

Jonah 2 “A Repentant Sinner’s Prayer”**

Main Idea: In Jonah 2 the prophet Jonah prayed a repentant sinner’s prayer. Or did he? As we look at the prayer and what happened as a result of it, we’re going to learn some vital truths about true repentance.

I. Jonah prayed (1-9).

A. Jonah asked for help (1-2).

1. His biggest problem wasn’t the fish.
2. His biggest problem was himself.

B. Jonah acknowledged that God got his attention (3-4).

1. The Lord took him down before He lifted him up (3).
2. The Lord gave him what he wanted to teach him what he really needed (4).

C. Jonah admitted that when hope was gone God rescued him (5-7).

1. He couldn’t save himself.
2. He looked to God’s holy temple.
3. We must do the same.

D. Jonah learned life’s most important lesson (8-9).

1. If you cling to idols, you forfeit grace.
2. If you believe in the Lord, you experience His salvation.

II. The Lord answered (10).

- A. He gave Jonah a second chance on life.
- B. He gave us a type of Christ.

Make It Personal: What happened inside the fish can happen in our lives today.

1. Because God is gracious, we can change.
2. Because God is God, we must change.

When a dog bites a man, that isn’t news. But when a man bites a dog, now that’s news! For instance, if I told you my dog bit my hand last week, you’d respond, “Is that so? Are you okay?” But on the other hand, if I shared, “I bit my dog on her tail yesterday,” you’d say, “You did *what?*!” It’s not every day a man bites a dog.

Similarly, when a man catches a fish, that’s not news (unless it’s an eight pound large mouth bass like Dale caught last week!). But when a fish catches a man, now *that is news!*

That’s one of the reasons the book of Jonah is so popular. It’s not every day you hear about a man being swallowed by a fish, and to top that, living to tell about it! But that’s what happened to a prophet in the eighth century

B.C. The Lord God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach a message there, but Jonah disobeyed.

Two weeks ago we investigated Jonah 1 and saw five scenes. Scene one, God said *Go!* In scene two, Jonah said *No!* and took off in the opposite direction. In scene three, God responded, *Oh?* and sent a violent storm to get the prophet's attention. In scene four, when confronted by the pagan sailors, Jonah, instead of repenting, said *Throw!* as in *throw me overboard and the storm will stop. I'd rather die than go to Nineveh.* But God is persistent, so in scene five He called on a large fish and said *Tow!* as in *tow that runaway prophet back to shore! He's going to Nineveh!*

Perhaps no account in the Bible has received as much scorn by critics as Jonah 2. So called scholars have questioned the validity of this narrative for years. Some have tried to rationalize the miracle of Jonah being rescued by a great fish, saying, Jonah landed on *top* of a fish; or Jonah landed on the floating dead carcass of a whale; or saying "The Fish" is the name of a ship that rescued Jonah. Others have tried to interpret Jonah 2 as a *myth* or *fable* which has meaning for us but is not to be accepted as true and genuine.

In 1912 Captain Charles Thompson harpooned a huge mammal off the coast of Florida which was found to contain *another* 1,500 pound fish that had been devoured whole. Yet whether or not such a fish can be explained scientifically is irrelevant, for Jonah 1:17 says, "The LORD *provided* a great fish." This is a God-crafted miracle. It's a clever scheme of the enemy to get the Christian to seek proof of his Bible. My friend, the Bible isn't true because we can prove it scientifically (although there's often scientific support for biblical accounts). The Bible is true because it came from the God who is true. We believe it because He said it.

The fact of the matter is, if Jonah was a fiction then so was Christ who said in Matthew 12:40, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." It's no wonder that Satan would attack the validity of the Jonah story with such tenacity.

There's something else that all this fish-talk achieves, even for the person who believes the historicity of the story. Thomas John Carlisle said, "I was so obsessed with what was going on inside the whale that I missed the drama inside Jonah!"

Well said. So let's take a close look at the drama going on inside of Jonah. In Jonah 2 the prophet Jonah, from inside the great fish, prayed a repentant sinner's prayer. Or did he? Granted he prayed, but did he truly *repent*? Is there more to repentance than admitting you are in trouble and asking God for help? If so, what is it? Since we, like Jonah, are sinners and get off track at times, we need to know the answer to those questions. We need to give serious attention to Jonah 2.

As we look at Jonah's prayer and what happened as a result of it, we're going to learn some vital truths about true repentance. There are two scenes in chapter two...

I. Scene one: Jonah prayed (1-9).

Verse 1—"From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God." What kind of fish was it? We're not told. I'm not sure even Jonah knew, after all, he only saw its inside (unless he happened to catch a glimpse of it from the shore as it swam away). Again, the issue isn't the fish. It's Jonah. In chapter one we saw Jonah *running* from God. In chapter two he's *praying* to God. As Peter Craigie puts it, "Jonah has been rescued from drowning, but he is still in deep water!"[\[1\]](#)

What did he pray? He told the Lord four things.

