

## Jonah 2 Sermon for 11am

Jonah has hit rock bottom. He has run away from God and God's call to him. He has hidden from God's face. He has brought disaster upon those around him because of his actions. And finally, he has been thrown into a raging sea where he sinks with no trace...

No trace, that is, except to God, who sends a great fish to swallow him.

It was Jonah's own fault, whether he'd have admitted it or not, or whether he'd have thought it justified or not even if he had admitted it. Jonah, sinking beneath the roaring waves, swallowed up completely, was now lost to the world. Buried forever. No-one would find his body. No-one would mourn him. Maybe no-one would even ever know what had happened. He is left in the rotting, stinking darkness; all alone to either become fish-food or to drown, or die of hunger and thirst.

Sometimes life can feel like this, maybe through our own fault, and maybe not. We are left in darkness, devoid of relationship, devoid of hope, sinking in the consequences of our own or someone else's rotten actions, feeling like the world has chewed us up, feeling like we've been swallowed by a bottomless pit. If that's you, then Jonah has gone before you. If that's you, then read on in Jonah's story.

The sailors had prayed to God and worshipped God, when Jonah hadn't, and it is only now that Jonah turns back to God. In the dark deep, there is no-one else to turn to. It is significant that even now, after all that has happened, the reading identifies God as 'the Lord HIS God'. Despite all that had happened. Despite his disobedience, fleeing and hiding, God is still Jonah's God. In the reading, there's no note that God listened to Jonah. This is just assumed. Jonah finally prays, and God acts. When there is no possibility of relationship or salvation, God still hears.

For us, despite anything we might have done or said or thought or failed to do. Despite our stopping praying, our anger at God, and our anger at the injustice of what has happened. Despite all that we bring into our darkness and despite the depth to which we have sunk, God remains our God. He has not left us. He does not ignore us. You'd think he'd have some strong words to say to Jonah before saving him, but he doesn't even do that. God just hears and acts on Jonah's prayer.

There are loads of opinions on Jonah's prayer, and I don't want to make this an academic lecture, so let me just briefly note a couple of things. You can read the prayer as a desperate ramble of a broken man, or you can read it as a well-crafted Psalm of supplication from a penitent prophet. Ironically, both are reasonable readings! Maybe there are times where our faith is strong and we craft our prayers, or when our faith is weak and so we use well-crafted prayers from elsewhere to compensate for our lack of words. Maybe there are times when we are desperate and we just mumble whatever we can to God in hope he will hear, and maybe there are times where those mumblings are the result of a strong faith that expects God to hear us whatever we say. It doesn't really matter. Jonah's prayer is ambiguous, and maybe that's useful for us to know and recognise so that we can be assured that whatever our prayer, God will hear.

The next thing about Jonah's prayer we might usefully recognise is its Hebrew worldview. Jonah talks about his descent to Sheol, to the deep, to the roots of the mountains and the closing bars which condemn him to the pit. As an Israelite, for Jonah this isn't just flowery language describing his loss in the depths of the sea. Instead, it's his belief that in his dying, he is heading somewhere much deeper – to the land of the dead where no-one can reach him, not even God. Jonah isn't despairing of his life, which he repeatedly wants to give up throughout this story. He's despairing of

an eternity separate from God and his temple. He's despairing of an eternity among the dead in an underworld completely cut off. The belly of the fish in the depths is an image for him of the belly of Sheol, where the shades and spectres of death reside, from where none can return. For us, a superficial reading of Jonah being scared of dying is inadequate. Jonah is terrified of a spiritual eternity without hope where he is 'driven from God's sight.' Jonah isn't scared of death. He's scared that he may have accidentally succeeded in getting away from God. He's come so close, and suddenly recognises the full horror of what that means, and that's terrifying as he stares into the abyss.

We may scoff at the Israelite worldview a little nowadays, but the fact remains that what the Bible calls hell, is a complete separation from God. We can't imagine how or where, but Jonah has seen it and is terrified by it. His response to it is to back-peddle as fast as he can, to desperately claw back that relationship with God that he had tried so hard to hide from, because the alternative was unimaginable. I don't want to dwell on this, but this is why, as Christians, the opportunity to return to God, provided through Jesus Christ, is not just attractive, but absolutely essential. The alternative should make us shudder. It's hideous. And we must tell anyone we can about Jesus so they too can experience a relationship with God.

Luckily for us, Jonah's prayer gives us hope. The amazing thing about it is that it is written in the past-tense. It's easy to miss, or to put down to a translation problem, but it's consistent across many of the Psalms too. Hebrew, as a language, has only two tenses – past, and then future-present. And so there's no mistake – Jonah prays in the past tense. It only comes back to the future-present in the final verse when he is expressing how, once he's out of this big fish, he'll fulfil his vows and make his sacrifices.

This prayer in the past tense is really challenging for us. The first thing he prays is that he called to God and God answered. Imagine doing that when God hadn't answered yet! It's a statement of someone who knows what God is like; that he is a God who hears and answers, to the extent that it would be inconceivable for God not to hear and answer this time. He describes his plight, how far away from God he had become, how precarious his existence was now and how close he has become to ultimate ruin. This sounds like, maybe a bit more flowery perhaps, the kind of prayer we might pray – "God life is so hard. I'm surrounded. I'm frustrated. I'm angry. I'm devastated. I'm terrified." And then in verse 6, there's the moment where Jonah can exclaim "yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord My God." Already, in the past tense, Jonah trusts God, not only to answer, but to rescue him from the hellish reality he is facing. To rescue him from an eternity of darkness and shadow. This is what he's afraid of, and he has no doubt at all that God will save him.

He goes on to declare that he remembered God and God received his prayer and his loyalty, and therefore he will in the present and the future thank God, and worship him with the sacrifices which were due at the time. This isn't a conditional prayer like sometimes we do where we madly make silly promises if only God would save us, as if God can be bought! Instead, this is Jonah praying for delivery from the ultimate death he faces, completely confident that God won't leave him to his fate, and saying that from henceforth he will worship, keep his vows and give thanks to God.

He is thus vomited out of the fish, safe but smelly, onto the beach. He had been in the fish for 3 days. Effectively, he had been in the belly of death for 3 days and now death had spewed him out into the world of the living. How intriguing that Jesus, the man who died on the Friday and was raised back to life on the third day, refers to Jonah in the Gospels as a sign. We may ask why this connection.

The story of Jonah tells us about a God who is willing and able to save people who can only see the ultimate end as their lot in life. To keep people from a world of hellish death, separated from God. He did it for Jonah, showing that no matter how far we've run away, God will still save us. He did it for the whole world when hundreds of years later, God himself, as Jesus, came into our world, died to pay the price for our running away from God, spent 3 days in the belly of death, before death could not hold him and he was spewed out of the grave. Jesus went to the depths and beyond for us, so that, like Jonah, we can pray in the past tense thanking God that he has saved us from that ultimate Sheol-like grave. We may each of us pray to God in our troubles and be assured that he hears and answers, as complicated and confusing as that statement can sometimes be. But we are all absolutely assured that when we ask God to return us to himself, we are already saved in the asking. Thanks be to God. Amen.