

**Sunday 22 April 2018. Love That Chases Us: A Study in Jonah.
Chapter 2 ~ Jonah's Prayer.**

If you asked anyone to name a story from the OT, church-goer or not, they'll probably default to just a very few well known ones - and Jonah and the Whale is likely to be high up on that list (only of course the Bible doesn't call it a whale - but a big fish). This is now our second week studying the book of Jonah which is found in the Minor Prophets section of the OT. And today we're in chapter two which you'll find on page 927 of the church bibles.

I really don't know what possessed me to volunteer to speak on this chapter! Chapter one we looked at last week is where most of the exciting action is that everybody associates with this story. It tells us about Jonah as the rebellious prophet trying to run away from God's direct instruction and getting nowhere. How in his disobedience he endangered the lives of others and yet seemed totally oblivious (until he was shaken awake) to the situation he's in. It tells us of him being hurled into the sea, of God preparing a big fish to swallow him to save his life, and the subsequent effect on the crew of the ship he'd boarded because of the miraculous calming of the storm.

And right from beginning, the content of this book begs an obvious question. Is this just a story with a moral, or an event that actually happened? Commentators are divided between calling it an OT parable (which included C.S.Lewis) and others who respect its historical veracity. So let's briefly look at that issue before we read on into chapter two.

First, Jonah was a real person. He's mentioned in 2 Kings Ch.14 when he prophesies to Jeroboam II, which places this book about the end of the eight century BC when the empire with Nineveh as its capital was on the rise. A century or so later this empire would decimate Samaria and disperse the ten Northern tribes of Israel so that they could never be a co-ordinated entity ever again. So it is located historically.

Then in Matthew 12 Jesus says this about Jonah, and I'll read it to you in full so you can get a sense of His emphases. "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. 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 something greater than Jonah is here".

Now this isn't necessarily proof of its historical nature, as I could use a story from, say, a Star Wars script, to make a point without implying the events were real. But Jesus here talks about Nineveh's repentance as a real event with consequences, which does imply that *He* took the whole story as fact.

And then there's the big fish, who's belly is the setting for today's reading? In folklore this is always referred to as 'a whale'. Could it happen? Well scientists say it could, pointing to whales swallowing squid. But a man?

Well here's a picture from the days when whaling was more common than it is today, with a row of men standing on atop a beached whale.





And here's another photo from a recent Metro newspaper showing a giant whale shark, usually residing in the depths around Australia, but here came up just under the surface near this boat. So practically, we could say, "Yes".

And there have been various reports over the years of people being swallowed by whales and surviving. The most famous was a James Bartley in 1891 which was covered by several American newspapers at the time, although in 1991 someone researched this story and threw serious doubt on it. But his isn't the only story out there of such incidences. However, as one commentator has said, "What sort of fish can swallow a man is not the interest of scripture."

And in some way it's all irrelevant anyway, because the main character of the book of Jonah *isn't* Jonah, and certainly not 'the big fish'. It's God. Or the LORD, to give Him His reverent title most often used in the text. And the Bible tells us, '*nothing* is impossible to God' including of course, resurrection (which might actually be the case, similar to that of Lazarus in the NT, from the language we're going to read). And as one writer's said, 'miraculously rescuing someone from drowning via a fish is no great feat.' So it was *God* who provided the way of saving Jonah - in one sense - from himself. And it was *God* who had him eventually delivered to an appropriate beach to continue his journey in the direction that *God* wanted him to travel in.

So - today's passage is based in that period between Jonah being swallowed up and being vomited out. And by now you should have all found Jonah Ch.2 - so let's read it. And as I've said before, if my rendition has slightly different words to yours, our church bibles are a 1984 imprint.

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said:

"In my distress I called to the Lord,
and he answered me.
From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.
You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents 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.

But you, Lord my God,
brought my life up from the pit.

"When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, Lord,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.

"Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God's love for them.
But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will make good.
I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'"

And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Now if your Bible's set out the same as mine, then the layout of what we've just read should give you a clue as to the type of literature this is. It's poetry. In fact - it's a psalm - and it wouldn't be out of place in the book of Psalms. The rest of this book is prose - a narrative - a story - but chapter two is written as a poem. (Incidentally, another thing about the text is it's a *very* well preserved record, and a version of Jonah discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls shows very few, and only minor, differences to the text preserved for us in our Bibles.) And of course, we're used to Psalms being prayers. All sorts of prayers. And many of them are shouts to God for help.

