

(Jonah) the Depths of Hell

by John Vissers

Jonah's experience in the fish teaches us that God is sovereign and that we can trust in Him, even in the midst of crisis and difficulty.

Duration: 36:03

Scripture: Jonah 1:17 - 2:1

Topics: "Jonah", "God's Mercy", "Salvation in Despair"

Description

John Vissers preaches on Jonah's experience in the depths of despair, emphasizing how Jonah faced imminent death and judgment but found salvation through God's mercy. The sermon highlights the transformative power of the phrase 'but the Lord,' illustrating how God intervenes in our darkest moments. Jonah's prayer from inside the fish serves as a model for acknowledging our crises and recognizing God's sovereignty and faithfulness. Vissers draws parallels between Jonah's experience and the broader theme of salvation, encouraging believers to trust in God's grace even in dire circumstances. Ultimately, the message is one of hope and thanksgiving for God's deliverance, reminding us that salvation comes from the Lord.

Transcript

swept over him, the seaweed it says wrapped around his head, he probably thought it was over. He may well have had one of those experiences that people who are about to face death, to enter into death, purportedly have. His life may well have flashed before his eyes.

He realized that the end was near, that the end was imminent, that his death was only a matter of minutes away. But then we have the 17th verse, the last verse of chapter 1, which we didn't read, but which we read last time. But the Lord, it says, provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside of the fish three days and three nights.

And the opening phrase of that verse, the 17th verse, the last verse of chapter 1, really tells it all. But the Lord. All seemed lost.

Death was imminent. Jonah was facing the very depths of hell itself. His life was ebbing away.

It would only be a matter of minutes before Jonah's lungs filled with water, and he probably would drown. His flight from God was going to end, rather ironically, in this sea, where he was going to meet his end

once and for all, his death, and the end was at hand. But it says, but the Lord.

And time and time again, throughout scripture, this little conjunction, this little word, takes a situation and transforms it. God's people are often at their wit's end. The end seems near.

All hope has been vanquished. And then the text reads, but God. But the Lord.

And God steps in, and God acts, and the Lord intervenes, and everything is turned upside down. Hell itself may loom on the horizon. But, this powerful conjunction in scripture, but God, but the Lord, and it's all turned around.

And then the second chapter, which we began with tonight, begins with these astonishing words, from inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God. And the rest of chapter two, with the exception of the tenth verse, is a record of that prayer. It's a record of Jonah's prayer to God, out of the depths of despair, in the midst of his crisis.

Having been tossed into the sea, Jonah experiences both the judgment of God, but he also experiences the salvation of God. It is the judgment of God upon his flight from God's call. But in the midst of the judgment, Jonah also experiences the life-saving grace and mercy of God.

And it's kind of ironic, because in the opening of chapter one, it's God who's calling to Jonah. Jonah, I want you to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to them, because their wickedness has come up against me. It's Jonah who's calling to God, and Jonah won't listen.

And Jonah runs, and Jonah turns tail, and goes in the opposite direction, and boards a ship to Tarshish. But now, it's Jonah calling upon the Lord, and Jonah discovers, in fact, that God listens to his prayer. And he experiences the deliverance of God, and the chapter ends with Jonah, in rather vivid language, being expelled, being vomited, as the New International Version puts it, which is a literal translation of the Hebrew, being vomited, being spit up, on to dry ground, on to dry land by the fish, and the nightmare ends.

Well, what is it that's in this prayer, in verses two to nine, that is so profound, and so important? What is it that Jonah says as he calls upon the Lord that we need to notice tonight? This is a prayer prayed from the depths of despair. It's a prayer uttered by someone who is so far down that he doesn't think there's anywhere else to go. Jonah has nothing, he thinks, left for which to live.

He'd run from God. He'd wreaked havoc in the lives of those that he touched, the sailors with whom he was aboard on this ship. He'd come to the end of his rope.

He was without hope and without God in the world, or so he thought. And here he stands under the judgment of God, but under the very judgment of God, he also experiences the rescue of God. And this prayer, in verses two to nine, in a marvelous way, is Jonah's experience moving out from under the judgment of God, by the grace of God, to experience the salvation of God.

