

Bible Study – Jonah

Chapter 2

In the original Hebrew, verse 17 of chapter 1 is actually verse 1 of **chapter 2**. God sends a ‘great fish’ to swallow Jonah and rescue him from drowning and Jonah spends the next three days and nights in the fish. Whilst in the fish, Jonah prays.

Scholars argue that the text found in **Jonah 2:2-9** has been added into the narrative at a later date. The theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests that this prayer has been inserted as ‘a vehicle for the advance of the narrative’. He argues that ‘this prayer is a poetic account of Jonah’s thankfulness to God and change of heart for his mission, without which, the story would be unable to continue’. Other scholars argue that the prayer has possibly been inserted into the wrong place, suggesting that it should come *after* Jonah was vomited onto the shore. However other scholars argue that the prayer is so essential to the story as a whole, it makes little sense to view it as a later addition.

Taking a literal reading of the Bible, we are told that Jonah is swallowed by the fish, spends three days and nights in its belly and “*Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from inside the fish*” (**Jonah 2:1**). I’ve always found the use of ‘then’ quite powerful here – as if the writer is trying to say, ‘what does it have to take to get you to pray’?

Jonah’s prayer is a powerful one, making reference to several psalms (**Psalms 3:8; 16:10; 18:4-6; 31:22; 40:12; 42:7; 69:1-2; 88:6-8**) demonstrating Jonah’s knowledge of scripture.

The prayer itself could be split into three sections:

1. Jonah’s prayer of thanks for his deliverance (**v1-2**)
2. Jonah’s recount of his troubles, his cry for help and God’s rescue (**v3-7**)
3. Jonah’s recommitment to God (**v8-9**)

In his prayer, Jonah states that it was God who ‘*threw [him] down into the ocean depths*’. Although physically it was the sailors who threw Jonah overboard, Jonah is attributing the entire sequence of events to God’s providence, including the storm itself and the casting of lots.

In **verses 6-7** Jonah mentions sinking ‘*down to the very roots of the mountains*’ and being ‘*imprisoned in the earth, whose gates lock shut forever*’. This could have several meanings: On a literal, physical level, the coast around Joppa is recorded to have promontories, or large rocks, that jut out just above the water line, meaning anyone trying to escape the sea would be blocked by the cliffs and rocks above them. On a metaphorical level, this could be a reference to ‘hell’ or ‘sheol’, particularly given Jonah’s mention of it in **verse 2**. To me there is no suggestion that Jonah actually died and went to hell – although he may have felt as if he was about to die, he is simply being dramatic! However, we can see the obvious prophetic links here to Jesus, who was dead and buried for three days before rising again.

God ‘spoke to’ or ‘ordered’ the fish to spit Jonah out to which the fish obeys without question and Jonah is literally hurled onto the beach (**v10**). We are not told where Jonah was ejected from the fish, but it would be reasonable to assume it was somewhere on the west coast of Israel. Those who state Jonah was washed up on the shores of Nineveh forget that Nineveh was at least 387 miles from the nearest sea – the Mediterranean. To suggest that Jonah was launched 387 from the sea to Nineveh would take some serious projectile power!

Landing (probably) on the west coast of Israel still meant a long journey inland for Jonah, of between 387 and 800 miles depending on his route and where he started from. Some older translations of **Chapter 3** suggest that it was a “*three-day journey*” to get to Nineveh (**Jonah 3:3**), but this is unrealistic given the distance involved. It’s almost certainly a comment on the size of the city itself. The closest possible coast to Ninevah would be near İskenderun, in Turkey. Even to walk from here to Ninevah could take between one and two weeks depending on your walking speed, how long you walked for each day, and what route you took.

Incredibly, sperm whales’ vomit, has a name – it’s called *ambergris*, and is actually a very expensive ingredient in perfumes. When it is first ‘released’, it has a terrible smell but over time it matures into a very sweet aroma. So not only was Jonah saved, but he also came out smelling of roses!! It’s a great encouragement that even the worst of us can get vomited up from the bottom of the pit, and we would still end up smelling fragrant to God.