

Family Worship Booklet

An underwater photograph of a whale's tail, showing the tail fluke and the surrounding blue water with light reflections. The image is used as a background for the title text.

Jonah

God's astonishing Grace

God tells us that Ezra read from the book of the Law,
day after day, and that the people of God
were filled with joy!

Friday – Jonah 2:1-10 – Thanksgiving and resolve.

We could easily gloss over what Jonah says in verse eight of his prayer for a couple of reasons. First, it's not easy to understand and second, it's difficult to see how it fits with the rest of the prayer; it just seems a little bit out of place. In the original, i.e., the Hebrew, the sentence consists of just five words. The initial three words refer to those who practice idolatry; we find an almost identical phrase in Psalm 31:6. The word translated as 'idol' literally means a 'snare'. There are a couple of possible interpretations, and I am going to go with the one Desmond Maxwell, in his excellent commentary on Jonah, in the Tyndale OT Commentary series, opts for, and that is that those who worship idols have abandoned their loyalty to their gods. He reasons that "If, as seems likely, this verse forms a contrast with what follows in verse, then Jonah expresses here the opinion that those who worship idols will discover in times of trouble how impotent they really are, and as a result will no longer show loyalty or love to their supposed gods. Those who worship the Lord, however, will always find him trustworthy and reliable." What a truth to keep close to your heart! Especially so that you can respond to Satan when he tempts you with the empty promises that he has idols waiting for you that always offer you more than what you are getting from the gracious and loving hand of your Father in heaven.

Verse 9 is a pure and wonderful declaration of praise, thanksgiving and loving commitment. Having experienced the rescuing power of God, Jonah's effervescent expression of gratitude doesn't just rise to verbal praise; there is a heart-resolved commitment here – "I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you." That's not merely a pleasant platitude; it's a statement spoken from a heart that has made a serious and pre-mediated determination. And it is followed up with a second statement of similar faith-driven commitment, "what I have vowed, I will pay." How many Christians can say that? Can you say that? It has certainly made me think about the vows I have made, and how serious I am about doing what I have said. Surely, the activities of pagan idol worshippers, who give themselves without reservation to the keeping of vows, should be an indictment to many who profess the name of Christ. How truly thankful are we of the glorious truth that 'Salvation that belongs to the Lord', and how does it show in our lives?

- Q1. What do idols promise? What do idols deliver?
- Q2. How does Jonah respond to his deliverance?
- Q3. What challenges do his words bring to you?

Thursday – Jonah 2:1-10 – The Lord’s refreshing.

Yesterday we saw how Jonah was brought to his knees in the belly of the fish. Faced with the reality of his chosen separation from God and the impending judgment of his soul, what does Jonah do? Well, in the mercy and grace of God, he does the one thing that he can do. He cries out to God. Verse 2 – “I called out to the Lord, out of my distress.” Devoid of all pretenses, he doesn’t meticulously craft a well-worded prayer; no, he prays the Word of God into his soul. He pleads to God in faith, in verse 4, “Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.” There is nothing presumptive or arrogant in these words; far from it, this is the proclamation of a man on his knees looking humbly up to God. A man who has experienced a deep sense of separation from God, and then the two-edged sword of God which had pierced to the division of his soul and discerned the thoughts and intentions of his heart. And he was brought to that place where he remembered the Lord. Not just that he was a Hebrew, one who feared the creator of heaven and earth as he had told the sailors on the ship, but that he was one called by the covenant-keeping God, a God who loved him and had brought his life up from out of the pit, verse 6. He’s now thinking and speaking from a place of joy in the Lord. What a work of reforming and refreshing grace in this man’s heart.

Do you not crave such a work in your own heart, even if you are in a good place with the Lord at this time in your life? Is there a desire within you to go even deeper into the things of the Lord? We don’t have to flee from Him to be brought back to experience such refreshing; it can come to us by standing in His presence. Here is what God tells us in Psalm 19:2-11.

“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

- Q1. What does Jonah do?
- Q2. How does he come to be in the place?
- Q3. Where are you on seeking a fresh work of God in your life?

Monday – Jonah 1:15-17 – The great fish swallows Jonah.

The now-believing sailors have done what Jonah had asked them to do and what they knew they had to do because their attempts to row through the great storm had proved futile and counterproductive – they have thrown Jonah overboard. Not the first man to have either fallen or been thrown overboard from a ship, but certainly, he is the only one who when hitting the water resulted in a storm stopping and the sea becoming calm.

Having gone down to Joppa and then gone down into the ship, Jonah is now going down into the depths of the Mediterranean Sea. His life is now coming to an end. How long can he survive? No search and rescue team is going to come to his aid. If anything is going to happen, his bloated, stinking body may be washed up on some shoreline, somewhere in the coming weeks, and if it’s found, he may be buried in an unnamed grave. A sad end for a once successful prophet of God, but we are all mortal; life does end.

