

A prayer about what?

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Date: 14 September 2014

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[0 : 00] Please turn in your Bibles to Jonah chapter 2. If you're following in one of the Blue Bibles, you'll find that on page 774, Jonah chapter 2.

Jonah has been thrown overboard. He finds himself in the water. We'll pick the story up at chapter 1, verse 17. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.

And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, 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. 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. Then I said, I'm driven away from your sight. Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple. The waters closed in over me to take my life.

[1 : 12] The deep surrounded me. Weeds were wrapped about my head 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.

When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed, I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord.

And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Please do sit down.

Please turn your Bibles to Jonah chapter 2. We come this evening to a chapter which has been a cause for huge controversy over the last hundred years or so.

[2 : 20] For in Western Christianity, we have been through a period of enormous anti-supernaturalism. And there is nothing in the Bible quite as difficult for the anti-supernatural mindset to deal with than a man surviving three days and three nights in the belly of a fish.

How can that happen, people have said. Perhaps this story is a metaphor for the state of Jonah's mind at the time, depressed, gloomy, smelly even, or a metaphor for the state of Israel at the time. Those more inclined to take the story at face value have done things like try to work how on earth it could be possible for someone to stay inside alive a fish for three days.

What kind of fish could it be in which one could stay alive for three days? Such speculations are understandable, but simply not the concern of this part of the Bible.

One author puts it like this. What sorts of fish people can live inside is not a concern of the Scriptures.

[3 : 32] All we are told about the fish you find in chapter 1 verse 17 and chapter 2 verse 10. Four things can be discerned about the fish. One, it was a big fish. Two, God gave it the job of swallowing Jonah.

Three, it did that. Four, when God spoke to it three days later, it vomited him up on the dry land.

That is all we know about the fish. It might be a big one, but it is not a big 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 for you, you have not really begun to grasp how very big the God of the Bible is.

The God of the Bible is the God who has limitless power over everything that he's made. Total mastery. He's not tied to impersonal laws of nature.

He is the law of nature. He rules everything every second in an ordered way. He keeps everything in existence all the time. You owe your present breath, your ability to hear these words to his sustaining power.

[4 : 43] The fish is just one of his many things. He uses it how he wants. And if he wants Jonah to stay alive inside it, he is well able to make that happen.

He simply does not have a problem doing what he wants to do in his world. No, the real puzzle of Jonah chapter 2 is not the fish.

It's the attitude of the prophet. The biggest puzzle of chapter 2 is how a man who seems so grateful to God for rescuing him at this point can two chapters later be so angry at the same God rescuing other people.

How does that work? It's one of the greatest puzzles of this book. And so some have said that chapter 2 doesn't really belong with the rest of the book at all. It's kind of out of key.

Of course, it's such a different style from the rest of the book. The rest is story. Here we break out into poetry, into song. Into a psalm, really. Something that could be sung.

[5 : 47] And that seems really odd. Breaking into poetry in the middle of the story in the belly of a fish. But in fact, Bible stories quite often have poetic interludes like this.

And the poetic interludes are really important. You see, this is not like a musical. In musicals, people burst into song all the time.

The bursting into song moments in musicals are not really relevant to the main storyline. Any excuse for a song will do. In the Bible, the songs often take you right to the heart of what's going on. And I think this one does too. And so I want you to notice first how joined up this poetic section is to the rest of the story.

Compare chapters 1 and chapter 2 for a moment. Both of them are rescue stories. In chapter 1, it's the sailors who are rescued from the storm. In chapter 2, it's Jonah who's rescued from the deep.

[6 : 52] In both chapters, people get into trouble on the sea. In both chapters, people pray for help to the God of Israel. In both chapters, God hears and rescues.

The sailors in chapter 1, Jonah in chapter 2. And in both cases, the people who've been rescued make vows to God. Look at chapter 1, verse 16.

Then the sailors feared the Lord exceedingly. And they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. And now look at chapter 2, verse 9. I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. You see, there are very strong parallels between what's going on in chapter 1 and what goes on in chapter 2. These chapters fit right together.

So what is going on in chapter 2? What's it doing here in this story? It's introduced as Jonah's prayer to God from the fish.

[7 : 58] Verse 1. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying...

