

Jonah 1:17- 2:10 – Jonah's Prayer

We last saw Jonah being hurled overboard into the sea heading for a watery grave, no chance now of his delivering his message to Nineveh! “But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.” This is the verse that creates a great story for children and a great problem for those who do not believe in miracles. For one way or another we have a miracle. It is possible for a fish, or sea creature, to swallow a man, but even if what happened to Jonah was a natural event then the timing of the arrival of the fish seems more a miracle than coincidence. Then we have the issue of the time Jonah spent in the fish. “*Three days and three nights* is a special phrase used in the ancient world with the meaning ‘long enough to be definitely dead’”.¹ The fact that Jonah could pray in the fish then be vomited out alive on dry land on the third day, seems supernatural rather than natural. This is not a problem to those who believe that Christ, as God, is the creator and upholder of all things. (Heb 1:1-3)

Professor Edgar Andrews explains in his book “Who made God?” how on rare occasions God overrides natural law to bring about a miraculous event. “One way to understand this is to say that the divine will is *immanent* in nature. While the God of the Bible necessarily transcends nature as its creator, he also pervades nature as (1) the upholder of all things; and (2) the provider of all things. As regards (1) he ordains and maintains the laws of nature through the moment-by-moment action of his mind and will, while as regards (2) he employs these same laws providentially to bring about his purposes in the material world. However, the point to grasp here is that because of (1) he is not limited to (2)!”² Although God normally directs the laws of nature to achieve his ends he does on occasions operate within nature in a different way, a miraculous way.

It was the Lord's purpose that Jonah should go to Nineveh and preach, so he providentially arranged for a large fish to swallow him, miraculously kept him alive in the fish then instructed the fish to vomit him up on dry land. God's purpose was not going to be thwarted by a recalcitrant prophet who chose a watery grave rather than obedience to the Lord's will. We will find in our later studies, however, that the miraculous rescue of Jonah had a deeper significance than just getting him back on track to Nineveh.

So what do you do when you find yourself inside a great fish at the bottom of the sea? Pray! That's what Jonah did and as we come to look at his prayer we will see that this prayer marks Jonah's finest hour in the book, well finest three days. His prayer is really a psalm and whereas we might have expected a psalm of lament what we have is a psalm of thanksgiving. Jonah knew even inside the fish that this was God's rescue plan for him so he gives thanks in anticipation of the completion of the plan. In this sense he foreshadows those who are now in Christ who know that “he who began a good work in them will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”³

“Thanksgiving psalms have usually five elements: (i) an introductory statement of appreciation for rescue; (ii) a description of the misery rescued from; (iii) a description of the appeal for rescue; (iv) an indication of the rescue itself; and (v) a testimonial or vow to continue to show gratitude via future worship. The psalm of Jonah includes all five elements, in the order listed above.”⁴

1 Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition* (4th ed.) (Jon 1:17–2:10). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

2 Andrews Edgar H (2009) *Who Made God? Searching for a theory of everything*, EP Books, Darlington, England.

3 Philippians 1:6

4 Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition* (4th ed.) (Jon 1:17–2:10). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

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Open

- What has been the strangest place you have prayed in?

Study

Read together Jonah 1:17 – 2:10

1. “The Lord provided a great fish” (Jonah 1:17) “the Lord commanded the fish” (Jonah 2:10), what do these verses tell us about God? How is the fish a lesson to Jonah?
2. Compare verse 2 with Jonah 1:5b-6, what was the difference in Jonah's relationship to God inside the fish to what it was inside the hold of the ship? In which situation do you think Jonah was most alive? Why?
3. Who did Jonah see as being the source of his troubles and for what purpose did he think this trouble had come upon him? Why do you think he could have seen this as a just response to his behaviour? (Jonah 2:3-4, cf Jonah 1:3 and 1:10)

Commit Question

4. Initially Jonah saw the action of God in the trouble he experienced, but misunderstood the purpose because he expected justice not grace. Do you think it is right to see God as the source of our troubles? What is your default expectation of God when trouble comes?

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5. How does Jonah describe his misery in verses 3-6? “Several psalms use the metaphor of drowning as a kind of all-purpose statement of misery⁵ why do you think this is? (Cf Psalms 42:7, 69:1, 130:1)

6. At what stage did Jonah “remember” God and pray? How did God respond? (Jonah 2:6-7)

7. What are the lessons that Jonah says he has learnt from his experience and what does he promise to do? How is this an expression of his hope in God? (Jonah 2:8-9)

Commit Question

8. By thinking he could flee from God, Jonah had treated God as if he were just an idol and not the all powerful God, hence his prayer Jonah 2:8. In what ways do we reduce God to an idol and what must we do to keep ourselves from idols? (cf 1 John 1: 21)

9. “The last words of the psalm, *Salvation comes from the LORD* (lit. ‘*Salvation is the Lord’s*’) can also have the sense that he saves whom he will—he is in charge of the whole business of salvation. ⁶ Why was this an important lesson for Jonah, the original hearers of his story and for us?

⁵Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition* (4th ed.) (Jon 1:17–2:10). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

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