

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Lessons from the life of Jonah: Can there be forgiveness? - Jonah 2

### Introduction

Last week we saw how the disobedient prophet Jonah, ran away from his God given task of preaching against Nineveh. Conveniently, as he thought, he found a ship going in the opposite direction. But God still had His eye on this disobedient servant. First, God prepared a great storm so that Jonah was thrown overboard. Then God prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah so that he would not drown.

At the end of chapter 1 we are told simply that Jonah was in the belly of a great fish three days and three nights. We are told nothing of Jonah's experience during that time. It is just as if Jonah sulked and possibly thought over the events that had resulted in his unusual imprisonment. God appears to be silent leaving Jonah to come to a conclusion as to his next decision. Initially, Jonah might have thought that he would simply die and then he would have achieved his end of disobeying God and not going to Nineveh.

Disobedience to God is a natural characteristic of people. It is our nature to do what we want. When God wanted Jonah to reach out to Israel's enemies, it triggered his disobedience. Although Jonah's name means 'dove' and we might have thought that his character would reflect his name, yet his business as a prophet, a messenger from God required boldness to face people and sometimes kings with unfavourable news. However, unfavourable news was not always the role of the prophet as in Jonah's message to Jeroboam king of Israel. Jonah prophesied regarding the recovery of land previously lost to Israel as in 2 Kings 14:23-25.

Today we would class Jonah as a nationalist who was fiercely defensive of Israel as the people of God. The conflict in Jonah must have been great because he understood clearly the great overriding nature of God as stated in 4:2, "I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, One who relents from doing harm." Jonah was not ignorant of how God always desired to bless. For Jonah it was right for God to help the evil king of Israel, Jeroboam, but not the evil people of Nineveh.

Jonah made the wrong decision and thought he could frustrate and hinder God's intentions. Jonah's wrong path resulted in him sitting in the fish's belly, slowly being digested and yet still fighting God!

Do we find that we have a clear direction from God, through the Scriptures, and yet because it does not match what we want to do, we rebel and try to go our own way?

### Jonah's Prayer and God's Action

Almost the whole of chapter 2 is taken up with Jonah praying to the LORD. The last verse is God's action as a result of Jonah's prayer.

Let us consider this amazing prayer under three headings: personal, patriotic and prophetic.

#### Personal

At the end of the three full days, Jonah concludes that he does not want to remain in this place of torment. "Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly." There was no alternative for Jonah; he is driven to this conclusion. For the moment, he is no longer in opposition to God.

The title of this talk is "Can there be forgiveness?" This is not to do with that eternal forgiveness which every person needs if they are to avoid eternal punishment and banishment from the presence of God. When a person accepts the Lord Jesus Christ as their own personal Saviour, forgiveness of sins is the result. However, forgiveness here has to do with a believer who sins in some way. Communion with God is interrupted: hence the silence of the three days. Repentance in this sense has to do with restoring communion, getting our lives back on track; following God's will and being obedient believers. The Scripture in 1 John 2:1 is relevant to restoration: "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

Verse 2 states that Jonah prayed as follows, "I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, and He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried and You heard my voice." As mentioned before, it was the torment that drove Jonah to pray, "my affliction". But the great thing is that God answered! This is Jonah's prayer seeking forgiveness. He might not be very happy about the whole situation (see chapter 4) but there was no alternative. This episode is probably the worst in Jonah's life. Jonah likens his current situation to being in the place of departed spirits, where he may have feared that God had abandoned him forever. That was not a situation Jonah relished even if, in his point of view, he thought God was wrong!

Jonah had not died but he was experiencing what it was like to be dead! In Luke 16:19-31 we have a real life situation told by the Lord Jesus. This story is not a parable where we have to look for a related meaning. Nevertheless, in this story, we see two people who had very different situations in life and, when they both die, the situations are reversed and both are very conscious of the change. Death is not the end of things but only the beginning of eternity, and where we will spend it?