And so the prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving for that deliverance. Jonah now praises the very God whose presence he had tried to avoid, and that's what makes the prayer so instructive for us, I want to suggest to you tonight, that there are times in our lives when we think we can't go down any further than the position, than the situation, in which we find ourselves. When all hope is gone, when the end seems near, and then, like Jonah, there is a transforming moment but God, but the Lord.

And God moves in, and everything which was turned upside down is turned right-side up, and God, in the midst of judgment, has mercy. God delivers. And this makes what Jonah thought, and how Jonah felt, what Jonah experienced in these moments of utter fear and crisis, and the manner in which Jonah responded, it makes all of that so significant for us as people who seek to live our lives in the kinds of days we find ourselves.

Jonah responded with thanksgiving from the depths for what God did for him. Now let's move into the prayer itself, and let's look first of all at verses 1 to 2, where Jonah calls upon God. It says, From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God, and 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. Now there are a number of things about this prayer in its entirety that we need to notice, and verses 1 and 2 introduce a number of these things to us, and I'd like for us to notice them as we make our way into this prayer of Jonah's in the second chapter. And I want you to notice that there's a movement, or a flow to this prayer, a movement of three parts, and verses 1 and 2 are really the first movement in that three-part movement.

The prayer moves from an acknowledgment that the Lord heard Jonah's petition, in verses 1 and 2, through a review of Jonah's predicament, or the crisis in which he finds himself, in verses 3 to 6, and then an acknowledgment. Jonah makes a final note of praise, or a vow of thanksgiving, and announces that salvation is of the Lord, in verses 6 to 9. And what's interesting about this movement is that it is a movement characteristic of many of the psalms in the Old Testament. In fact, if you were with us for some of the psalms that we looked at this past summer, you'll remember that the psalms often move from the psalmist calling upon God, to facing his crisis, to then an acknowledgment or a word of confidence that God has in fact delivered him, that God has in fact met his need.

There is praise for the deliverance which is experienced. And I want to suggest to you that there's a pattern here which is helpful, and which is instructive for us, as we may well find ourselves in the midst of crisis and difficulty. But not only is the movement reflective of the psalms, but the language itself which Jonah uses throughout this prayer is also reminiscent and reflects the psalms.

In fact, there's really not much here in Jonah's prayer that you cannot find in one of the psalms, in the psalms throughout the Old Testament. The psalmist talks about things like distress, about Sheol, which the NIV translates as the grave, about waves and breakers which pass over us, about going down into the pit, about distress, about the temple, about the waters closing in. And it seems to me that it's not too much to imagine, that it's not too much to think that Jonah, being a prophet of God, well knew the psalms, well knew the psalms of the people of God.

And in the midst of his crisis, some of those psalms flood back into his mind, flood back into his memory. And so as he comes to God, and in his distress he prays, his words are shaped by, his words are formed by, his words are informed by the psalms. And Jonah experiences, in fact, what many believers have experienced throughout the ages, that the book of psalms provides for us words with which to pray when we do not have words ourselves.

When we don't have the language to come into God's presence because the crisis seems so great, there we find in the psalms the experience of the psalmist being the same as ours, and we enter into God's presence. And then notice that Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. Verse 1, from inside of the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God.

This is the first time in the book of Jonah that God is referred by Jonah to the Lord his God. It's the first time that he refers to the Lord his God. It was the word of the Lord that came to Jonah in verse 1. It was Jonah who tried to run away from the Lord in verse 3. It was the Lord who sent a great wind on the sea in verse 4. Jonah is urged to pray to to his God by the captain in verse 6, but those words are on the words of this pagan captain, not on the lips of Jonah.

But now the text says that Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. There is an acknowledgment that the God from whose presence he had been trying to flee is indeed the Lord his God. And our flight from God ends when we begin to realize that the God from whom we are running is the Lord our God.