However, I think that what we have here are probably Jonah's words looking back on his mindset in the fish.

I would be surprised, wouldn't you, if Jonah got as far as poetry in the belly of the fish. Prayer, certainly. Psalms, not so sure. What I think we have here are Jonah's words from later on about how his mind was and how he prayed in the fish.

This poem has an air of calm reflection about it that I think might be quite difficult to summon up when swimming around in the deep inside a large sea creature.

Look at verse 5. The waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me. Weeds were wrapped about my head. At the roots of the mountains, I went down to the land.

Yet you brought up my life from the pit. The deep surrounded me, past tense. But of course, in the belly of the fish, the deep is still all around him.

[9 : 10] Verse 6. You brought up my life from the pit. Past tense. Well, he's not in the sea, but was the inside of the fish any less terrifying than being in the ocean? Now, I think these words are Jonah telling the reader how he was back then in poetic form to mark it out as significant.

Let me say that this is a last minute prayer. Because up to this point in the story, Jonah has not prayed at all as far as we can see.

He's been stubbornly silent towards God all the way through chapter 1. Let me remind you of the story so far. God gives him a command. Go to Nineveh, to that great city, and preach against it. And Jonah deliberately disobeys. And he's done more than that. He could just have stayed at home, not gone anywhere. But instead of being an obedient messenger to the word of God, Jonah has chosen a positively anti-God thing to do.

He's headed for the sea. And the sea is loaded in the Bible with anti-God imagery, as we looked at last time. He's chosen the realm of chaos and disorder and evil and death, rather than continue to serve the true God.

[10:22] It's almost as if he's opted for the dominion of darkness, rather than the kingdom of light. And in chapter 1, it's absolutely clear, both to the sailors and to him, that God is against him.

But he does not pray and ask for forgiveness. And neither does he turn around from his course of action. He seems stubbornly determined to die in the deep.

But what we find is, chapter 2, that as the waters close over his head, and as the end approaches rapidly, Jonah's life is too precious for him to lose.

And he prays. And the words of this prayer give us Jonah's take on what has just happened. Let's look at the prayer, and then we'll try to reflect on what it's doing here in this book.

In many ways, this is a rather typical Thanksgiving poem in the Bible. You can find a number of poems like this in the book of Psalms, for example. Usually, the person writing is thanking God for some sort of rescue from some sort of danger or other.

[11:29] This psalm, this poem, has three parts to it. Quickly, first, we have an introduction, verse 2. The introduction sets the scene for what follows.

I called to the Lord, he answered me. I cried, you heard my voice. He has cried to God for help, and God has answered him. That's what the poem's about.

Second, we're told the story. This is what happened, and that's there in verses 3 to 7. Here, Jonah describes the crisis in the sea.

How desperate it was. How he cried to God for help, and God rescued him. There are two bits to this story part. They both end with a mention of the temple. Look at verse 4, please.

I shall again look upon your holy temple. And verse 7, my prayer came to you into your holy temple. The first part, verses 3 and 4, emphasizes how God cast Jonah into the water.

[12:31] You cast me into the deep. All your waves and billows passed over me. The second part, verses 5 to 7, emphasize how God rescued Jonah out of the water.

I went down, yet you brought my life up. So, in this part of the poem, Jonah is describing the situation.

God threw me into the sea. God rescued me out of the sea. There's a very strong emphasis on God having done it all. The throwing in and the pulling out.

And then, verse 8 and 9, there's a vow of obedience. Now, that's what we have in this poem. Hooray! God has 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. There it is in summary.

[13:34] Now, what do we make of this little song? Well, let me mention three things that I think are very strange. Very strange indeed about this prayer of thanksgiving.

Three things which seem very odd, given what's already happened in the book. Here's the first. In this prayer, God certainly gets a mention.

But Jonah is right at the center of the stage. In this poem, Jonah refers to the Lord a number of times. Verse 2, the Lord hears and answers my cry.

Verse 3, the Lord is in charge. He threw me into the deep. Verse 6, he brought me out. Verse 9, salvation belongs to him.

There's no doubt that God is in this psalm. But I wonder if you noticed how orientated around Jonah, Jonah's words are. Jonah's distress.

