pulled me out.

Those who worship idols forsake God's love, but I will pay my vows to the rescuing God. That's the prayer in summary. Now, what I want to do now is explore three big surprises about this prayer.

Three things that are really surprising. Given what's happened in the story so far, here's the first big surprise. In this song, God gets the praise, but Jonah is center stage.

Jonah refers to the Lord a number of times. Verse 2. The Lord hears and answers his cry. Verse 3. You hurled me in. Verse 6.

[12 : 29] You brought up my life. Verse 9. Salvation comes from the Lord. There's no doubt that God gets the praise in this song, but I wonder if you noticed how orientated around Jonah Jonah's words are.

Jonah's distress. Jonah's life and death situation. Jonah's words. And most especially, Jonah's activity. What Jonah does is uppermost in his mind here.

As I read it, notice the eyes and me's and my's. In my distress, I called to the Lord and he answered me.

From deep in the realm of the dead, I called for help and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas and the currents swelled about me. All your waves and breakers swept over me.

I said, I've been banished from your sight, yet I will look again towards your holy temple. The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me, seaweed was trapped around my head.

[13 : 31] To the roots of the mountains I sank down, the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, O Lord, my God, brought my life up from the pit. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you.

God is in there, but Jonah is really in there. Do you see? Now, you might argue, of course he's in there. It's his prayer about what happened to him.

Yes, but let me ask you, is this how you would praise God? Finding yourself suddenly alive in the fish rather than dead at God's hand in the sea?

Wouldn't you go, thank you, thank you, thank you. I can hardly believe it. Thank you.

I nearly had a catastrophic accident on my bicycle when I was a student. It was partly my fault. My brakes were not good. I had known they were not good from some time and they needed attention.

[14 : 41] I had not attended to them. I was late for class one morning, coming downhill, fast, busy morning traffic, parked cars all along one side of the road, just ahead, a junction coming in from the right.

I was coming towards the end of the row of parked cars when a car came out in front of me. It had clearly not seen me. I knew I was going to hit it.

I could not stop. I just about prayed. An inarticulate yell of despair. You know how it slows down when you know a bad thing is going to happen.

I just about had time to imagine how catastrophic a smash would happen to me right then when I ran into this car. And then suddenly, extraordinarily, I found myself through the gap between the front of the car and the end of the row of parked cars.

I have no idea how I managed to navigate that gap. There must have been millimeters. Do you think I came away from that saying, cool, what a smart driver you are for negotiating that one.

[15 : 57] Do you think I came away from that one saying to myself, I prayed and the Lord answered me. People who don't pray in situations like that, they really have no hope of receiving God's love.

But I prayed and I got rescued. No, the sense of relief was absolutely overwhelming. Thank you, Heavenly Father.

Thank you for getting me out of that. I will fix my brakes. Thank you so much for getting me out of that. When you know you've been in extreme danger, especially if it's basically your fault, what you have contributed to the deliverance and what you have prayed is very far from your mind.

But not in this case. Verse 7. I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you.

That's the tipping point in this psalm. Yes, Jonah mentions God and his activity, but most of the active verbs talk about what Jonah has done.

[17 : 14] I called, I called, I said, I remembered. I, with shouts of praise, will sacrifice to you. Yeah, God was a rescuer, but there's more here about Jonah's prayer for rescue than God's rescue.

God has acknowledged, you see, that Jonah is sent to say his words about God are true, orthodox words, but his orientation fundamentally lacks perspective.

Even in that moment of euphoria after deliverance, says Jonah, looking back on the situation, my thoughts were evolving around me and what I'd done.

God has acknowledged, but he's right in the middle of his vision. Isn't that odd? Given the situation in how he got there? Second, really odd thing.

He admits his danger here, but not his disobedience. I mentioned there are a good number of psalms like this one, psalms of thanksgiving after deliverance from danger. I say some sort of danger because in those thanksgiving occasions, usually the situation is not very clear.

[18 : 25] Which pit did the psalmist in Psalm 40 get rescued from? Well, we don't know. We don't know if it was a metaphorical pit or a real pit because there's no detail about what the danger was.