So - what does Jonah pray as he sloshes about in a fish's gastric juices?

Well the first thing that's striking is, while Jonah was running away from God's purposes - actively trying to escape God's direct instruction - he's not abandoned his faith in God or his relationship with him. In fact if you wanted a subtitle for the book of Jonah, it could be, 'A prophet having a serious disagreement with the God he believes in and serves'.

So the first thing Jonah starts to do is talk to God again. He hasn't up to this point, but now he does. Somewhere in the Bible I remember reading God saying to His wayward people, "return to Me, and bring words with you". The way back to God starts with the desire to be in communication with Him again: start to talk to Him. And that is not always easy. Where do you start when you're really out of sorts with someone, and you're in the wrong?

You might of heard of some bosses who say, 'my door is always open if you want to talk to me'. That may not of course be so - but with God - it is so to the sincere person seeking God in a real way. Or as the old chorus says:

There's a way back to God,
from the dark paths of sin,
there's a door that is open that you may go in,
At Calvary's cross is where you begin,
When you come as a sinner to Jesus.

OK - that's a NT take on it - so you might prefer a promise at the beginning of the OT prophecy of Zechariah: "Return to me", says the LORD Almighty, "and I *will* return to you", says the LORD Almighty.

But I've a question. When we were reading Jonah's prayer from inside the fish just now, did anything strike you as missing in his prayer?

Well if I'm in the wrong I usually start by saying sorry. Take David's prayer in Psalm 51 we looked at a few weeks back for instance. But nowhere in Jonah's pray does Jonah say 'sorry' to God. There's no actual statement of repentance anywhere in this prayer for disobeying God's instruction. And without treading too much on the toes of Oli who'll be talking about the later story, that fact is going to work itself out in the next chapters. In fact we have to wait to the beginning of chapter four to realise that Jonah's running away wasn't a spur-of-the-moment action, but the result of a fundamental disagreement with God's purposes that he'd already discussed with Him.

So, if Jonah doesn't say 'sorry' to God when he prays, what does he say? Well the first very obvious thing I notice is that he's very aware that God is not just a vague idea of some 'higher being' who may or may not exist. He's absolutely certain that God not only exists - but that it was *God* who got him into the mess he found himself in - and it was *God* who got him out of it. Remember also - this psalm's written as a testimony to God's provision of his salvation sometime after the event when Jonah's probably back in Jerusalem. And somewhere I read that in Hebrew thought if you didn't publically express your thankfulness aloud it wasn't real thankfulness. Which could mean our session of 'celebrations' most Sunday mornings isn't so far off the wall as it might sometimes appear.

So first Jonah says;

You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers swept over me.

Then later he goes on to say, "But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you...".

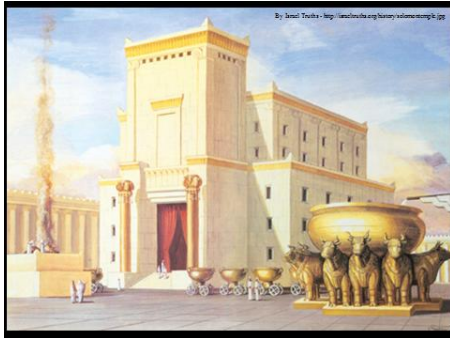
Jonah can often get a 'bad press' in the retelling of his story. We're of course well aware today that our Media can take a stance on a person who hits the headlines, and our judgement is often coloured by that. And the way Jonah's story is retold can do that too. So let's just think dispassionately about what we know of Jonah for a moment and his relationship with God.

Jonah was one of God's trusted messengers. We've seen he'd already got a bit of a track record for serving God. So when God wanted a message of judgement given to an emerging hostile world power in their own capital, He wants someone He trusts as His ambassador to do the job properly... Jonah.

And had it crossed your mind that Jonah might also have been a linguist to be able to fulfil this role to this foreign nation? So also a man with the gift for the work - a

bit like today God using *our* natural gifts to do the work He calls *us* to do? I don't know that's true of course - but it's an idea.

So Jonah was a man who was absolutely certain of God's reality. And also, given the times he lived in, a practising, faithful worshipper of God. Twice in this short prayer Jonah mentions 'the Temple'.



This would have been Solomon's Temple and the place to look to where God could be found by those who called on Him, as outlined in Solomon's prayer of dedication in 1 Kings 8 v.30 - which is why he metaphorically (because I doubt he knew which way he was facing) prays towards the Temple from inside the fish.

