

Normally, God's prophets worship God, and the pagans are judged. Normally, being in a ship on the water means that you are safe, and being in the belly of a fish means that you are dead. Normally, when you hear a whale song, the whale is the one singing. But nothing about the story of Jonah is normal, and so after God's judgment comes on Jonah and the pagans worship Him, after Jonah is hurled overboard from a doomed ship and swallowed by a great fish, we come to chapter 2, and if you were out at sea next to this whale, you would have heard quite a different song rising up from her belly.

This is of course the most famous moment in the book of Jonah, and it remains one of those Bible stories that even people who don't know anything about the Bible still know. This fish has filled our collective imagination with stories and paintings and songs, both from Christians and non-Christians, whether we're talking about Pinocchio, Moby Dick, VeggieTales, Albert Ryder, or Bruce Springsteen.

And just like you all, the songs and paintings are divided over what sort of creature it was that swallowed Jonah, and so I wanted to get this out the way right up front, because ultimately, it really doesn't matter: the Bible calls it a *great fish*. And although whales aren't fish by our modern classification, that's not the way creatures were classified in the Bible. *This* great fish might very well have been a whale, and oddly enough, just last July a scientific study was published arguing that this part of the Mediterranean Sea served as a calving ground for certain types of whales.

And that brings us to the matter of reconciling this account with modern science, which I also want to deal with briefly, because that's not the Bible's focus. Many people have expended a great deal of energy and ink arguing over whether or not a sea creature could swallow a man whole and have that man stay alive inside its belly for three days. They've conducted measurements, dredged up newspaper clippings of old whaler's accounts of strange happenings at sea, attempting to prove or disprove the possibility of these events.

But while they might be helpful in some cases, historical and scientific studies are ultimately beside the point. Jonah 1:17 says that God appointed this great fish to swallow the prophet, which lands us firmly in the realm of the miraculous. Christians confess that the central event in world history is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which

history and science would tell us is impossible, but which nevertheless happened, as we heard in today's reading from 1 Corinthians 15. So it really is quite simple: if God can raise the dead, God can call on whales to swallow runaway prophets, and He can keep them alive on the inside.

Jonah's whale is shocking, fascinating, and endlessly evocative, but she's really only mentioned a couple of times, primarily here at the beginning and ending of Jonah's whale song. However catchy the Veggietales version might be, in Jonah 2, Jonah sings his own song from the belly of the whale, a psalm of thanksgiving that glorifies God by celebrating the central truth of the Bible: *salvation belongs to the Lord*. So let's spend most of our time exploring how God saved Jonah with the help of this merciful whale.

In v. 1 of ch. 2, we see Jonah doing something that he's refused to do for far too long: he *prays*. He wouldn't call out for God against Nineveh, and he wouldn't even call out to God for deliverance in the storm, but at last, as he's sinking to the bottom of the sea, he finally cries out to God. This initial prayer from the water is what he's remembering when he prays *this* prayer from the belly of the whale.

*That* prayer probably consisted of screams and cries for help, but *this* prayer in chapter 2 is full of repurposed lyrics from the Psalms. Some have counted over 100 connections to various different psalms, such as Psalm 18, 42, 120, and 130, which we sang earlier. Jonah knows a lot of Bible, but it takes a downward trip to Sheol to drive the truths in his *head* down into his *heart*, and even then, as we'll see, it takes a lot more work for those truths to work out in his life.

This reality should lead us to pray that God does this work in our hearts without having to call for a whale! We cannot be content with knowing *Bible verses* and *facts about God*! We need to know God *Himself*, and live out what we know in the context of our relationship with Him!

If I memorize the book of Psalms, but don't love God, I am nothing but a lousy prophet, sinking to the bottom of the ocean. As Jonah learned, knowing the Bible is good, but using that knowledge to love and obey God is better!

