

Jonah

Chapter 2

Jonah's Prayer

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, 2 saying, “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. 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.’ 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. 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!” 10 And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

1:1 *Jonah prayed.* Psalm of thanksgiving recounting how the Lord heard his cry for help and rescued him from death. (TLSB)

The furious action of chapter 1—with its storms and waves and lot casting and panic and fear and finally a man thrown overboard—now ceases in order to allow Jonah time to pray. St. Paul writes: “I will that people pray in every place” (1 Tim 2:8), which in this case is the belly of a great fish! (CC)

2:2–9 A psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance from death in the sea. Jonah recalls his prayer for help as he was sinking into the depths. His gratitude is heightened by his knowledge that he deserved death but that God had shown him extraordinary mercy. The language of this song indicates that Jonah was familiar with the praise literature of the Psalms. (CSB)

The prayer is a model in form:

1. It addresses the Lord of covenant grace (v. 2)
2. It brings a petition for help (vv 2-3)
3. It expresses hope and confidence in the Lord’s answer (vv 4-7)
4. It concludes with thanksgiving and praise (vv 8, 9)

Jonah’s experience reminds us of the blessings Christians have in committing Bible passages and hymn verses to memory. Sometimes the agony of sorrow and tribulation is so distressing that the child of God cannot find words of his own to speak to God. These treasured words not only comfort the heavy heart and give strength to bear the burden, they also enable the Christian to tell God what is in his heart. (PBC)

2:2 *I called out.* The first word in Jonah’s psalm is קָרָאתִי, “I called out.” This is the same verb that Yahweh (1:2), the captain (1:6), and the sailors (1:14) used in seeking help to alleviate life-threatening danger. In chapter 1 Jonah was unwilling to “call” (preach) to Nineveh to save it from divine judgment or to “call” upon Yahweh to save the foundering ship. But now, Jonah is finally calling to Yahweh, fulfilling Yahweh’s command that he “call” (1:2, קָרָאתִי). Yet ironically, the prophet is only calling out for his own sake! Jonah 2:2 sharply emphasizes the first person singular nature of the prophet’s prayer. The call has

come to Yahweh, but it is not for the sake of the sailors or the Ninevites; it is only for Jonah himself. Jonah only calls when *his* life is on the line. (CC)

In my distress. The second Hebrew word, נִצְרָה, “from/in distress,” anticipates a lament. However, despite beginning “I called out in distress,” Jonah delivers a thanksgiving song that describes a devout worshipper who is saved from certain death, prays toward the temple, vows to offer a sacrifice, and acknowledges that all salvation comes from Yahweh alone. (CC)

Verse 2 gives a fine example of the structure of Hebrew poetry called parallelism. “In my distress” is parallel to and explained by “From the depths. Of the grave.” So also, “I called to the Lord” parallels “I called for help.” Finally, “and He answered me” parallels “and you listened to my cry.” (PBC)

Lord – Three times in his prayer Jonah speaks the name Lord, the name of the covenant God of grace and mercy. This is significant, because the name of the Lord is the basis for all prayer. (PBC)

Sheol. Figurative for Jonah’s near-death experience in the sea (see Ps 18:5; 30:3). (CSB)

Place of the dead. Jonah’s descent into the sea was like descending into Sheol, the grave. (TLSB)

Even unbelievers may pray when facing calamity or death, but the content of Jonah’s prayer reveals that it is a prayer of faith. Moreover, throughout it, Jonah echoes the Psalms, which he must have learned so well that he could reflect their language and theology even as he prays *ex corde*. God’s Word is always first. Just as he spoke creation into existence (Genesis 1), so also his Word creates our faith in him and saves us through that gift of faith. He bespeaks us righteous, and we answer because we have been spoken to. (CC)

Literally, from the belly of sheol, the Hebrew word for death, the grave, the abode of the dead. (PBC)

answered – Jonah echoes the words of Psalm 30:2, 3 (see also Psalm 18:6; 120:1)

God saved Jonah from drowning, but Jonah had no way of knowing that he would escape the fish. It took faith to believe that God’s salvation included restored life for him. (TLSB)

2:3 *You cast me ... your waves.* Jonah recognizes that the sailors (1:15) were agents of God’s judgment. (CSB)

This verse names Yahweh as responsible for throwing Jonah into the sea. It is not a contradiction of Jonah 1:15, where the sailors, at Jonah’s request (1:12), lifted him up and hurled him overboard. The storm account in chapter 1 ascribes the tempest to Yahweh (1:4), and the only action that can ease the storm is the sailors’ offering of Jonah (1:12). Their prayer to Yahweh underscores that he is in control of all that is occurring (1:14). Accordingly, in Jonah 2:4 (ET2:3), the prophet does not wrongly blame God for his predicament, but acknowledges the reality of the situation: Yahweh cast him into the depths, and only Yahweh can get him out. (CC)

Jonah recognized that his brush with death by drowning was God’s doing. (TLSB)

2:4 *driven away from Your sight.* Jonah felt forsaken by God, just as Jesus felt separation from His Father while on the cross (Mt 27:46). (TLSB)

