

We Are Jonah

Jonah 2

**Digging
Deeper**

January 17, 2010

Intro

Chapter 2 of Jonah comes across much differently than the rest of the book. This chapter records a prayer that Jonah offered to God while he was in the belly of the fish. This week we will look at some of the background to the setting of chapter 2 and the issue of repentance, a key theme in the prayer.

Background for Jonah 2

The story does not specify what kind of fish it was, how Jonah could have lived inside it, or the answers to any similar questions. Yahweh can easily toss the wind around to make a storm when he wants to. Miraculously rescuing someone from drowning via a fish is no great feat for God, either. But it is not, also, a feat to be described analytically. A miracle is a divine act beyond human replication or explanation. The numerous attempts made in the past to identify the sort of fish that could have kept Jonah alive in it are misguided. How would even Jonah himself have known? Can we assume that he caught a glimpse of it as it turned back to sea after vomiting him out on shore (2:10)? How much could he have understood of what had happened to him when he was swallowed? These questions have no answer. To ask them is to ignore the way the story is told. What sorts of fish people can live inside is not an interest of the narrator (Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea-Jonah*, Thomas Nelson, 474).

Despite the obvious discomfort involved, the fish that swallows Jonah must be seen as an instrument of deliverance for the prophet. God is both the Lord of the sea, but also the Lord of its creatures. His providential control extends over all. Jonah's prayer not only stresses the Lord alleviating his distress, but also highlights the difference between the Lord who does save and idols who cannot do so (2:8-9). Jonah's prayer confesses a central Old Testament truth. Having noted the Lord's position as Creator, Jonah makes the logical comment that only Yahweh is a living, hearing, acting, saving God (Paul House, *Old Testament Theology*, IVP, 366-367).

In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.

Jonah 2:2

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In the prayer, Jonah lauds Yahweh's power to save by contrasting it with the uselessness of idolatry. How foolish are those who seek help in life through idols (literally the “empty nothings!”). But idols represent not only ineffectiveness; worshiping them also shows a lack of faith in Yahweh. For any Israelite to trust in idol worship was a violation of the covenant. God's grace was based on the covenant he made with Israel. Those who broke the covenant's first commandment by having other gods had “abandoned” his or her loyalty to Yahweh (Stuart, 478).

“From the depths of the grave” (2:2) literally reads “the belly of Sheol,” referring to the grave as a devouring monster that had swallowed Jonah. Jonah thought of himself as good as dead. There is no evidence to suggest that he actually died and was resurrected like Christ. The primary point of similarity between the experience of Jonah and Jesus was the time element- “three days and three nights” (1:17) and being in a grave (2:2) (Robert B. Hughes and J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, Tyndale, 347).

The Sign of Jonah

Jesus refers to Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish (Matt. 12:38-42; Luke 11:29-32) in response to his critics' demand for an unambiguous sign that will prove his identity. He replies that the only sign that God will give a wicked generation is the sign of Jonah (Matt. 12:39). This sign is likened to Jonah's three days and nights in the fish: “so also the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights” (12:40). Jesus then contrasts his opponents' skeptical response with the proper spiritual responses of both the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba (12:41-42). With a spokesman for God greater than both Jonah and Solomon in their midst, these Jewish leaders should be that much quicker to repent!

“Three days and three nights” reflects a Jewish idiom for any part of three consecutive twenty-four-hour periods of time, so there is no need to employ this verse to question the standard reconstruction of the events of Jesus' death and resurrection covering Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of Passover week. The sign that Jesus has in mind is not the crucifixion per se, but rather the resurrection. Just as Jonah's time in the fish would have proved meaningless had he not been spit up onto the shore to continue his appointed ministry of preaching repentance to Nineveh, so also the crucifixion is not the decisive sign of who Jesus was, for his subsequent rescue from death is what vindicated his ministry and enabled his mission to go forward (Craig Blomberg, “Matthew” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, Baker, 45).

Repentance

Believing in Jesus is more than just having the right information. It also requires the right attitude. The Bible calls the proper attitude toward Christ “repentance”. It literally means “to change one's mind”. The apostle Peter called his hearers to this very thing, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

Repentance, the attitude of faith, says, “I've changed my mind about Christ. I accept Him as my Savior and Lord.” A new believer in Christ has a new desire deep within: to be God-directed, not self-directed. Saving faith is part of a fundamental change in the life of the believer. It's not just on the surface.