Of course, we know that doesn’t happen, but I make the point to remind you that it’s only because of God’s miraculous provision that he is saved. And what a miraculous provision. Many column inches have been written about God’s provision to save Jonah’s life. Whether it is physically possible for a great fish to swallow a man and for him to survive for three days in its stomach has been debated back and forth, with some people trying to cite other occasions when it has happened. But you know what, and this isn’t a ‘head in the sand’ anti-scientific statement, God simply records that He “appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah” and then the fact that “Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights”. Nothing dramatic, no sketching of a vivid word picture, no embellishing of what happens. It’s just a simple, concise, clear statement, and that’s it! Even the fish, which dominates the account for so many, is only mentioned twice, first in 1:17 and then in 2:10. In reality, though highly significant, one could argue that it amounts to little more than a walk-on part. Remarkably, the so-called centrepiece of this book takes up only a couple of sentences. As far as God is concerned, we don’t need any more information. Take it for what it is and move on, and to the charge that doing so is to have nothing but ‘simplistic faith’, thank God that you have ‘simple childlike faith’. Because of it, you are sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see because it is God’s gift to you, and it is the means of Christ for your eternal salvation.

- Q1. What happens to the storm and the sea when Jonah is thrown overboard?
- Q2. What could we have expected to happen to Jonah?
- Q3. What does happen to him and why?

Tuesday – Jonah 2:1-10 – Jonah sinking to the depths.

Yesterday, we opened the second act of this phenomenal drama. Man overboard becomes man swallowed by great fish. But before we move on, I want you to think for a moment of the sovereign power of God in all His providential dealings with us and His creation. Imagine all the ‘coincidences’ involved in that great fish, being under that ship, during that storm on the Mediterranean Sea, at just the right time to swallow that man just after he has been thrown overboard.

Now he is in the belly of the great fish, and everything is going to work out just fine. Or is it? Chapter 2 opens with the words that Jonah prayed to the Lord from the belly of the fish, but it would be wrong to jump immediately to verse nine and focus on the jubilant thanksgiving; true, his prayer does end with thanksgiving, but the opening verses speak of an experience marked by terror. (By the way, this prayer is a litany of quotations from the book of Psalms, Lamentations, Jeremiah, and 2 Chronicles, and is a wonderful example of how to cry out to God. What an encouragement to learn and know God’s Word.)

Jonah says that he is in a distressed state, verse 2. He declares that it is God who has cast him into the deep, into the heart of the seas. Any thoughts about the actions of the sailors in throwing him overboard, albeit at his request, even if they had momentarily crossed his mind, are now long gone. This is about God’s dealing with him and what dealings they are. Engulfed by the waves and billows, and note that these belong to God, he is rapidly losing whatever remaining joy he previously had of his salvation.

In recounting how the waters are closing in and about to take his life, in speaking of the deep surrounding him and the weeds wrapping around his head as he sinks to the depths of the ocean, he is not simply using evocative, powerful imaginary, the sort that flows seemingly effortless from the pen of a skilled poet. No, these are the words of a man who is living it, breathing it, experiencing it firsthand. And what does it communicate to him? That his life is fainting away (verse 7), it’s coming to an end, and hastily so. And, of course, there is absolutely nothing he can do about it. He’s a dead man.

Q1. Where is Jonah now?

Q2. What does he recount from inside the great fish?

Q3. How does he share his experience?

Wednesday – Jonah 2:1-10 – The great fish of judgement.

Jonah’s life had been fainting away (verse 7), but now he is in the belly of the great fish and is saved. The immediate trauma of the wind God had hurled and the resulting tempestuous sea, which had led to his being cast overboard, is now over. He has been saved, and while he is not sure what will happen now, he can settle himself and see what transpires. Is that the feeling you get from reading his prayer? It’s certainly not what I get from it.

Look at verse 2. Where does he see himself? In the belly of Sheol – Hell. Now he’s not saying that the inside of the great fish is ‘Hell’, that place of eternal damnation created by God, but what he recounts is the fact that he is experiencing real separation and judgement from God. The hurling wind and the tempestuous seas were merely precursors to the judgment. Being thrown overboard was a terrifying experience, although one he had asked for. The crashing into the sea must have been horrific, as must have been the descent into the depths. But all those experiences put together were nothing compared to the ‘spiritual death’ he was sensing now.

Many see the great fish as God’s provision of deliverance, and ultimately it will prove to be so, but at this moment Jonah is not in the great ‘deliverance fish’, but the soul frightening ‘judgment fish’. These verses in chapter 2 silence those who would argue that Jonah’s plea to the sailors in chapter one to throw him overboard was, in fact, the request of someone seeking to make atonement for his wrongdoing. That in offering himself up he was saying ‘I will save you. I will be the redeemer of your physical lives.’ Those who present such an argument go on to conclude that the provision of the great fish is nothing less than a just reward for his doing so. This is not the case, and nothing could be further from the truth. It’s not guesswork nor conjecture on my part, Jonah’s prayer tells us that, the provision of the whale by God was not because he wore the saviour motif well on his shoulders. Look at the prayer; verse 4 tells us that Jonah sees himself as being driven away from God’s sight, which is a dauntingly awesome reality for a man who had done all he could to flee from the presence of God. He speaks of death surrounding him in verses 5 and 6. He speaks of his life being in the pit in verse 6. This is his experience. It’s in the fish that God’s judgement is going to bring Jonah to the sense of his sin and the resulting need of a saviour.

Q1. What is Jonah confronted with in the belly of the great fish?

Q2. Why is it wrong to see the provision of the fish solely as a means of salvation?

Q3. What is God doing in Jonah’s life?