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This means that the sailors are the human instruments that performed the divine will. In 1:14 they pray that the action they are about to undertake against Jonah may coincide with Yahweh's will. The sailors do not perish for disposing of the prophet, nor are they punished for taking "innocent blood" (1:14). Rather, the calming of the sea shows that they were the agents of Yahweh's will. The sailors not only survive, but worship Yahweh (1:16) as his loyal subjects. (CC)

yet I shall look again toward your holy temple. The same note of hopeful expectation found in the prayers of the Psalms (e.g., Ps 5:7; 27:4). "Temple" here probably refers to the temple in Jerusalem, while "temple" in v. 7 refers to God's heavenly temple. The Israelites held these two residences of God in inseparable association (see 1Ki 8:38–39). (CSB)

Jonah was confident that he would live and have opportunity to worship at Zion once more. (TLSB)

On the other hand, for all we know about Jonah's prayer to this point, we still have questions. Is it not strange that Jonah expresses his eagerness to return to the temple. Where is the fear and worship of Yahweh that he confessed in 1:9? Why doesn't Jonah ever come clean and confess his sin? Does he perceive his decent into Sheol as sufficient divine punishment? Is he counting on divine steadfast love to overlook his disobedience and cancel his commission to preach to Nineveh? Is not the piety reflected here just a bit too cozy? To what extent does his psalm align the temple with the ship's hold and the fish's belly—as yet another deathlike shelter that he hopes will protect him from fulfilling his divine commission (cf. Jer 7:11)? (CC)

2:5 *surrounded me...weeds were wrapped about my head* – Like a bundle of firewood, Jonah felt himself sinking helplessly. (PBC)

Jonah had found himself at death's door. The gates of hell had prevailed against him, clanging shut with a terrible finality! He had reached "the belly of Sheol" (2:2), the land of no return. What awaited him but inescapable death? But just as Yahweh had been the one who, as David says, "lifts me up from the gates of death" (Ps 9:13), so this same God had come to save Jonah by means of a great fish (1:17).

Graphic description of drowning. (TLSB)

2:6 **ROOTS OF MOUNTAINS** – Jonah was speaking from a real life experience. Oceanographers tell us there are high mountains rising from the sea floor as well as deep canyons (see Psalm 18:15). When Jonah came to rest in such a sea canyon, he saw the high cliffs above were barring his escape like the gates of a prison. (PBC)

Jonah sunk deeply. (TLSB)

As Jonah sinks deeper and deeper, it is as though he is overwhelmed with feelings of claustrophobia. Utter helplessness grows and closes in upon him. At the moment of greatest darkness and despair, when

no human action can release him, Yahweh broke through all his suffocating layers and drew his life out to safety, using the great fish (1:17). (CC)

bars. Gates were barred to lock them securely. Jonah felt the gates of death closing behind him. (TLSB)

pit. Expression for Sheol, the grave. (TLSB)

2:7 *I remembered the LORD.* At the last moment, Jonah turned to the Lord, who alone could save him. (TLSB)

Some might say that Jonah has a fox-hole religion, or perhaps a deep sea or fish-belly religion: he remembers Yahweh only when his life faints and he faces death. Why did he only remember Yahweh when his “life ebbed away” (2:7)? Why did he not remember when Yahweh called him in chapter 1? (CC)

your holy temple – This is the Lord’s gracious presence, always found in connection with His word by which He reveals Himself to man. His presence means forgiveness of sins, life and salvation in heaven. This is the meaning the psalmist has in mind when he says, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Psalm 23:6). Jonah may have thinking of Psalm 5:7 in his prayer or Psalm 18:6. (PBC)

Jonah had run from God, but now he longed for God to hear his prayer. Luther: “First God grants grace and spirit to cheer the heart, He reminds it of God’s mercy, dismissing thoughts touching on God’s wrath, turning the heart from God the Judge to God the Father. But this does not lie in the power of man; for Jonah says here that his soul fainted within him and that faintheartedness was the strength and power of his soul. But the fact that he thinks about himself and begins to have faith is not the work of his soul. The Spirit, and no one else, can bring the Lord to mind. And when it comes to pass that the heart is reminded of the Lord, a new light flares up, life again raises its head, and the heart is emboldened to cry in supplication; and thus its petition also surely finds an ear” (AE 19:79). (TLSB)

2:8 *vain idols* – Jonah is making a general statement about the damning sin of idolatry in this verse. He could have been thinking about the false gods the sailors prayed to when the sea storm arose. Their gods are “worthless idols” like those aptly described in Psalm 135:15-18. (PBC)

Lacking reality or value. The prayers of Jonah’s shipmates addressed to idols were worthless. “All confidence is empty, except confidence in mercy. Mercy delivers us; our own merits, our own efforts, do not” (Ap V 209). (TLSB)

forsake their hope – Idols can be more than statues of Baal, Moloch, Ishtar, Dagon, gods of the ancient Near East who were enshrined in silver and gold, wood and stone. An idol is often enshrined in the imagination of the mind. Jonah may have thinking about himself. He had learned to his sorrowful regret that worshiping his self will he forfeited the forgiving “grace that could be” his. (PBC)

steadfast love. Idol worshipers fail to experience God’s loyal love, which Jonah had again tasted. (TLSB))