Jonah had to come to terms with the fact that the Lord who made the heaven and the sea, the land, and all that is in them was the Lord his God. That God was not simply some abstract power behind the universe, but that in fact God was his God. That he knew more than simply information about God, but he knew God and he knew God was after him.

And he prays now to the Lord his God. This is the God with whom he has to do. And then Jonah calls on the Lord his God in his distress.

And notice that the distress is described in three ways. First, from inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. In my distress, he says, I called to the Lord.

And then he says, from the depths of the grave or from the depths of Sheol, I called for help and you listened to me. Now there's a parallelism here in the second verse. Twice he speaks about his distress and twice he acknowledges the faithfulness of God.

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. Now the word here, as the NIV translates it, is the depths of the grave.

Sheol. It doesn't literally mean hell, at least not in the New Testament sense of hell as a place of eternal punishment, but it refers to the grave. It refers to going down into death.

And Jonah is praying now on the very doorstep of death itself and he sees the abyss and he calls upon God in his distress. And he realizes in the midst of his distress that he needs to call upon the Lord and that only God can save him. And of course Jonah experienced what many people often experience, that it's only at those moments when we're on the edge, when we're struggling perhaps in the midst of life, perhaps even struggling for life itself, that we come face to face with God.

And then Jonah, it says, acknowledges the faithfulness of God. He says, the Lord answered me. In verse two, the Lord listened to my cry.

Jonah appeals to God and he trusts in God and then he thanks God for his goodness and for his faithfulness. So in this opening call, as Jonah calls out to God in this ironic moment, the God who had called to him he had ignored. But now he calls out to God and he calls out from his distress and he acknowledges God's faithfulness and he acknowledges God's goodness and he acknowledges that God heard him.

And I want to suggest to you that there are moments in our lives when, like Jonah, we are faced with situations when there is nothing else but to do than to call upon the name of the Lord. When our backs are against the wall, when we've tried everything, where we've explored every possibility, and we realize that

we need to call out upon the Lord, Jonah's prayer begins with a calling out to his God in his distress and an acknowledgment of God's faithfulness and God's goodness. But then secondly, notice that Jonah goes on and he reviews his crisis.

He reviews his predicament. One of the wonderful things about the Psalms and one of the wonderful things that comes through in this prayer of Jonah's is that he's very honest. He's brutally honest about his experience.

He's brutally honest about what confronts him. He's brutally honest about what is challenging him and what faces him. But notice that he understands his situation in relation to God.

Verse 3, you hurled me into the deep and into the very heart of the seas, and the current swirled about me. All your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, I have been banished from your sight, yet I will look again toward your holy temple.

The engulfing waters threatened me. The deep surrounded me. Seaweed was wrapped around my head.

To the roots of the mountains I sank down. The earth beneath barred me in forever. What I find interesting about the way that Jonah puts his predicament is that he acknowledges the sovereignty of God.

He acknowledges that God is in control. He says, you hurled me into the deep. Your waves and breakers swept over me.

In verse 4, I have been banished from your sight. Jonah acknowledges and recognizes the sovereignty of God and that he's bumping up against the sovereignty of God in his life, but what's astounding, what's astonishing about this prayer is there's no bitterness here. There's no anger.

There's no hostility. One would imagine if we were going through experiences such as those of Jonah that as we came into God's presence, we would be angry. We would be hostile and we would complain against God, but Jonah confesses that he's bumped up against the power of God in his life and he acknowledges the sovereignty of God and he knows that he can't outrun God even though he's tried.

And so as he reviews his predicament now, and remember all of what's happened in verse 1, as he reviews the crisis in which he finds himself, he sees the hand of God in his life. And I want to suggest to you that one of the things that happens when we're in crisis, when we cry out to God from the depths, we begin to get a new perspective on our experience. And what is that perspective? That perspective is that our lives are in the hands of the living God, that there's nothing about our life that does not have to do with God, with the sovereignty of God.

And then as he reviews the crisis in which he finds himself, the image of water now becomes a powerful, powerful picture. It's a powerful image to describe Jonah's experience. He was tossed into the sea.