So even in his dire situation - and knowing it was God's actions that had got him there - he still turns to God and says, "In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and You listened to my cry."

By the way, if you read through the book of Jonah in preparation for these talks, or if you recall the story from hearing it before, did you pick up on a touch humour in it? Jonah's task is to declare judgement to a guilty people, but instead, they get undeserved salvation. Jonah's *also* wrong and gets judged, and he *also* gets undeserved salvation. And he misses the parallel entirely! Even without Jesus direct instruction to us about judging others that we have in the NT, this story also challenges us on this score. To read and to learn.

The relationships of people with God in the Bible aren't fairy tales. These are real people working out in real time their relationship with the unseen God who is there. And they don't all always make a good job of it. So how about you and me and where we are at the moment? How does Jonah's relationship with God mirror ours? Are we working with Him or against Him?

Paul in the NT was another man God was after - and as God reveals himself to Paul (still then known as Saul) the risen Jesus said, "why are you fighting against the pricks", as He prods him towards responding positively to Him.

Another hymn chorus I know well is -
 Trust and obey,
 For there's no other way,
 to be happy in Jesus,
 But to trust and obey.

Jonah did end up obeying God - but the way I read it there is always a sense in the book of Jonah of the reluctant servant. I don't know if you've noticed - but nowhere in this book is much said about Jonah or by Jonah that indicates a sense of happiness or joy in the Lord - apart that is from a 'shout of grateful praise' he plans to give God when he gets back to the Temple. In fact if you were writing a staff appraisal for Jonah, 'Has a bad attitude', wouldn't be amiss on it. But then, that also begs a question about us. We might be faithful servants in what we do, but be known as a sour person in the way we come across to other people. The good news



is that as long as we're still breathing, we can still be 'work in progress' by God the Holy Spirit.

So Jonah might have been thoroughly aware of the reality of God and ended up doing what God wanted. And he might be saying all the right things about God when speaking or writing about Him. But he definitely doesn't appear to be on the same page as God when it came to motivation.

But again, that can also be a picture of us as 21st Century Christians - even doing the work of God because we know it's the right thing to do - but never quite sharing God's heart about what we're doing. But exploring that is also maybe for another week - so back to Jonah inside of the big fish.

Chapter 1v17 says Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. Some commentators want to emphasise the point that the 'three days and three nights' was a definition of him having been 'dead and buried' - rather like we use the term today, 'six feet under'. Which means that Jesus' hearers when He gave them 'the sign of Jonah' should have understood clearly what He was implying about His own death and resurrection. And in fact what Jonah say about crying to God from the depths of the grave, of being barred in forever, and God rescuing him from the pit, all indicate at the very least what we've come to call 'a near death experience' - complete with the frightening picture of having seaweed wrapped around his head!

But then Jonah prays to God for His undeserved salvation - and God hears him and provides a way of escape for him. If there's a good point in Jonah's prayer, it is a sense of thankfulness to God for saving him and his re-commitment to God - in spite of what I said about him as a reluctant servant. "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you", he says in verse 9.

For him, within the context of his time, this would be what he was looking to doing physically when he eventually got back to Jerusalem and got back to the Temple. But what about us? When we are conscious of God saving us, what do we do as a sign of our thanksgiving? Well surely Paul's spelt that out for us at the beginning of Romans Ch.12. "Present your bodies as *living* sacrifices..." he says. Not now the sacrificing of an animal's life - but our own lives lived out in an obedient way before God. And the life-long question for each of us is, 'what's that going to look like for me today?'

I'm going to wrap this up because Jonah needs to be vomited out onto dry land for Oli to continue the story next week! But as we leave him drying out his wrinkled (and maybe even stained) skin on some beach - I've one more thing to say as a postscript to his experience inside the fish.

It is not unusual for people to make promises to God in dire circumstances - not unlike Jonah's 'vows' from inside the belly of the fish. But it was not a forgone conclusion that once back on Tera Firma Jonah would automatically obey his next instruction from God. And it's never automatic that when I make God promises to do (or not do) something that it will happen. That's why one of the pictures of living the Christian life is walking with Jesus - going in His direction with Him - being yoked together with Him as we live out our Christian lives.

You'll have to wait until next week to see what Jonah's next conversation with God turns out to be. And indeed - if he's put his rebellious ways behind him and is now going to walk in the direction God points him in.



But as far as we're concerned - you don't need to wait at all. Moment by moment Jesus is giving us a job to do - and in its simplest form it's just this - "follow me" - "come with me" - "do the things that I'm doing".

Granville Richards