It's important to remember the order here: we belong to God (through faith) and then we behave like it (a new person). It doesn't work the other way around (Alpine 101, Page 5).

The demand to repent is as basic as it gets in Jesus' message. It is equally basic to, and almost synonymous with, the command, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). One of my concerns is to show that repentance in Jesus' message is not behavior but the inner change that gives rise to new God-centered, Christ-exalting behavior. Here are some thoughts to help make the meaning of repentance more plain.

* From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 4:17)

* I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:32)

* The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. (Matthew 12:41)

* Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:3, 5)

The first demand of Jesus' public ministry was, "Repent." He spoke this command indiscriminately to all who would listen. It was a call for radical inward change toward God and man.

Two things show us that repentance is an internal change of mind and heart rather than mere sorrow for sin or mere improvement of behavior. First, the meaning of the Greek word behind the English "repent" (metanoeo) points in this direction. It has two parts: meta and noeo. The second part (noeo) refers to the mind and its thoughts and perceptions and dispositions and purposes. The first part (meta) is a prefix that regularly means movement or change. So the basic meaning of repent is to experience a change of the mind's perceptions and dispositions and purposes.

The other factor that points to this meaning of repent is the way Luke 3:8 describes the relationship between repentance and new behavior. It says, "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance." Then it gives examples of the fruits: "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise" (Luke 3:11). This means that repenting is what happens inside of us that leads to the fruits of new behavior. Repentance is not the new deeds, but the inward change that bears the fruit of new deeds. Jesus is demanding that we experience this inward change...

Repenting means experiencing a change of mind that now sees God as true and beautiful and worthy of all our praise and all our obedience. This change of mind also embraces Jesus in the same way. We know this because Jesus said, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God." Seeing God with a new mind includes seeing Jesus with a new mind. (John Piper, "Thoughts on Jesus' Demand to Repent" from *Desiring God*, found at desiringGod.org/).

Jesus calls us to repent from trusting in false gods and exercise faith in the one true God.

Repentance and faith are the two sides to the coin of the gospel. They are not a one-time act to get us into heaven, but an entire way of life to maintain Christian joy. Repentance is not a work we tack onto our faith; it is an expression of faith.

Repentance can be described as turning our affections away from false gods. God wants our hearts, not just our morality. Repentance is a stepping-stone to true joy. Faith, then, is trust in the one, good, true, dying, and rising-from-the-dead God. It is relying on the person of Jesus through the power of the Spirit by the promises of God. It is not blind faith but perceptive faith. Biblical faith sees the truth, goodness, and reliability of God's promises and chooses to trust them over the fleeting, false, and bad promises of the world.

The Christian life is a constant repenting from belief in false promises and an increasing belief in the true, good promises of God. Repentance, then, is letting go of false gods and promises, both with our affections and actions. Faith is grabbing onto the one true God and his promises with our

affections and actions. Faith is not merely belief in the facts of the gospel message; it is trusting and treasuring the person of the gospel—Jesus Christ our Lord.

Repentance and faith form the bridge that leads us away from union with false gods and promises and into the promise of joyful union with the one true God. This is a gospel that motivates, that animates the life of a disciple of Jesus (Mark Driscoll, “Fighting the Fight of Faith” from TheResurgence, theresurgence.com/the-fight-of-faith).

Final Thoughts

In Jonah 2, we are given a picture of what true repentance looks like. As we have been reminded, repentance is not a work. It's not something we do to earn our salvation. It's a fundamental change of mind. It's changing our attitude about God and acknowledging him as our Lord. This attitude of repentance is not something that we just have one time when we become a Christian. It is meant to be a consistent attitude that we possess in our Christian life.

Home Group Questions

1. Read Jonah's prayer in Jonah 2:1-10. What elements do you see in his prayer (example: thanksgiving, repentance, cry for help, etc.)?
2. Why is prayer often our last resort? Share one or two words that would best describe how you view prayer.
3. Why do you think God often waits till the last minute to deliver us?
4. What do you think Jonah learned about God through his experience?
5. What are some worthless idols we can cling to instead of putting our hope in God? Describe some ways we forfeit the grace of God when we trust in idols.
6. How do we see God's grace in the Jonah story so far? What does this teach us about grace?

Questions for Personal Application

7. What idols are you trusting in that you need to give up?