Now what is the sea for him? Well the sea for him is first of all a place of death. It's a place of judgment. It's a place where he expects he's going to meet the end of his life.

It's a place where he comes face to face with death itself. But it's now being transformed into a place of life. It's the place where he's going to experience the salvation of God.

It's the place where he's going to experience the rescuing power of God. And I want to suggest to you that in fact in the Bible, water represents in this powerful way both death and life. Think for example of the

experience of Noah and the flood in Genesis chapter 6 and in the chapters which follow.

The water of the flood was the judgment of God upon the people. For in fact their disobedience and their having as we saw this morning, trying to throw off the kingdom of God in their midst. But Noah and his family were rescued and spared by God.

For them the water became a place of new life and new beginning. Moses leads the people out of Egypt and what happens they cross the Red Sea. The Red Sea becomes both a place of judgment but also a place of rescue and a place of deliverance for the Israelites.

These waters are the power of death and those plunged into them are plunged into death but they are also the beginning of life and those plunged into them experience God's rescue and release and salvation. And I don't think it would be pushing the point, in fact I know it would not be pushing the point to in fact indicate that what we find here is the Old Testament background to the New Testament understanding of what baptism is. Jesus refers to the cross as a baptism which he must go through.

It is a baptism in which he experiences and bears the judgment of sin upon himself on the cross but it becomes the cross of Calvary, the place of new life, the place where salvation comes to the world. And in Romans 6 Paul says that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death and the language there of the water is language of death going under, being buried, being killed, putting to death the old self, buried with Christ in the cross in baptism. And then Paul goes on, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father that we too may live a new life and that baptism, that water of death becomes for us a water of new life.

And in fact throughout the history of the church those who have taught and those who have preached on this passage in the book of Jonah have pointed out the power of the image of the water. This becomes for Jonah the place of his judgment but also the place of new life. And so we need to be reminded of our own baptisms as Jonah goes through this experience.

And then in these verses Jonah notice also looks to the temple of the Lord. The temple of the Lord in the Old Testament is the place of God's presence with his people. It is the place where God's presence is located in Israel.

And the irony is that Jonah now longs for the very presence, the very communion, the very fellowship of the God from whose presence he had tried to run. He's now running to God instead of running from God. And so Jonah in his prayer reviews his crisis but this is not simply a superficial recounting of what's happening to him.

It is a powerful God intoxicated interpretation of his experience of his life. And as I suggested a moment ago when you come into God's presence and you call out to God in the midst of crisis then you begin to see your experience and what's going on in your life in a quite different way in relation to God. And then thirdly and finally notice that Jonah praises God for his deliverance in verses 6 to 9. This prayer of Jonah's is an entirely appropriate song or prayer or psalm on which to preach on Thanksgiving Sunday because it ends with a sacrifice of praise.

It ends with a vow of thanksgiving. Jonah says that God has brought his life up from the pit. When his life was ebbing away the Lord heard his prayer and he comments about those who put their trust in idols.

Now he may well be referring to the sailors who first sought out their own gods and when that didn't work then they turned to the Lord God of Israel and found refuge and found salvation and found deliverance. But what Jonah is saying here is that those who put their trust in idols and false gods have no refuge, have no rescue, have no salvation. And you need to think of Jonah's experience here.

He's saying how could anyone trust in other gods when God has been so gracious to me? He's saying how can you cling to worthless idols and forfeit what could be yours when you've seen what God has done in my life? If you continue to trust in yourself, Jonah says, or your own gods or your own possessions or the things which creep into your life, you end up forfeiting the very experience of life for which you long. Jonah had tried to run from God but he found that life itself was to be found in the very God from whom he was trying to run. The God from whose presence he wanted to flee.

And there's a great deal of irony here and I hope as we've worked through week by week and continue to go through the book of Jonah you'll notice the irony as it comes again and again to the forefront. Jonah finds God when he's trying to run away from God. Jonah finds life in the midst of death.

Jonah reaches the heights of spirituality in the depths of the ocean. And Jonah offers prayers of thanksgiving at the point when he seems to have the least to be thankful for. But the prayer ends with a song of thanksgiving.