[14:37] Jonah's life and death situation. Jonah's words. And most especially, Jonah's activity. Activity, what Jonah does, gets a lot of space in this psalm. As I read, notice the eyes and me's and my's.

I call that to the Lord out of my distress. He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol, I cried. You heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas. The flood surrounded me.

All your waves and billows passed over me. Me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me. He says me and I and my a lot in this prayer. Now, you might well argue, well, of course he's in there.

He's the one that's been rescued. It's a story about what happened to him. But let me ask you, is this how you would pray? You've just been thrown into the sea by a bunch of sailors who can't think of anything better to do than to avoid disaster.

You're sinking down into the deep. There is no escape from the depths of the sea in the middle of a storm. Suddenly, you find yourself alive in the belly of a fish rather than drowning and dead.

[15:50] Would you not go? Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for doing that. I can hardly believe I've been rescued.

I nearly had a catastrophic accident on my bicycle. It was partly my fault. My brakes were not good. They'd been not good for some time.

I'd known for a while they needed attention. I had not attended to them. I was late for class. I was driving downhill, busy road, early morning, parked cars on the left all the way down, junction ahead on the right coming in.

I was coming towards the end of the row of parked cars, towards the junction, when suddenly somebody pulled into my way from the right-hand side.

I was going too fast. I could not stop. There was absolutely no way, no way I was going to avoid it. I knew it was going to be bad.

[16:52] I just about prayed, an inarticulate yell of despair. And I just about had time in my mind to anticipate in slow motion the dreadful thing that was about to happen.

And suddenly, extraordinarily, quite unbelievably at the time, I found myself suddenly through the gap between the front of the row of the parked cars and the one coming in from the side who hadn't seen me.

Now, I have absolutely no idea how I managed to negotiate that gap going that quickly. Do you think I came away from that encounter saying, oh, cool, what a smart driver you are?

The sense of relief was just overwhelming. Thank you. Thank you, Heavenly Father, for getting me out of that. What an idiot I was.

Thank you for getting me out of that. I can't believe that I'm alive. When you know that you've been in extreme danger, especially if it's basically your fault, what you have contributed to getting out of it is a long way, in my experience, from your mind.

[18:03] This is not that kind of prayer. Yes, it mentions God and his activity. You cast me in. You brought me up. Salvation belongs to you.

But most of the active verbs in this passage talk about what Jonah has done. I called. I cried. I said. I remembered. I will sacrifice. Yeah, God was the rescuer. He's in no doubt about that. But there's more about Jonah's prayer for rescue than there is about God's rescuing him.

God has acknowledged. God has acknowledged. But Jonah is at the center of his mental picture. His words about God are true. Orthodox. But his orientation fundamentally lacks perspective.

Even in that moment of euphoria after deliverance, says Jonah, looking back on his situation. My thoughts were revolving around what I had done.

[19:04] God is acknowledged. But Jonah is center stage. Isn't that odd? Given what's happened in the story? Second thing that I think is odd. Jonah, in his prayer, admits his danger, but says nothing about his disobedience.

I mentioned before there were a good number of psalms a bit like this one. Psalms of thanksgiving after deliverance from some sort of danger. I say some sort of danger because often in those thanksgiving psalms, the situation that is dangerous is not all that clearly in view.

It's not described at great length. It's just a very bad thing happened to me. The Lord rescued me. I am so grateful that he has rescued me. The details of the situation are often not that important.

Now, this poem of thanks looks rather like one of those. It's full of the danger. It's certainly thankful. You could almost pluck it out and put it in the book of psalms and it would stand on its own.

And that's what's odd about it. Because unlike those stand-alone thanksgiving psalms, this one is seriously rooted in a situation.

[20:17] And that makes its content seem unusual. Jonah's predicament is not some random undeserved mishap. The reasons for Jonah's danger have been laid out with great clarity.

In chapter 1, he's a prophet. He's been used by God back home. But he'd rather die than be used by God in Nineveh. His actions towards God in chapter 1 are those of an enemy.

He knows that. Look at chapter 1, verses 11 and 12. He knows that God is his enemy at this point. And it's that that makes his prayer so odd. For though the prayer recognizes God's hostility, you cast me into the deep, verse 3. At no point in this prayer is there any acknowledgement of Jonah's role in causing the situation that he was rescued from.