A. Jonah asked for help (1-2). Verse 2—"He said: '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.'"

There are two kinds of people in the world. There are those who call on the Lord, and there are those who don't. It's been that way ever since the beginning, as Genesis 4:26 reveals, "Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD."

God has many ways to get people to call on Him. With Jonah He used *distress*. "In my *distress* I called to the LORD," says Jonah. Keep in mind this was self-imposed distress. Jonah got himself into this fix. Which makes the next three words so astounding... "He *answered* me," Jonah declares. And then in most personal terms Jonah

rephrases what happened, “I called for help, and *you* listened to my cry.”

That’s a far cry from the silent treatment we often give people who have disappointed us. Be honest. If you were God, how would you treat a person that deliberately disobeyed your instructions and went AWOL? For sure, Jonah didn’t get what he deserved.

Sometimes it’s said that people will never change until they hit bottom. That’s what it took for Jonah. Literally. Where was Jonah when he asked for help? “From the depths of the grave,” he uttered this prayer, which literally reads “from the belly of Sheol.” Jonah thought he had joined the realm of the dead, and some feel he actually did die.

And how did Jonah respond? He asked for help! What kind of help did he need? Please realize something...

1. *His biggest problem wasn’t the fish.* Nor was it the sea. Nor was it the storm. Rather...

2. *His biggest problem was himself.* That’s what Jonah needed help with...*himself*. He had something ugly in his heart, just like his nation did, and that something surfaced when God told him to go to Nineveh. There was pride there, and prejudice, and a self-focused, “the world revolves around us” approach to life. Quite frankly, he didn’t want to go to Nineveh because he didn’t think the people of Nineveh deserved to hear God’s Word. And it irked him that God would “lower Himself” and have anything to do with those “sinners” who lived “over there.”

Like Jonah, our biggest problem isn’t what’s happening *to* us. It’s what is happening *inside* us. It *is* us.^[2] And not until we face that fact are we ready to do what Jonah did and *ask for divine help*. Next...

B. Jonah acknowledged that God got his attention (3-4). Verse 3—“You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.”

I’m not sure what picture you have in mind at this point. You may be imagining the children’s storybook presentation of Pinocchio and Geppetto sitting around a fire inside a huge whale trying to figure out how to escape. That’s not what Jonah was doing, for sure. My hunch is he probably was water-logged, tangled in sea weed, churning in gastric juices, and drifting in and out of consciousness. But he’s alive. And he’s praying. And in so doing he’s acknowledging two important realities...

1. *The Lord took him down before He lifted him up (3).* I mentioned last time that the Jews didn’t like the seas, that they, in fact, feared the deep sea. That means Jonah’s worst nightmare is coming true. He’s in the *heart* of the sea, with currents *swirling* about him and waves *sweeping* over him. And while the sailors may have “thrown him overboard” (1:15), “*You* hurled me into the deep,” says Jonah to God. That’s right. The *Lord* did this to Jonah. And why would He do that? Jonah doesn’t know yet, but he will. The Lord took him down so that He might, at the right time, lift him back up.

But that’s not all. Jonah experienced a second reality, namely...

2. *The Lord gave him what he wanted to teach him what he really needed (4).* Verse 4—“I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.’”

What’s going on for Jonah? Simply put, God is giving him exactly what he asked for back in chapter one. Remember why Jonah sailed for Tarshish? He told the sailors he wanted to get away from God’s presence (1:10). So God gave him a taste of what he thought he wanted. Jonah thought he wanted God to leave him alone, so God let him experience what it’s like to be alone, *all alone*, separated from God. And when that happened Jonah discovered that’s not what he wanted at all!

“Do I *have* to go to church today?” I wonder how many people in our community asked that question this morning. Uust think about what it implies. Do I *have* to go to church, that is, do I *have* to go and assemble with the people for whom Jesus Christ shed His blood? Do I have to go where God’s precious Word will be taught so that I can know Him better? Do I have to go where I’ll be given opportunity to express to the Lord through corporate singing how much He means to me? Do I have to go to the institution that the Son of God established and where the presence of God is most vividly expressed in the needy world today? Do I *have* to go to church?

The real question, of course, is why *wouldn’t* a person want to go? Jonah ran from the presence of God because he didn’t want to do what God wanted him to do with his life. He didn’t like God’s agenda. He liked his own better, so

much so that He distanced himself from God. That's a reason why a person wouldn't want to go to church.

"I don't want to be near You, Lord," Jonah in essence said. So the Lord gave Jonah what he thought he wanted. The result? Jonah learned what he really needed!