All throughout this prayer we see Jonah getting a new perspective. In ch. 1, we read that the sailors hurled Jonah into the sea. Here in vs. 3, Jonah tells God, “You cast me into the deep.” Jonah sees God’s hand at work. In 1:17, from the human perspective, Jonah is in the belly of the whale, but in 2:2, Jonah sees himself to be in the belly (or better, *womb*) of Sheol, the biblical name for the place of the dead. Ch. 1 tells us that Jonah fled from before God’s face, which especially refers to the temple, but in 2:7 Jonah realizes that he still has access to God’s temple, even at the very gates of the underworld. And most importantly, Jonah in the water knows God’s judgment, while Jonah in the whale is experiencing God’s mercy and love. And as James 2:13 says, mercy triumphs over judgment.

But as much as Jonah’s eyes are being opened, there are hints that for all the lessons he’s learned, Jonah still has a long way to go. He rejoices and gives thanks that God has saved him from distress and danger, but he doesn’t mention anything about guilt or repentance. In fact, in v.4, Jonah talks about being driven away from God’s sight, and hoping to look again upon the temple. That seems like an odd way to say, “I ran away from what you asked me to do, hoping to hide from your face.” We’ll see a couple more of these missteps in the rest of the prayer, but even here we find encouragement: God hears and answers imperfect prayers from imperfect people! Jonah still has to work on his pride and his self-righteous heart, but fundamentally, he is no longer running from God. Yes, he’s still sinful, but he’s doing exactly what sinful people need to do: he’s calling on God for salvation.

And as we chart the journey that’s brought him to this point, the text gives us a picture of *death and resurrection*. Jonah descends into the underworld, and God lifts him back up again. As a psalm or song, Jonah’s prayer uses images and poetic language to convey a very grim situation: he finds himself in the belly of Sheol, the waters close over him, and the weeds are wrapped around his head. The bars of the underworld close upon him forever, and his life is fainting away.

Jonah is as good as dead. He’s gone down to the roots of the mountains, the very bottom of the world, as far as it is possible to get from the temple on top of God’s holy mountain. The biblical scenes that Jonah calls to mind are Noah’s flood, or Pharaoh’s army being drowned in the Red (reed) Sea, and Jonah isn’t on the ark or passing through the parted waters. He’s being

judged, like the sinful world, like Pharaoh and his army. He's experiencing a preview of what awaits the Ninevites, and as soon as he does, he cries out for mercy.

But at his lowest moment, God *does* have mercy on Jonah. V.6 is key: "I went down," Jonah says, "but you brought me up, O Yahweh my God!" And remember, the salvation that Jonah is celebrating at this moment comes *in the belly of the whale*. He is not saved *from* the whale; he is saved *by* the whale. We're not entirely sure why being swallowed by a whale convinces Jonah that God is saving him, but it does.

And as he sits there praising God, his psalm gives us hints about what's coming next. In 1:17, he's in the belly of the fish, but in 2:1, the fish is specified as feminine, leading some to translate 2:1 so that Jonah is in the fish's *womb*. In 2:2, this idea is supported by the word "distress", which often refers to birth pangs, and by a reference to the "womb" of Sheol. The word for belly in 1:17 and 2:1 *can* be translated "womb", but the word in 2:2 is different, and probably *should* be translated "womb." The point is that Jonah is going to be reborn! He recognizes that this fish has not been sent to destroy him, but to keep him alive so that he can be "born again"!

This whale song is depicting Jonah's journey to Sheol and back, a journey of death and resurrection, metaphorically if not literally, which is yet another reason why Jesus finds Jonah's story to be the perfect picture of His own life and work. But in the middle of providing us with this wonderful preview of Jesus, Jonah shows us one more reason why we need Jesus to come.

In v. 7, Jonah tells us something true, but he gets the emphasis wrong. Remember, his language is meant to remind us of the flood, but in Genesis 8:1, *after* the judgment, the text tells us that *God remembered Noah*, and guided the ark to safety. Here in Jonah, we read the opposite: "When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord." That's true, but it's also trivial. What's important is that *God remembered Jonah*, and sent salvation. Jonah's desperate prayer doesn't save him; *God* saves him.