Jonah continues his prayer and lays the blame for his situation upon God, "For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me; all Your billows and Your waves passed over me." It was Jonah, who in 1:12, proposed to the mariners that they throw him overboard. At first, they did not want to take such drastic action but eventually all their alternative methods failed and they did as Jonah required.

Jonah has realised that all his present circumstances are from God as a direct consequence of his disobedience and his attempts to thwart God's intentions. God has placed him in an hostile environment and possibly he should have been dead, consumed in the fish, but here he is suffering and still alive!

Now verse 4 states, "Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.'" Jonah is praying but also recognising that due to his disobedience he is at a distance from his God. There is a break in the fellowship that formerly he had enjoyed, "I have been cast out of Your sight". When we find ourselves in a similar situation to Jonah, we need to react in the same kind of way. Turn back again to God! This is the thought in the phrase "Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple". Jonah is here claiming the promise that Solomon prayed for, as found in 1 Kings 8 and what Daniel and others practised when in captivity in Babylon.

Jonah realises that he is in a crisis and verse 5 of his prayer confirms this. "The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head." We gain some insight into the terrible situation of Jonah when we read these words. Was he claustrophobic? Did water enter the stomach of the fish and was then expelled? Were the weeds, part of the food that the fish was consuming? Was this a repeated experience for Jonah during those three days and nights? Each time these things happened did he fear for his life? "The waters surrounded me, even to my soul"?

In verse 6 Jonah says, "I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God." Here again we have Jonah expressing the helplessness of his situation but expressing his hope of deliverance. His experience is like going down to the very foundations of the mountains, only these were mountains that were under the sea, which we now know exist. The feeling of being totally lost and cut off forever is clearly seen in the expression, "The earth with its bars closed behind me forever".

Dear hearer, if you are in the situation of not knowing the living God as your Saviour through trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ and his completed work on Calvary, then death faces you, as it faced Jonah, as he so vividly describes in his prayer. But that death is to be cut off forever from a loving God who desires only your greatest blessing. JT Mawson in his hymn states the need and the action very succinctly:

*Jesus, my Saviour, come I to Thee.  
Take me, oh! Take me, Thine ever to be;  
Guilty and helpless, this is my plea,  
That Thou has suffered for sinners like me.*

*Nothing I bring as price for my sin,  
Thy blood alone my redemption doth win;  
This is my hope, none other I know,  
Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.*

The blessing of the jailor at Philippi as recorded in Acts 16 is another similar situation. The man was desperate and had decided to commit suicide, when he is stopped by Paul and the following conversation occurred: "But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, 'Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.' Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down

trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' So they said, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.'"

As previously stated, Jonah contrasts his desperate state with this confident statement at the end of verse 6, "Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God".

Look at the amazing expression "Yet You". Jonah looks to his God to see that his God has delivered him though at the moment he was not yet free. This is faith in action believing God before the actual event happens. But, believing in such a manner is seeing that it is already accomplished. Being a believer, whether from the Old Testament or now as Christians, all we have is by faith in the living God. We accept the fact that we take possession of what God has promised in a future day. The reality is in Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Possibly, Jonah thought that he was going to be confined to "the pit" forever. We have read how he describes his incarceration and it was obviously far from pleasant!

However, Jonah is revived and he hopes once again in his God for deliverance. This is the point of forgiveness because he has turned to his God. Repentance is turning to God and repentance must come first before forgiveness can be granted. Jonah is to be restored to the God he has disobeyed and from whom he had run away.

"When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple", verse 7. The actual point in time when Jonah turned is described as "When my soul fainted within me". He had no more strength to resist. However, he clings to this, "I remembered the LORD". Is there anyone listening today that has strayed or deliberately turned away in the past and is no longer enjoying communion with God on a daily basis? Here is the solution. Remember the Lord, as He desires only the best for His children, even His wayward children. Now is the time to remember and return.

Jonah full of confidence can say, "My prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple". As stated before, this is what Solomon had prayed for at the temple dedication – that those who, for whatever reason, had gone astray could return by prayer and receive the restoring forgiveness that can only come from a compassionate God. For God's people in the Old Testament the symbol for reaching the heart of God was the holy temple. Today Christians direct their prayers to "Jesus, the Son of God" who is on the "throne of grace", Hebrews 4:14 and 16.