This poem of thanks looks very like that at first glance. It's full of the danger. It's certainly thankful. But unlike those standalone thanksgiving psalms, this one is seriously rooted in a situation.

Jonah's predicament is not some random, undeserved mishap. The reason for Jonah's danger has been laid out in chapter 1. He's a prophet. He's been used by God back home in Israel.

He'd rather die than be used by God in Nineveh. His actions towards God in chapter 1 are those of an enemy. And that makes his prayer so odd.

For though the prayer does recognize God's hostility, look at verse 3. You hurled me in. At no point in this prayer is there any acknowledgement of Jonah's role in the danger he fell into, of his gross disobedience in chapter 1.

[19 : 42] He mentions that he prayed for deliverance but not at any point that he prayed for forgiveness. The poem goes, that was a bad situation. I remembered the Lord and he rescued me.

The situation the poem describes is more like this. I was very wickedly disobedient and extraordinarily against all the odds God heard my prayer and rescued me.

There's not a hint of that in Jonah's words. Given the situation, don't you think that's odd? He admits his danger but not his disobedience. And third, and perhaps most striking of all, verse 7, he thinks he's better than the sailors that have just thrown him overboard.

When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them, but I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you what I vowed I will make good.

I will say salvation comes from the Lord. He prays to the Lord. Other people pay attention to worthless idols and have no hope of steadfast love, but I, I'm quite different from that.

[21 : 00] You see, he puts himself in the position of faithful orthodoxy here. The one who prays to the true God. The one who has access to God's steadfast love.

The one who does worship rightly. And the pagans, well, the ones who worship idols, there's no hope for them. Contrast this with chapter one. We said chapter one is so closely linked to this chapter.

We find in chapter one quite the opposite is true. Who is the disobedient in chapter one? Jonah. Who takes the course of action away from God's steadfast love in chapter one?

Jonah does. Who has an accurate view of the God of Israel in chapter one? The sailors do. They don't start there. They start praying to their own gods.

But by the end of the chapter, they're praying to Yahweh, the God of Israel, to rescue them. They don't know much, but what they do know, they know rightly. Incidentally, folks, that's a real encouragement.

[22 : 04] If you're somebody here this evening who's just, who's just looking into Christianity for yourself, I think people often think when they're just beginning to find out things that when they come to church, they're in the presence of experts.

How will I ever understand all of this stuff? This is a wonderfully reassuring book. You don't have to know much about the true God to respond rightly to him. Jonah, on the other hand, knows loads about the true God and responds disgracefully to him.

The sailors are the ones who know God rightly in chapter 1. Verse 10, look at what they do. What have you done? They knew he was running away from the Lord.

And then they pray to the Lord and they fear the Lord greatly in verse 16. In chapter 2, Jonah looks back on the storm and the ship and the sailors and says to himself, those pagans up there, what are they doing praying to their gods?

There's no hope of steadfast love for them. I, on the other hand, I'll pray to the true God. Do you see the jarring inconsistency of that?

[23 : 20] Three odd things then. God gets the praise but Jonah is center stage. He admits his danger but not his disobedience. He thinks he's better than the pagans.

Let's have a few closing reflections on this. What are we to make of all this? What is this prayer doing here in this book? We don't need this psalm in order for the story of the book to hold together.

The story would make perfect sense without this. Many important things would still be learned from this book if we didn't have chapter 2. We'd still know that God is a gracious God.

We'd still know that God has great concern for all the peoples in the world. We'd still learn that God uses reluctant servants to accomplish his will. All those things would be obvious from the rest of the book.

Many of the commonest applications of this book would still be absolutely obvious if this chapter were missing. So why are we given all of this information about what Jonah was thinking at the time?

[24 : 25] Well, it certainly makes it clear to us if we were lacking this perspective that God's prophets are far from perfect. But I think it's for a bigger reason than that.

You see, back home in Israel, back home in Israel, things have been going well for God's people. Under their king, Jeroboam II, they've been going well for Jonah back home.

God has used Jonah, but things are not well back home. Just keep a finger in Jonah 2 and turn back to 2 Kings 14, page 384.