We see that Jonah has turned back to God, but he still has a ways to go, and the more we see the hints here in ch. 2, the less surprised we are when we get to ch. 4, where we find that Jonah still doesn't fully understand and embrace the mercy of God.

Nevertheless, the central point of v.6 remains: “I went down,” Jonah says, “and you brought me up, O Lord.” And so in v.9, Jonah summarizes the message of the whole Bible in one sentence: “Salvation belongs to the Lord.” He’s not just confessing that God does the saving, but also that *who* God saves, *how* God saves, *when* God saves, and *why* God saves is all up to God. Humans can’t engineer it, earn it, or even explain it! Salvation belongs to the Lord, and Jonah’s story makes that abundantly clear.

But once again, Jonah would probably be better served to talk more about God and less about himself, because in v. 8, he decides to make a boast against pagan idolaters. “Those who worship idols lose out on any hope of mercy.” Jonah says, “But not me! God loves me, and so I’m here thanking Him, offering sacrifices, and paying my vows to Him.”

Of course, the pagan sailors aboard the ship did exactly those things three days ago, as soon as they heard a word from God. They obeyed God, then worshipped Him in exactly the ways that Jonah describes, and they didn’t even need to be sent to Sheol to learn their lesson! Jonah obviously doesn’t know what happened on the ship after he was thrown overboard, but he seems to be crowing over the fact that the sailors’ gods couldn’t calm the storm, while his God could.

Even though he’s technically speaking truth, his boast falls pretty flat. Jonah doesn’t appear to have any sense of his own embarrassing role in this whole drama, and so it’s almost humorous when God orders the whale just to barf up this oblivious prophet onto the beach. It’s not a glorious vindication of God’s prophet over against the pagan sailors. The sailors by now have reached their destination by boat, while Jonah’s whale taxi dumps him at the curb.

But despite Jonah’s foolishness, the main point is that he is not drowned in Sheol; he is alive and well back on the shore. He has received unimaginable mercy from God, and God deserves all the thanks, sacrifices, and vows that Jonah could possibly offer, and much more. The great fish has served as Jonah’s ark, preserving him through the flood of his own rebellion, and landing him back on dry land.

Jonah has been humbled, and he has turned back to God. He doesn’t fully appreciate what just happened, and he doesn’t even fully understand the full meaning of the wonderful words that he’s saying, but he does grasp the heart of the gospel: *salvation is founded on God’s steadfast love.*

It's interesting that this truth is at the heart of the book of Jonah, which is at the heart of the book of the twelve minor prophets, which is at the heart of the Bible itself. This is the central message of God's Word: *God saves sinners*.

And so far in Jonah, we've seen amazing hints of how the gospel of Jesus Christ will bear that out: salvation has been credited to God's sheer love and mercy, not to human effort like rowing harder or getting rid of the cargo, or even to faithful membership in God's covenant people. God saves runaway rebels!

And not only that, but God makes substitutionary sacrifice central to His saving plan, which we saw last week as Jonah goes into the sea so that the sailors can be saved. In chapter two, the picture of salvation continues to be filled in as Jonah is saved through a three-day journey of death and resurrection. There is enough gospel in Jonah for Jesus to declare that Jonah functions as a sign of His own ministry, His own saving work.

But how much more should we give thanks and praise to God for our greater Jonah, the Lord Jesus Christ, who spent three days and nights in the heart of the earth as a substitutionary sacrifice in our place, as a testimony of God's steadfast love and immeasurable mercy towards sinners! If Jonah gave thanks, how much more should we! If Jonah sang from the belly of the whale, how much more should we lift up glad songs to God! And if Jonah knew enough to confess that salvation belongs to the Lord, how much more should we magnify the salvation that God has accomplished for us through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So let us give thanks to God,

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*