

### Jonah's Prayer from the Stomach of the Great Fish

#### Jonah 2

Jonah 2 – *“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish’s belly. <sup>2</sup> And he said: ‘I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice. <sup>3</sup> For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me. All Your billows and Your waves passed over me.*

*<sup>4</sup> Then I said, ‘I have been cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.’ <sup>5</sup> The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head. <sup>6</sup> I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever. Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God.*

*<sup>7</sup> “When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple.*

*<sup>8</sup> “Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy. <sup>9</sup> But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord.”*

*<sup>10</sup> So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.”*

#### Background Notes

I've prayed in many different situations and from many different places, but never from the belly of a fish! But I can tell you one thing for sure - if I were inside the belly of a fish and still alive, I would pray right away - and I would pray hard! (And so would you!) In fact, I would have started praying as soon as I hit the water - or even before.

Did Jonah pray right away? We don't know, but it appears that some time may have elapsed before Jonah prayed. Look at the end of chapter 1: *“Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”* And then chapter 2, verse 1: *“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish’s belly.”* We'll say something more about the possible delay in Jonah's prayer in a few minutes, but first we'll discuss the phrase, “the three days and three nights.”

Does the Phrase “three days and three nights” mean that Jonah was in the fish for 72 hours? Not necessarily. “Three days and three nights” was a Hebrew expression, or idiom. The use of the words “days and nights” can refer to *any part* of a day or a night.

This same expression was used by our Lord when He referred to His time in the grave between His death and resurrection: *“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 1:40).* If the Lord was crucified on Friday afternoon and was resurrected

Sunday morning, there's no way that was 72 hours. But since "three days and three nights" was a well-known Hebrew idiom, that phrase could mean any part of a day or night, and still be stated as "three days and three nights."

If you're not aware of this Hebrew way of referring to time, and you've been trying to push the crucifixion back to Thursday or even Wednesday to get a full 72 hours (as some try to do), you will have problems with other Scriptures. Turn to Luke 24. This chapter covers events after the resurrection. In verse 46, our Lord Himself referred to the resurrection on the third day, *"Then He said to them, 'Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day.'"* If Sunday is the third day, there's only one option for the first day - Friday. And perhaps that's about the same amount of time Jonah spent in the belly of the fish.

In any case, after three days and three nights, *"...the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land."* (As the saying goes, "You can't keep a good man down!")

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. God uses discipline to turn the believer away from disobedience.

It looks like Jonah didn't pray until he was inside the fish! Why the delay? Most likely it was because Jonah was running away from the Lord. He didn't want to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were enemies of Israel, and Jonah did not want the grace of God to be extended to Nineveh. And Jonah would rather die than change.

When Jonah was thrown overboard, and when he was struggling in the water, he still had not changed. He was still a disobedient prophet with a bad attitude. But God uses discipline to turn believers away from disobedience.

When our daughter Catherine read the story of Jonah to our four-year-old granddaughter, Callie, she asked Callie, "Why was Jonah inside the fish?" Callie replied, "God was giving Jonah a "time out"!" Yes, God was indeed giving Jonah a "time out"! Jonah was undergoing God's discipline.

In Jonah's prayer (which comes after he repented), it's clear that he knew that he was undergoing God's discipline. Notice his use of the words "You" and "Your" in verse 3: *"For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me. All Your billows and Your waves passed over me."*

When God uses circumstances to discipline a believer, that believer knows the situation is not just a chance circumstance, or a random coincidence. A believer who is undergoing God's discipline knows that the discipline is from the hand of **God**. Remember - when Joseph's brothers were imprisoned in Egypt, they knew right away that **God** was dealing with them for what they had done to Joseph years before. *"Then they said to one another, "We are truly guilty*

*concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us” (Genesis 42:21).*

In Jonah’s account of his experiences, it’s really hard to tell precisely what took place inside the fish, and what took place outside in the sea, the fish. For example, was the seaweed wrapped around Jonah’s head (v5) before he was swallowed by the fish - or inside the fish? And going down to the bottom of the sea (v6) - was that inside the fish or outside the fish? It’s not clear.

In any case, Jonah knew he was being disciplined by the Lord - and he finally prayed! *“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish’s belly. And he said, “I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice” (v1-2).* And verse 7: *“When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple.*

The phrase *“out of the belly of Sheol”* (v2) could be paraphrased “out of death” or “from death’s door.” Many times in the Old Testament the term *“Sheol”* was used for “the grave,” but its use here should not be pressed as a proof text that Jonah literally died. Jonah came close to death, but God’s discipline resulted in repentance in Jonah’s heart (v4).

Notice that true repentance is not just “being sorry for your sins.” No! It includes a complete change in direction - away from disobedience and back toward the Lord.

*“Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy”* (v8). In this verse Jonah acknowledged that looking away from the Lord in any other direction was forsaking the Lord’s mercy. It was nothing less than idolatrous disobedience!

In verse 9 we see not only a repentant Jonah, but also a worshipping Jonah: *“But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord.”* Jonah had been restored to fellowship with the Lord. He had turned away from disobedience, and he was worshipping the Lord.

Then God moved the great fish to deposit Jonah on the dry land. God uses discipline to turn the believer away from disobedience.

## **2. God uses discipline to turn the believer back to scripture.**

Did you realize that most of Jonah’s prayer was a series of Scripture quotations, mostly from the Psalms? Isn’t it interesting that God, in His discipline, turned Jonah away from disobedience and back to Scripture? Jonah’s prayer was not a plea for deliverance – it was a psalm of praise and thanksgiving! It was a doxology, quoting Scripture!

Isn’t God’s method of discipline marvelous? It doesn’t result in bitterness. It’s not an end in itself. It results in the fruit of righteousness - in Jonah’s case, quoting Scripture. Hebrews 12:11 says, *“No discipline seems to be joyful for the present,*

*but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*"

Quoting Scripture from the belly of a great fish is certainly the fruit of righteousness! God uses discipline to turn the believer back to Scripture.

Another point to notice: a number of the Scriptures that Jonah quoted came from the **Messianic** psalms. For example, the end of verse 3 is a quote from Psalm 42: *"All Your billows and Your waves passed over me."* The beginning of verse 5 is from a well-known Messianic psalm, Psalm 69: *"The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me."* The end of verse 6 is very close to Psalm 30:3 and Psalm 16:10, other well-known Messianic psalms: *"Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God."* And there are others.

These quotes from the Messianic psalms would certainly emphasize the fact that Jonah is a *type* or picture of Christ, just as our Lord mentioned in Matthew 12.

Let me ask you - have you had the experience of turning toward Scripture when you were under the Lord's hand of discipline? This is a true and biblical response to God's discipline. In Psalm 139:23-24, David said, *"Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my anxieties. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."* How does God search the heart? Primarily with His Word!

God uses discipline to turn the believer back to Scripture.

## **Practical Application**

### **Would you be able to quote Scripture from inside a fish?**

Can you imagine, during this experience, quoting Old Testament Scripture? And isn't it amazing how much Scripture Jonah knew by heart? Remember, Jonah was not reading the Old Testament by candlelight in the belly of the fish! No! Jonah knew his Bible, and because of that the Holy Spirit was able to bring Scripture to his mind and use it as a means of restoring Jonah.

Suppose you were in Jonah's condition. Would the Lord be able to bring Scriptures to your mind to restore you? Not if you don't already know Scripture! We really tie the Lord's hands when we don't know His Word!

Is there a regular time each day when you read the Bible? Do you have a program for memorizing Bible verses? The Holy Spirit can't help you remember Scripture if you don't already know Scripture!

Would you be able to quote Scripture from inside a fish?