And Jonah sacrifices to the Lord and he makes this wonderful confession, what I have vowed I will make good. We're going to see in the coming weeks what that means. And then he says salvation comes from the Lord.

And the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. You see it's in his moment of deepest distress. It's in the depths of his own hell.

It's in the crisis which seems to not be ending when the legions of hell themselves seem to be overtaking him. That Jonah experiences grace. A moment of transforming grace.

It's then that Jonah experiences God's salvation, God's rescue, God's hope in his life. One of my professors at Princeton Seminary was a man named Richard Armstrong who taught us courses on evangelism and ministry. And he was a wonderful, wonderful teacher and a godly, godly man and a committed Christian.

Before he was called to the ministry he worked for 10 years in the Baltimore Orioles organization. He worked in administration and in marketing, marketing the baseball team. This was back in the 1950s.

And shortly after he and his wife heard God's call to them to enter ministry they moved to Princeton Seminary where he became a student. And one of the things that was going on in their lives at this time is they had a little boy. And their little boy had leukemia.

And so they moved and they packed up and they moved to Princeton Seminary. And they moved with their little boy and settled in Princeton. Well they'd only been there a couple of months and Dick had only been away from the Baltimore Orioles organization for a couple of months.

And they had planned a farewell dinner for him back in Baltimore. And so he had intended to go. I mean he'd started off on this new life but he had intended to go back to this farewell dinner, this dinner which was being given to honor him.

And he said I was on my way down to the train station in Princeton to get on the train, to board the train, to go down to Baltimore so that I could attend this dinner. But something prevented me from going. He said I just could not get on that train.

And he said I made my way back out of the train station and back up the street through Princeton and back into our student apartment. And my wife was astonished to discover me at the door. And he said I just can't go to this dinner.

I don't know why but I just can't go tonight to this dinner. And she said well you have to go. I mean they're throwing this party for you.

It's a dinner in your honor. You have to go. And he said I can't go.

I'm not going. And so they called Baltimore, if you can imagine, hundreds upon hundreds of people having gathered in this big hotel room for this dinner to tell them that he wasn't coming to his own farewell dinner, to this dinner which had been planned to honor him. And I'll never forget as he told us the story in class one day with tears in his eyes.

He said that night at four o'clock in the morning as he held his son in his arms he passed away. He died. And Dick Armstrong said to us as students with tears in his eyes and yet also with a smile on his face, he said God is so good.

God is so good that he prevented me from going that night so that I could be with my son in those last moments, those last hours of his life. He saw that as the providence of God. He saw that as the goodness of God.

He saw that as somehow God's salvation to him and to his wife at their moment of what really should have been their darkest hell and their deepest moment of distress. He saw it as the provision of God. And I learned something from him that day and that is whatever our experience, whatever our distress, whatever challenges we might face, whatever hell might await us in the midst of it all, there is the grace and salvation and providence and presence of God.

And some of you tonight may not think that you have very much for which to be thankful. And you may be facing your own moments of distress, but let us be thankful for the grace and the mercy of God in our lives and let us say with Jonah that salvation comes from the Lord because we can praise God that even in the midst of judgment there is salvation. And we can offer our thanks for the one who chose not to run from God, his Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, and who bore the judgment of death for us so that we might live.

So that even from the depths of despair at the edge of death itself, we can praise God for Jesus Christ who tasted death for all of us so that we indeed might live. I don't know what your experience is tonight, but I do know that even in the depths of hell itself, from the depths of the grave as Jonah experienced it, there is the grace of God. May we find, may we know, may we experience, may we trust in that grace for our salvation on this Thanksgiving Sunday.

Let us pray. Father, we bow before you tonight and we thank you for Jonah's life and we thank you for his experience and we confess tonight that there are moments in our own lives when his experience is our experience. We pray tonight that by your Holy Spirit you administer your grace to us, help us to hear the good news, help us to believe the good news, help us to trust in the good news tonight.

For the sake of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/30/SID30653.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-vissers/jonah-the-depths-of-hell/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net