

Jonah 2:1-10¹

1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, 2 saying, "I called 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 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; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' 5 The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head 6 at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;² yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God.³ 7 As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. 8 Those who worship vain

¹ Throughout chapter 1, Jonah is unable to pray. Yet a conversion takes place as Jonah repents, accepting responsibility for his attempted escapes, and as he see the grace and providence of God. While this grace takes the unlikely form of a giant fish, it becomes the impetus for Jonah's prayer.

Now, the careful reader will note that Jonah's prayer sounds strangely similar to the psalms. This is not a mistaken observation. Jonah's prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving that is similar to the psalms of thanksgiving. There are four typical elements to psalms of thanksgiving: "an introductory summary of answered prayer, reports of personal crisis and divine rescue, and a vow of praise (Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 215)." Each of these elements can be found in Jonah's prayer.

² Jonah's prayer begins with an introductory summary of his situation and the Lord's grace. In response to his deliverance and the Lord's grace made known in the great fish, Jonah lifts his prayer to the Lord. In understanding this opening to his prayer, we must understand the Hebrew idioms that reflect their worldview.

For the Israelites, creation is viewed as a three-storied structure, "with heaven above, earth in the middle, and Sheol, the place of the dead, under the earth. The earth floated on subterranean waters and was anchored in those waters by pillars or mountains, and below the subterranean waters was the realm of Sheol (Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Minor Prophets I* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 271)." Jonah equates his apparent drowning at sea to being dragged to the depths of Sheol, to being dragged to the place of the dead in Hebrew thought. We might wonder if Jonah really died, but this is to misinterpret the poetic imagination that he uses. Reflected in Jonah's prayer is the Hebraic and poetic imagination that "every sort of distress or illness or trouble was considered to be a weak form of death. Thus, while Jonah is not yet dead, he can say that he has been to Sheol (Achtemeier, 272)." Nor should we think that Jonah is being melodramatic; rather he emphasizes that his experience in the water threatened his very existence. He was trapped in the chaos of the churning waters, seaweed had become wrapped around his neck and head, and as his lungs began to give out he felt himself drifting further and further into the sea. Without the grace and mercy of the Lord, Jonah was surely dead.

³ Only from within the belly of the fish is Jonah able to recognize God's grace, mercy, and care. Despite all his attempts to flee from God's presence and escape God's claims upon his life, Jonah is still held precious in God's sight. Jonah confesses that despite all his attempts to evade the Lord, it is God himself who has brought him up from the Pit. It is the Lord who has acted decisively for Jonah. And in response to this act of grace and mercy, Jonah becomes a new person. No longer is he the prodigal prophet trying to run away; rather he has repented and prays to the Lord in light of God's gracious care and providence.

idols forsake their true loyalty. 9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.⁴ Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”⁵ 10 Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.⁶

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) How do times of distress affect my prayer life?**
- 2) How fervent am I in prayer when life is going well?**
- 3) How does distress re-orient my thinking toward God?**
- 4) Is the power of prayer found in my sincerity, my persistence, or God’s grace?**
- 5) In what ways have you known the deliverance/salvation of the Lord in tangible ways?**

⁴ In a bit of irony, Jonah offers criticism against those who worship vain idols rather than the living Lord. “Until the time of this prayer, Jonah has not relied on Yahweh at all. But now, seemingly, he has realized his dependence on God for his life (Actemeier, 272).” In chapter one, the picture of Jonah is one of self-reliance and self-dependence. Yet, what Jonah discovers is he cannot survive on his own. His life is utterly dependant on God. This is the great fruit of his repentance. In light of the gracious love of God, Jonah repents of his self-dependence and selfish ways to see the way of the Lord. And with a voice of thanksgiving, Jonah will sacrifice to the Lord. Clearly he will not be doing this from within the belly of the fish; rather it is a vow to be accomplished at some point in the future.

⁵ Finally, after all he has gone through, Jonah cries out “*yeshuata leyahweh*,” which means “salvation/deliverance belongs to the Lord.” God is finally and fully acknowledged as Savior. “This is the climax of the psalm. Jonah is now supremely a saved man who has tasted the grace of Yahweh, and who has been delivered from the just reward of his disobedience. It is in this radically new role that he is soon to be addressed by Yahweh again (Allen, 219).” And hear, in Jonah’s cry, we see a foretaste of God’s gracious salvation made known to us in, through, and as Jesus Christ. This is not to say that Jonah’s cry points to Jesus; rather God has provided through the prayer of Jonah the mediated structure for understanding the mission and ministry of Jesus to the world in the power of the Holy Spirit.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jon 2:1–10J). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.