2 Kings 14, page 384. 2 Kings 14, page 384. This is the best time in the northern kingdom that they've ever had since they were divided.

Verse 25, there has been military expansion. Verse 25, this has happened in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant, Jonah summoned Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hefer.

[25 : 49] Jonah has been very useful back home and things have gone well and God has made that happen. To the casual observer, all is fine, but things are not well.

Verse 24, because we learn that Jeroboam II did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit.

Jeroboam II did not turn away from the sins of his predecessor, Jeroboam I, some hundred odd years before. I wonder if you remember what the sins of Jeroboam I were.

Well, he erected golden calves at the northern and southern ends of his kingdom. It was a political move to stop people going to Jerusalem, to the temple, to worship the true God.

He didn't want people from north going down south, so he built alternative shrines. He led the nation to worship idols and they never turned away from that.

[27 : 03] Jonah has been used for good back home in that situation, but fundamentally, back home, his nation is an idolatrous nation, not a nation faithful to the true God.

Jonah knows only too well. Jonah chapter 2, turn back there, please. He knows only too well. Well, verse 8, that those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.

That's exactly what's happened back home. Yet, these words make it look as though he's blind to that. Great confidence is expressed in verse 8 and 9.

no doubt in his mind that he, in contrast to those pagans up there, is among the faithful and will be just fine. But his words in chapter 2 sit very uncomfortably with what we know about him and them from chapter 1.

They simply lack perspective. What are we to draw from this? Well, I think this, that comfort and success which Jonah has had back home often breeds pride in individuals, in nations, in churches.

[28 : 41] My guess is that Jonah is so tied into the privileged position he's occupied back home and that his nation has occupied recently that he does not consider for a moment that such privileges are not guarantees of safety forever.

In his prayer he doesn't mention his own need for forgiveness though his rebellion has been gross. His looking back on his prayer expresses complete confidence that at the time he thought himself more orthodox than the sailors who'd responded so positively.

Confident that God would hear him rather than them. Why? Well, because he thinks he's a worshipper of the true God. But all the pagans in this book respond better to God than Jonah does.

The sailors in chapter 1, the people of Nineveh in chapter 3. Jonah is blind. He doesn't see with perspective.

And these words in chapter 2 no doubt deliberately chosen to bring the reader into the mindset of Jonah at the time seem designed to show how a privileged man with a God-given work can lose perspective on what's important.

[30 : 04] Why does he record these words? It must be because he thinks the people of Israel back home need to learn what he himself had to learn.

You see, it's possible for God's people to be in the right place saying the right things ticking the right boxes of belief and indeed experiencing something of God's blessing and yet blind to gross disobedience.

That was true of Israel back home and of Jonah their prophet. He doesn't consider at this point that God might remove his nation's privileges.

He is very angry that God might remove him from his successful ministry back home and take him to Nineveh to bestow privilege on another nation who might respond better.

Take him away from a successful work back home in order to bring privilege somewhere else. Jonah is not having anything to do with that.

[31 : 11] He doesn't consider apparently that God might be angry with his personal disobedience. But the truth is that the true God, the God he is supposed to know and serve is the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land and that God will have mercy on anyone who fears him.

And no person and no group and no nation no minister no church no tradition is ever in a position of such privilege that proud disobedience will go unchallenged.

Let's pray together. Jonah's words from chapter one.

I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. Lord, we thank you, gracious God, that you are our maker and sustainer.

you know everything about us, you see everything in us all the time. You uphold us every moment by your powerful word.

[33 : 06] We thank you that you that you respond so graciously to those who fear you.

We pray, please, that you would help us to see you truly as you are. we thank you that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

But we've seen this evening how somebody who knew all of these things about you could become so, develop such a sense of entitlement and of his nation's entitlement that he genuinely thought himself in a better position than the sailors who responded so positively in the chapter before.

Please help us, Heavenly Father, to see you as you are. Thank you for your mercy. Deliver us, we pray, from the pride that comes from privilege and comfort and ease.

and help us to respond urgently to you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.