"I've been banished from Your sight," says Jonah to God. "Yet I will look again toward your holy temple." Why, in the belly of the fish, is Jonah now thinking about God's temple? Because God's temple represents what Jonah now *needs* most, God's forgiveness, and what Jonah now *wants* most, God's presence.

Jonah is changing, isn't he? God is getting his attention. Notice what the prophet said next to God. Thirdly...

C. Jonah admitted that when hope was gone God rescued him (5-7). Verse 5—"The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head."

How bad was it for Jonah? He was drowning—the waters engulfed him. He was boxed in, claustrophobic if you will—the deep surrounded him. And he was suffocating—seaweed was wrapped around his head.

Verse 6—"To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever." Quite frankly, when you say "No" to God, you start going downhill. Jonah went *down* to Joppa, *down* into a ship, *down* into the hold, and finally *down* to the roots of the mountains.^[3] Simply put...

1. *He couldn't save himself.* By the way, neither can we. The wages of sin is *death*, and the payment must be made. But...

That's one of the most beautiful words in the Bible. *But*. We see this hope-giving word in the middle of verse 6, "*But* you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God."

There's the only hope for a rebel sinner who's running. He can't save himself even if he wanted to. God must intervene. God must initiate the rescue mission. And why in the world would God do that? Why would the Creator stoop to help a creature that willfully, in premeditated fashion disobeyed his Creator? There's only one answer. *Grace*.

It reminds me of Ephesians 2:3-5, "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.*"

And how do you respond when you've experienced grace? Watch what Jonah did in verse 7—"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple." There's what grace did. It grabbed hold of a tumbling, rebel sinner, turned him around so that...

2. *He looked to God's holy temple.* Why, from the fish's belly, is Jonah thinking about God's temple? Because in the eighth century B.C. that's the only place a sinner could approach God. Not by the apostate temple in Samaria, and certainly not by the pagan temple in Nineveh—all religions are *not* equal—but by the *holy temple*, the temple in Jerusalem. What made that temple so special? What happened there? Priests sacrificed animals there, and why? To make atonement for sin.

That's what Jonah needed, atonement for his sin. That's why Jonah is praying with the temple in mind because that's the place where sinners in the eighth century B.C. could get their sins forgiven.

3. *We must do the same.* We must look to the temple for forgiveness. You say, "How can we do that? It's not there anymore, is it?" No, that temple was destroyed in 586 B.C., rebuilt, and destroyed again in 70 A.D. But there's another temple, and it's to that temple that all sinners must look.

You say, "Where is that temple?" Jesus answered that question in John 2:19-21, "'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.' The Jews replied, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?' But the temple he had spoken of was his body."

There's the answer. Jesus' body is the temple. If you want to have your sins removed you can! But you must come to God through Jesus, for when Jesus' body was nailed to the cross He took upon Himself the sins of every

person who would ever believe upon Him, and He paid sin's penalty in full. Three days later He arose from the dead, and He lives today, the Living Temple who offers hope to modern day Jonahs like you and me.

We've seen three things Jonah expressed to God in his prayer. First, he asked for help. Second, he acknowledged that God got his attention. Third, he admitted that when hope was gone God rescued him. Here's the fourth and final element...

D. Jonah learned life's most important lesson (8-9). Verse 8—"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs." Jonah apparently is thinking about the last thing he saw before being tossed into the sea. He describes the pagan sailors calling on their gods, asking for deliverance from the storm, asking in futility. But false gods are worthless, says Jonah, and those who trust in them are shortchanging themselves. To put it bluntly...

1. *If you cling to idols, you forfeit grace.* Some folks don't see grace in the Old Testament, but here it is. If you trust in false gods, you forfeit grace. If you trust in idols, you forfeit grace. But if you put your trust in the true God, the God who saves undeserving people, then grace is yours! Indeed...

2. *If you believe in the Lord, you experience His salvation.* Listen to Jonah in verse 9—"But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."

The gut of a fish is a strange place to be thinking about singing, or is it? If that's the place where God broke into your life and rescued you, it's the perfect place! "But I, with a song of thanksgiving," says Jonah. You see, singing is what true believers do, an evidence that God's grace is changing them.

"But I...will sacrifice to you," Jonah prays. That is, he's heading for the temple in Jerusalem the first chance he gets to utilize the means of forgiveness God provided, the death of a substitute, a sacrifice. That's not all Jonah resolved to do...

"What I have vowed I will make good." When God called Jonah into the ministry as a prophet, Jonah made a vow, a vow he had broken by running. But now he says, "No more running! I'll do what I promised I'd do, Lord! I'm ready to go to Nineveh."

Notice the final words of Jonah's prayer: "Salvation comes from the LORD." When it comes to salvation there are only two approaches. It's either *from the LORD*, or, it's *not* from the LORD. Those are the only two options. Either God saves a sinner by His initiative and grace, or a sinner contributes to his salvation in some measure.