He mentions that he prayed for deliverance, but not at any point that he prayed for forgiveness. The poem goes, in short, that was a very bad situation indeed.

[21 : 42] I prayed and thankfully God rescued me. But the situation the poem describes is much more like this. I was very wicked indeed.

And extraordinarily, God had mercy on me. Given the situation, isn't it odd that there isn't a hint of that in Jonah's words? He admits the danger, but not his disobedience.

Third thing that's odd. And this, I think, is perhaps the oddest. He compares himself favorably with the sailors in the boat.

Let me read from verse 7. When my life was fading away, I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I vowed, I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord. He prays to the Lord.

[22 : 49] He prays this. Other people pay attention to vain idols and have no hope of steadfast love. But I will sacrifice to the true God.

You see, he puts himself in the position of being faithful and orthodox. He is the one who prays to the true God. He is the one who has access to God's covenant love.

He is the one who will worship rightly. And the pagans, no hope for them. Contrast this with chapter 1. Where we find that quite the opposite is true.

Who is the disobedient in chapter 1? It's Jonah that's disobedient. Who takes the course of action away from God's steadfast love in chapter 1? Jonah does.

Who has an accurate view of the God of Israel in chapter 1? The sailors do. They don't start there. They start the chapter praying to their own gods. But boy, do they learn quickly.

[23 : 51] They don't know much by the end. But what they know, they know rightly. Look at what Jonah says in chapter 1 verse 9 about himself.

I am a Hebrew. And I fear the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. The reality, of course, is that he does not fear the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. That's why he's running away. The sailors, on the other hand, do know God rightly. Look at verse 10. The men were exceedingly afraid.

They said to him, what is this that you've done? You must be mental doing what you've done in view of who your God is. They knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord because he told them.

In chapter 1, who worships God rightly? The sailors do. Verse 15 and 16. They picked up Jonah.

[24 : 49] They hurled him into the sea. The sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly. And they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

In chapter 2, Jonah looks back on the storm and the sea and the sailors. Those pagans up there, what are they doing praying to their gods?

No hope of steadfast love for them. But I, I remember the Lord and I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to him.

Don't you think that odd? Oddly lacking in perspective, given what's happened? Three odd things about this prayer then. First, God is certainly mentioned, but Jonah seems at the center of his mental stage.

Second, he admits his danger, but not his disobedience. Third, he seems to compare himself favorably with the believing foreigners he's just left behind. Now, what do we make of this?

[26 : 01] Folks, what do we make of this? Can I say this is a very warm evening? And I can see how warm it is out there because you're kind of beginning to melt all over your seats. Let me just do a bit of exercise for a moment.

Stretch, revitalize ourselves, prod your neighbor if they're especially inactive. Question, what do we make of this? What is this prayer doing here in this book?

Let me observe that you do not need a psalm here in order for the story of the book to hang together. As a story, this book would make perfect sense without this psalm.

And many important things would still be learned from this book if we did not have this psalm here.

We would still know from the book of Jonah that God is a very gracious God and very patient.

We would still learn that God has a great concern for all the peoples of the world. We would still learn that God uses even the most reluctant servant to accomplish his will.

[27 : 05] All of those things would be there if chapter 2 was missing. Because you could jump straight from 117 to chapter 2 verse 10 without missing a stride in the storyline.

And still get all of those big things about God and who he is and what he does. So what is this doing here? Many of the commonest applications of the book of Jonah, God is a gracious God.

God loves all the peoples of the world. God uses even the most reluctant servants. Many of those big applications would still be in place if chapter 2 was missing.

So why is it that right in the middle of this short and dramatic book, in lengthy poetic form, we're given all this information about what Jonah was thinking at the time?

Well, it certainly makes perfectly clear to us if we needed reminding that God's prophets are far from perfect. But I think it's here for a bigger reason. Back home, back in Israel, things have been going well.

[28 : 13] Things have been going well for the nation of Israel under their expansionist king, Jeroboam II. Well for Jonah, the prophet that God has used. Things have been going well. Please turn to 2 Kings and chapter 14, page 321.

2 Kings chapter 14, we looked at this last week. Very briefly this evening. This is the best time that people can remember for a long time in Israel's history.