Verse 8 states, "Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own mercy". Here I believe Jonah has come to see the emptiness of pursuing a course of action which is contrary to the mind of God. It is idolatry to suppose that we know better than God. "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5) was the promise of Satan to Eve and Adam. But, he did not tell them that they would be powerless to do good and they would do only evil!

This was Jonah, he thought he knew better than God. But that course of action puts a person outside the mercy or kindness of God. For a Christian, it is cutting ourselves off from fellowship with God. In 1 John 1:3 we have stated, "Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ." This is the situation a Christian needs to be in every day. Self-will breaks this fellowship so that we then need restoring.

Jonah exclaims his restoration in verse 9, "But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving, I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD." In this verse, we have three statements made.

The first is, "I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving". Here communion is restored. Jonah feels free to show his appreciation with this kind of sacrifice, the sacrifice of thanksgiving. As we read this, we can feel the heart of Jonah bursting with praise. In 1 Peter 2:5 we have this statement, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." We see that each Christian believer is considered a priest with the right to offer up spiritual sacrifices. This is a great privilege to be enjoyed by every believer. So the thought expressed by Jonah was not unusual or a one off; it is what is required by a great God.

The second statement is "I will pay what I have vowed". Here I believe Jonah is saying he is now prepared to do his job as a prophet. He is no longer going to be disobedient but will do what God wanted him to do. This is the substance of chapter 3 which will be covered next week.

The last statement in the verse is "Salvation is of the LORD". Salvation or deliverance is totally in the hand of the Lord. Jonah could not remove himself from his imprisonment and there was no one else who could help. At this point, Jonah is now no longer afraid and in distress but is content to wait with confidence that God would now deliver him.

It is the same with salvation for everyone. We are the helpless ones when it comes to forgiveness and deliverance from our sins by a holy God. The Lord Jesus Christ paid the price at Calvary and, through repentance we receive forgiveness on the basis that Christ has taken the punishment. However we only unlock the forgiveness when we truly repent; there is no other way.

Finally in the last verse of our chapter, the LORD suddenly acts, "So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land." During the three days the LORD had been silent but guiding the fish to return Jonah to where he should be. At the right moment of repentance, the fish nears the dry land to spew out Jonah.

For a believer to be disobedient to the Lord only brings suffering in some way. The Jonah incident highlights this very graphically. Heartaches are fewer when we are obedient.

### **Patriotic**

I said at the commencement of this talk that Jonah was a nationalist and therefore very patriotic as far as his country was concerned. Although Jonah in his prayer was saying he was sorry, the issue of Israel's enemy being forgiven was still a problem with him. This difficulty of Jonah will be seen in the last chapter. Do we have Jonah's problem today? The missionary who goes to some distant country to preach the Gospel has overcome his nationalistic tendency. How do we feel about preaching the Gospel of a full and free salvation to other nationalities in our own country? The Gospel preacher or evangelist has the good of others at heart. They want others to enjoy the blessing of eternal life in heaven! When you understand the eternal hopelessness of a person who dies in their sins, then you will want to spend time seeking the salvation of others. In 2 Corinthians 5:11, we have this very challenging verse, "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men." How do we respond?

### **Prophetic**

Although the incident in the book of Jonah is probably not the best in Jonah's life, yet the Lord Jesus Christ uses it in both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The three days and nights in the fish illustrate the situation connected with the Lord's death. Matthew 12:38-40: "Some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'"

The Lord Jesus Christ stamped His authority on the incredible event of Jonah's incarceration in the fish illustrating a far greater event, that of the death of Jesus, His incarceration in a tomb but it was only for a limited time, three days and nights. This was followed by a serious condemnation of those who rejected the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew 12:41, "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here."

What is our response to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ? Do we accept them or refuse them? Let us learn from this lesson of the prophet, Jonah, to be obedient to the word of the Lord.

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