2:9 *voice of thanksgiving* – Certainly Jonah thanked the Lord for His mercy and love which had delivered him from a watery death and which he trusted would yet rescue him from the fish. And then, would we

not expect Jonah to shout his loudest “Thank you, Lord” for delivering his soul from hell and damnation because of his sins, especially his self-will and disobedience. (PBC)

Jonah’s prayer is just such a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord. Many psalms are offerings of thanksgiving (e.g., Ps 100; 136; 138). (TLSB)

What I have vowed. In the book of Psalms, prayers were commonly accompanied by vows, usually involving thank offerings (e.g., Ps 50:14; 56:12; 61:8; 65:1; 66:13–14; 116:12–19). (CSB)

It is not unusual for a person in dire straits to make a pledge to serve the Lord in some special way. Perhaps Jonah’s vow was to obey if God should again call him; cf Nu 30. (TLSB)

Jonah also backed up his thanksgiving with thanks-living, a sacrifice and a vow to his Lord, just as the sailors had done (1:16). (PBC)

Salvation belongs to the LORD. The climax of Jonah’s thanksgiving prayer. It is Jonah’s second confessional statement (see note on 1:9) and stands at the literary midpoint of the book. (CSB)

Statement sums up Book of Jonah. Salvation is God’s possession, which He freely bestows. Jonah experienced that for himself and also saw how the Lord saved the sailors and would spare the people of Nineveh. (TLSB)

2:10 *the LORD spoke to the fish.* God rules over all creation, including animals and fish. His Word, as at creation (Gn 1:20–22), accomplishes His purposes. The Lord who teaches donkeys to speak (Nu 22:28) likewise teaches fish to listen. (TLSB)

This is still the Savior’s story. He is active in the lives of all His creatures – animals, plants, fish, as well as man. If only His rational creatures were as obedient as the rest of His creation! (PBC)

vomited. The fish could have become Jonah’s tomb, but at God’s command it instead provided transportation back to dry land. Though the event was likely terrifying for Jonah, his account has a humorous ring. (TLSB)

Summary of Scene 3 (CC)

First person singular Hebrew forms (“I,” “me,” etc., as subject, object, or possessive) occur twenty-four times in Jonah’s psalm, indicating that he is on center stage. In contrast, references to Yahweh appear sixteen times. If the psalm evokes traditional terminology, Jonah subverts it in significant ways to place himself in the spotlight. Yet, try as Jonah might, Yahweh still has the first and last words. (CC)

But Jonah would rather not admit this—at least not completely. The prophet’s deception peaks when he contrasts himself favorably with those who heed empty idols and forsake Yahweh’s loyal love (2:8). No doubt Jonah has in mind people like the sailors in chapter 1 and the Ninevites in chapter 3, but in the end they, unlike Jonah, become models of true faith and piety. Thus Jonah’s judgment on idolaters becomes a judgment against himself. The closing line of the psalm, “Salvation belongs to Yahweh” (2:9), further elevates the satire, since Jonah resents the fact that the converted pagans are saved. Though these words might be the essence of the entire narrative, when spoken by Jonah they have a nauseous effect—as demonstrated by the fish. More irony occurs when the fish, who delivered Jonah, is then delivered from him. (CC)

This interpretation of Jonah's psalm gains more credence when it is read within the context of the entire narrative. Based upon the prophet's confessions of Yahweh in 1:9 and 4:2, it would seem that when Jonah affirms Israelite traditional theology, his true words are ironic in their context. In 1:9 Jonah describes Yahweh as "the God of the heavens, . . . who made the sea and the dry land," while Jonah is fleeing from the land to the sea to escape this God! In 4:2 Jonah cites Yahweh's magnificent Gospel attributes—"a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in loyal love and changing your verdict about evil"—while Jonah is raging because Yahweh is just that! Just so, the same irony is wrapped up in this psalm. Where does Jonah confess his sins? Where does he vow to fulfill his mission to Nineveh? Nowhere! This disconnect correlates with the fish vomiting out Jonah at the point where he says, "Salvation belongs to Yahweh." Enough of this! The fish vomits out Jonah precisely so he can take Yahweh's salvation to the Ninevites, which he was loathe to do. (CC)

Ch 2 Jonah deserves death, not deliverance. Yet the Lord graciously rescues him by miraculous intervention. Jonah recognizes the greatness of the Lord's compassion and expresses his thanks in prayer. The apostle Paul, like Jonah, once felt that he had "received the sentence of death," but the God "who raises the dead" delivered him (2Co 1:8-10). All sinners deserve the sentence of everlasting death. But the God to whom salvation belongs has, in Christ, rescued us and given us new life. • Gracious God and Father, thank You for redeeming me from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Move my tongue to glorify You in praise and witness. Amen. (TLSB)