Jonah affirms, on the basis of Scripture, that of the two approaches only one is correct. Salvation is *from the LORD*.

You say, "How do you know Jonah based this conclusion *on Scripture*?" That's a good question. And here's the answer, another question... Do the phrases and lines that Jonah prayed in this prayer sound familiar? They come from the Psalms (e.g. Psalms 69:2; 30:3; 124:4; 42:5; 116:17-18). Yes, Jonah is praying the Psalms. And why would he do that? Because he knows that he's not the first sinner to need God's deliverance. The Psalms are full of prayers of real people who cried out to God, and what did they discover? That salvation comes from the LORD!

My friend, God sets sinners free, not only from difficult circumstances like being in a fish's belly, but He saves sinners from *themselves*, from living self-focused, self-destroying lives. He stops rebels from running and turns them into obedient followers. He *saves* them.

So ends scene one, Jonah prayed. And with the words, "Salvation comes from the LORD" out of his lips, scene two begins...

II. Scene two: The Lord answered (10).

Scene two is quite short, just one verse. Verse 10—"And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land."

There's some humor in this. Unlike Jonah who ran from God's command, the fish hears it and obeys instantly.^[4] One commentator, Terence Fretheim, put it this way, "How silly Jonah must have felt being vomited head over heels

across the sand dunes. It is enough to take the ego out of any man. Everything in all creation seems to be in a conspiracy with God to bring Jonah back to his senses.”^[5]

Yes, God used that fish to accomplish two very specific purposes...

A. He gave Jonah a second chance on life. Yes, Jonah deserved death, but God gave him another chance on life. God has a right to do that. He’s God. If He wants to deliver a wayward prophet, He can do so. And if He wants to deliver a wicked city like Nineveh, He can do that too.

That’s what this book is all about. The Lord is teaching, not just Jonah but the rest of the Israelites as well, that He loves *other nations* too.

Let that sink in. Does the Lord love us? Amazingly, yes! But not just us. He loves the world and His agenda is to save undeserving people from every nation, tribe, and language.

The question is, if He wants to use us to accomplish His world-wide agenda, are we willing? Jonah wasn’t, not at first. How about you?

The fact is, He *does* want to use us. He’s commanded us to pray (Acts 9:38), to give (1 Cor. 16:2), to witness (Acts 1:8), and to go (Matt. 28:19), so that the nations might know Him.

Not only did God give Jonah a second chance on life, but God used that fish to accomplish a second purpose...

B. He gave us a type of Christ. Listen to Jesus’ words in Luke 11:29-32, “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation... The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.”

So Jonah, in the belly of the great fish, *repented*. Or did he?

Take another look at the prayer. Did Jonah admit the error of his way? Did he say here, as David later did in his confession in Psalm 51, “Against you have I sinned and done what is evil...”? Did Jonah then confess, “I’m ready to go to Nineveh now, Lord. I was wrong for resisting Your plan, but now I’m on board...”? No, that’s not Jonah’s response in chapter 2, and his apparent lack of heartfelt repentance will become even more apparent when we see his sulking response to Nineveh’s revival in chapter 4.

I don’t think Jonah went to Nineveh because he wanted to. I think he went because he had no other choice.^[6]

You say, “Well if Jonah’s repentance was deficient, why did God spare his life?” The answer, once again, is God’s grace. Jonah 2 showcases the amazing grace of God. After Jonah’s defiant disobedience, he didn’t deserve a second chance on life. But God gave it to him, not because Jonah deserved it, but purely because God is gracious. He doesn’t treat rebel prophets the way they deserve. Nor wicked cities like Nineveh. Nor sinners in Wheelersburg...

Make It Personal: What happened inside the fish can happen in our lives today.

Jonah prayed, and the Lord answered. Just think about what that means for us today, beloved, two things...

1. *Because God is gracious, we can change.* Today can be a turning point! And...
2. *Because God is God, we must change.* If you doubt that, just ask Jonah.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

^[1] Peter Craigie, p. 226.

[2] We don't like to admit that. We'd rather convince ourselves that if our circumstances were better, everything would be fine. But our circumstances aren't the problem. They just expose the root problem which is *us*.

[3] Observation by P. Craigie, p. 227.

[4] Leslie Allen comments, "Yahweh speaks to the fish, his instrument of salvation for Jonah. It obediently and doubtless gladly spews up this indigestible object and swims off with a flick of the tail, its distinguished mission accomplished." p. 220.

[5] Terrence Fretheim, p. 96.

[6] John Walton explains, "The lesson that Jonah seems to have learned was not that it was wrong to disobey the LORD and try to escape one's commission, but rather it was fruitless. Jonah, we would suggest, was not repentant, but was resigned to the facts: He was going to Nineveh one way or the other." p. 35.