Verse 25, 2 Kings 14. There has been military expansion. They've regained some of the territory they lost in battle. Verse 25, we're told that this regaining of land has been as a result of the word of the Lord, which he spoke by his servant Jonah, the son of Anassai.

This prophet. To the casual observer, things are going pretty well back home in Israel. But things are not well.

For we're told in verse 24 that Jeroboam did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And in particular, he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat.

[29 : 34] That's Jeroboam I, one of his ancestors, which he made Israel to sin. I wonder if you know anything about the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat.

Well, Jeroboam erected golden calves at the northern and southern ends of his kingdom. It was a political move to consolidate loyalty to him and his northern kingdom.

He didn't want people from the north, drifting off to Jerusalem in the south to worship at the temple there. So he built alternative shrines. And in doing so, he led his nation into wholesale idolatry.

And, says 2 Kings 14, that practice continues at this point. Yes, Jonah has been used for good in this situation by God.

But, fundamentally, this is an idolatrous nation. Not a nation faithful to the true God. Jonah knows only too well, Jonah chapter 2.

[30 : 45] Back to Jonah chapter 2. He knows only too well that those who turn to idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. Yet, these words in Jonah chapter 2 make it look as though he's completely blind to that.

Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But, I, I will sacrifice to you. Great confidence is expressed in those words.

There's no doubt in his mind that he, in contrast with all those pagans out there, is among the faithful and will be fine. And his words in chapter 2 sit very uncomfortably with what we know about him from chapter 1.

His words simply lack perspective. Now, I guess it's true to say that comfort and success always breed pride.

In individuals, in nations, in churches. My guess is that Jonah is so tied in to the privileged position his nation has occupied and the successful course his ministry has run so far under God that he does not consider for a moment that such privileges are not guarantees of safety.

[32 : 15] In his prayer, he doesn't mention his own need for forgiveness, though his rebellion has been gross. His looking back on it account of his prayer expresses complete confidence that at the time he thought himself more orthodox than the pagans and was confident that God would hear him rather than them, even though they've shown themselves to fear God more than he does.

All the foreigners in this book respond better to God than Jonah does. Every one of them. Jonah is blind.

He just doesn't see rightly. And these words, no doubt deliberately chosen by him after the event to bring the reader into his own mindset at the time, seem designed to show how a privileged man with a God-given work can simply lose perspective on what is important.

Why does he record these words? It must be because he thinks the people of Israel need to learn what he himself has had to learn.

You see, it is possible for God's people to be in the right place, saying the right things, ticking the right boxes of orthodox belief, looking successful, and indeed experiencing something of God's blessing as Israel was back then, and yet be blind to fundamental and gross disobedience, the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, which remain untouched by the word of God.

[34 : 06] Israel was like that at the time, and so was Jonah. Things seemed okay for him back home, and okay for them back home, but they were not.

He doesn't consider that God might remove his nation's privileges. He is very angry indeed that God might remove him from his successful ministry back home in order to bestow privilege to those people over there.

Take him away from a successful work back home in order to bestow rescue on another nation. Jonah is not having any part of it. Jonah does not consider that God might be angry with his personal disobedience.

He does not fear God's anger at his personal disobedience. And I take it that his nation back home didn't fear those things either.

But the truth is that the God who made heaven and earth is really the God who made heaven and earth.

[35 : 15] He will have mercy on anyone who fears him. Jonah needed to learn this, and so did Israel.

Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Just a few moments in the quiet to respond to God on our own, and then I'll lead us in prayer.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

Gracious God, we recognize that these words are true and yet spoken with great lack of perspective. We pray that you would please give us a proper perspective on who you are and who we are.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. we want to acknowledge again in front of you that our own resolves, our own activities, our own prayers, our own obedience, our own worship is not what rescues because salvation belongs to you and to you alone.

[37 : 36] And we pray that if we have begun to think subtly that what we do and what we think and what we say and what we sing and how we behave somehow gives us privilege and certainty and confidence, we pray that you would have mercy on us and help us to think again.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. We gladly acknowledge this this evening and we pray that our hope might rest in you alone and in what you have done alone and that we'd be quick to hear your words and quick to obey them and glad to turn away from those things in our lives that are disobedient when we have them pointed out to us by you.

deliver us, deliver us, please, for living comfortably with our rebellion. Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen.