

# “All the Prophets Testify”: Jonah 2:1-10

Midweek Bible Study – 2025 November 19

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<https://www.pilgrimlc.org/bible-studies/prophets>

Invocation & Opening Prayer

Follow-up to last class: pace, depth, other comments or questions

Outline (TLSB p.1479):

- I. Account of Jonah’s Call and His Reaction (1:1-3)
- II. Onboard Ship in the Midst of a Storm at Sea (1:4-17)
- III. Inside the Great Fish (2:1-10)**
- IV. Yahweh gives Jonah His Assignment a Second Time (3:1-3)
- V. Jonah Delivers the Message; Nineveh’s Response (3:4-10)
- VI. Jonah’s Prayer in Nineveh (4:1-3)
- VII. Jonah Sits Outside the City of Nineveh; Yahweh Teaches a Lesson on Mercy (4:4-11)

Inside the Great Fish (2:1-10):

2:1 *Then*: the Hebrew has a simple conjunction that could be “and”. As presented, what is described in 2:1-9 clearly does not happen “after” but “during” the parts of three days and three nights mentioned in 1:17. (What happens in 2:10, connected by another use of the same Hebrew conjunction at the start of that verse, happens “after” 2:1-9 and brings to an end the period of 1:17.)

*Jonah prayed to the Lord his God*: as he essentially was asked to do by the captain of the boat back in 1:6, and as the mariners did to their gods in 1:5 and ostensibly to the Lord in 1:14, though different Hebrew words are used: 1:5 *za’aq*, 1:6 and 1:14 *qara’* (used again later in 2:1 of Jonah), and 2:1 *palal*. Roehrs-Franzmann comments, “In the belly of the fish, in the depths of the sea, Jonah again learns to pray”. Keil-Delitzsch highlights the reference to “his”, that is, Jonah’s, God. Laetsch refers to St. Paul’s exhortation to pray everywhere (1 Timothy 2:8) and comments, “A Christian cannot come into a place so abnormal that he could not pray to God there. We cannot imagine a place more fantastic, more horrible, more filthy, than the one where Jonah was, in the belly of a horrible monster, in the dreadful sea, all alone, cast away from mankind.”

*from the belly of the fish*: from the great fish appointed by the Lord to swallow up Jonah, in whose belly Jonah was for parts of three days and nights. Presumably Jonah was conscious and able to pray, though we remember that when we are unable to pray for ourselves that our Lord and the Holy Spirit still intercede for us (1 John 2:1; Romans 8:26-27). As with the Medieval Antiphon and Luther’s related hymn, perhaps produced around the time of his particular lecture on Jonah, Luther talks about Jonah’s being alive but surrounded by death. Luther also mentions Lazarus and others who were in the grave but later revived, some of whom claim various things, calling them “frivolous babblers”.

2:2 *saying*: what *TLSB* calls a “Psalm of thanksgiving recounting how the Lord heard [Jonah’s] cry for help and rescued him from death” (presumably not from drowning before the great fish swallowed him but from dying in the great fish or otherwise before he returned to dry land? But see *CSSB*: “A psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance from death in the sea”). Some of the past tense verbs in the “psalm” are somewhat-difficult (but not impossible) for us to understand in the narrative as it is happening. Perhaps the past-tense in the prayer is best understood as reflecting Jonah’s confidence that the Lord would answer him and so the things are described as “as good as done”, as it were (something other psalms also do; *CSSB* comments, “The language of this song indicates that Jonah was familiar with the praise literature of the Psalms”; Keil-Delitzsch says the Psalms passages “were so exactly suited to Jonah’s circumstances, that he could not have expressed his thoughts and feelings any better in words of his own”, calling it “the simple and natural utterance of a man versed in the Holy Scripture and living in the word of God”; and Laetsch refers to Jesus praying Psalms on the cross). This “psalm” notably is presented by the Divinely-inspired writer as being prayed from the belly of the fish and not from the dry land (2:10) after the deliverance was completed, though Jonah admittedly is telling his account after the fact. Roehrs-Franzmann comments, “the psalm-like content of ch. 2 is no simple transcript of what Jonah uttered then and there. His prayer is seen retrospectively, from the vantage point of his deliverance, and both his past petition and his present thanksgiving are recorded. Thus the whole span of Jonah’s experience, from his plunge into the waters (1:15) to his return to dry land (2:10), is recorded in a highly economical way.” Keil-Delitzsch disagrees, “the fact is rather this, that when Jonah had been swallowed by the fish, and found that he was preserved alive in the fish’s belly, he regarded this as a pledge of his deliverance, for which he praised the Lord.” (Keil-Delitzsch then quotes Luther saying that these very words may not have been uttered with Jonah’s mouth and arranged in this manner in the belly of the fish; confer Laetsch and Kretzmann.)

*called out ... cried*: cast parallel are the Hebrew verbs *qara’* used in 1:14, as noted above, and *shava’* (apparently *not* the root for “sitting shiva”, which has to do with the seven days of mourning and so is related more to the term “Sabbath”). The calling out/crying arguably is what Jonah is doing at this point, not anything prior to his being cast into the sea (but compare *CSSB*, “Jonah recalls his prayer for help as he was sinking into the depths”). Jonah does not explicitly say in this verse for what He called out/cried, but the context makes clear that Jonah expected to live beyond the belly of the great fish, for example, to return to the Lord’s temple (2:4). Luther emphasizes our need to call out and cry to God in our times of adversity and place our wants before Him.

*out of my distress ... out of the belly of Sheol:* Jonah's "distress" is set parallel to "the belly" not of "the fish" (confer Keil-Delitzsch) but "Sheol" (confer Matthew 12:40 where Jesus draws the parallel between Jonah's being in the "belly of the great fish" and His being in the "heart of the earth"). Depending on its context, "Sheol" can refer to a number of different things, such as the grave/the abode of all the dead or hell as the place of punishment for the unrepentant unbelievers. On this use, *TLSB* explains Sheol as "Place of the dead. Jonah's descent into the sea was like descending into Sheol, the grave." *CSSB* is similar, "Figurative for Jonah's near-death experience in the sea." (To be sure, Jesus's being in the tomb is different from His descent into hell [confer Formula of Concord IX and Luther's so-called "Torgau Sermon" to which it refers with some authority].)

*he answered me ... you heard my voice:* notable is the shift from the third-person reference "he" to the second-person address "you", and notable also is the parallel use of the verbs translated "answered" and "heard", where we might be inclined to (wrongly?) distinguish between God's "hearing" our prayer and His "answering" it, whether "yes" or "no". *TLSB* comments "Jonah had no way of knowing that he would escape the fish. It took faith to believe that God's salvation included restored life for him." Certainly our past deliverance can give us confidence of our future deliverance, though we do not know what form any intermediate future deliverance might take before the final, ultimate deliverance. Luther emphasizes our need to believe that our crying to God is of a nature that He will answer.

2:3 *For:* the Hebrew again has the simple conjunction that could be "and", though the ESV's "For" can introduce what follows as the reason why Jonah not only called out/cried but also why Jonah did so specifically to the Lord. Keil-Delitzsch says, "The more minute description of the peril of death is attached by...sequence of thought".

*you cast me ...surrounded me ... your ... your ... passed over me:* the ESV gives us one way to format the Hebrew poetry (confer the NIV but compare the ASV and NASB), so our knowing exactly what to see as parallel is more difficult for us. One thing to notice is the contrast between the Lord's "active" role and Jonah's "passive" role (the Hebrew appears to use at least one emphatic pronoun). Even if the Lord did not directly cast Jonah into the sea, and even if the mariners cast Jonah into the sea reluctantly (1:13) and because Jonah told them to do so (1:12), they also attributed to the Lord their casting Jonah into the sea (1:14), and the Lord ultimately was then is now in control. *TLSB* comments, "Jonah recognized that his brush with death by drowning was God's doing." *CSSB* goes further, "Jonah recognizes that the sailors (1:15) were agents of God's judgment" (confer Keil-Delitzsch and Kretzmann). Likewise, Keil-Delitzsch quotes Luther making the point that Jonah refers to the waves and billows as the Lord's because he perceives them as the Lord's servants of wrath to punish sin.

*the deep ... heart of the seas ... flood ... waves ... billows*: five different Hebrew words are used in reference to the water, likely evoking thoughts of creation and the flood. Laetsch distinguishes the waves as long welling waves and the billows as shot choppy breakers. On the whole, confer also 2:5-6 and shared terminology with Sheol as mentioned in 2:2 (the sharing of the terminology is most appropriate in the case of Jonah's "nearly" going to the grave by drowning). Roehrs-Franzmann comments, "the prayer concentrates on the inner, religious realities of Jonah's situation, with practically no stress on the physical aspects of his deliverance through being swallowed up and vomited out by the great fish."

2:4 *Then I said*: another use of the same conjunction that could be "and" as discussed at 2:1. Presumably what Jonah describes in what follows was part of his calling out/crying mentioned in 2:2.

*I am driven away*: *TLSB* comments, "Jonah felt forsaken by God, just as Jesus felt separation from His Father while on the cross (Mt 27:46)", but that comment seems to ignore the fact that Jonah himself fled from the presence of the Lord (1:3 essentially twice and 1:10). While Jonah does not explicitly say who was driving him away from the Lord's sight, the Nifal verb stem behind the passive voice usually would be taken as a Divine passive (that is, as if God is the One doing the action), though some Nifal verbs can retain a middle or reflexive sense (for example, drove myself), which might be more appropriate in this context. Roehrs-Franzmann comments that Jonah "finds that what he once sought by his flight (1:3) is unendurable agony". Luther says Jonah sees the things that the Lord was doing as driving him to despair. Allen remarks that "The alternative to saying to God 'Thy will be done' is to hear him say eventually, 'Your will be done.' The awful significance of being rejected by God had dawned upon [Jonah]."

*Yet*: the Hebrew adverb can mean "surely" or "certainly", and Laetsch explains further, "here it denotes assured confidence in spite of all circumstances pointing to the contrary".

*your sight ... I shall look ... your holy temple*: notable is the shift from God's sight of Jonah to Jonah's looking upon God's temple (confer our discussion of "the presence of the Lord" in 1:3 essentially twice and 1:10; also see the reference to a temple in 2:7; *CSSB* suggests the temple in this 2:4 is the temple in Jerusalem, while the temple in 2:7 is God's heavenly temple, commenting, "The Israelites held these two residences of God in inseparable association"). *TLSB* comments, "Jonah was confident that he would live and have opportunity to worship at Zion once more." *CSSB* says, "The same note of hopeful expectation found in the prayers of the Psalms". And, we might wonder if there is not some indirect indication that in Jonah's confidence of worshipping at Zion there is not also an implied willingness to do as the Lord has commanded him regarding Nineveh (confer 1:9's "vow"). Not so, according to Roehrs-Franzmann, who observes that Jonah does not mention his disobedience and may be "evading by his silence what he had once evaded by flight".

2:5-6 *The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains:* *TLSB* comments, “Graphic description of drowning.” Confer 2:3’s piling up of watery descriptions. And, continuing the opposition of God and Jonah in 2:3, waters are personified and weeds are wrapped against Jonah, his life, his head. *TLSB* explains the roots of the mountains as Jonah’s sinking deeply; Roehrs-Franzmann perhaps more helpfully says, “The earth and its mountains are conceived of as having their foundations in the waters.” Luther refers to the mountains’ ending in the lowest part of the sea.

2:6 *I went down ... yet you brought up my life ... O Lord my God:* As Jonah has accurately described, he “went down” as a result of the Lord’s actions, as Jonah also is delivered by the Lord’s actions. The great fish is the instrument of Jonah’s rescue from drowning and arguably also the distress out of which Jonah needs to be delivered further.

*the land whose bars closed upon me forever ... from the pit:* *TLSB* comments, “Gates were barred to lock them securely. Jonah felt the gates of death closing behind him.” And, *TLSB* explains “the pit” as an “Expression for Sheol, the grave” (confer 2:2 and *CSSB*). Roehrs-Franzmann comments, “The land of the dead has gates which open to receive the dead but do not open to release them.” Does Jonah think he would have been in the grave forever? Do we think that way when we similarly might speak that way?

2:7 *When my life was fainting away:* whether this was “when” Jonah was in the water nearly drowning or “when” he was in the belly of the great fish is not necessarily perfectly clear to us. *TLSB* ambiguously (?) comments, “At the last moment, Jonah turned to the Lord, who alone could save him.” Certainly, when it comes to spiritual salvation, God saves us before and enables us to call out to Him (to some extent confer the Luther quotation given by *TLSB*).

*I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you:* if the prayer referred to in this verse is that prayed in the belly of the great fish (confer 2:1-2), then the Lord’s saving Jonah from drowning does “remind” Jonah of the Lord and give Jonah “reason” to pray for further deliverance. Roehrs-Franzmann comments, “when the Lord is remembered, He becomes a living Presence in the mind and the heart; faith is revived, and confident prayer becomes possible”. Keil-Delitzsch carries the thought further, “when prayer reaches to God, then He helps and also saves. This awakens confidence in the Lord, and impels to praise and thanksgiving.”

*into your holy temple:* Jonah may mean the temple in Jerusalem, where the Lord was understood to be enthroned (confer 2:4), or Jonah may mean the temple in heaven, of which the temple in Jerusalem was thought to be a replica.

2:8 *Those who pay regard to vain idols:* the mariners are the most immediate example of those who at least initially called out to gods that lacked at least supernatural reality and value (confer *TLSB*). Roehrs-Franzmann notes the Hebrew could be “lying vanities” and “could refer to Jonah’s self-sought way”.

*forsake their hope of steadfast love*: presumably if the idol-worshiper is expecting mercy from the idol he or she will lose that hope when the idol does not answer with mercy because the idol is incapable of answering with mercy. *TLSB* comments, “Idol worshipers fail to experience God’s loyal love, which Jonah had again tasted.” Or, Roehrs-Franzmann suggests, “forsake Him to whom their loyalty is due”. Laetsch thinks of “mercy as a proper noun a name of God.

2:9 *But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you*: Jonah’s “psalm of thanksgiving” is not a sacrifice that satisfies God’s wrath over sin but a sacrifice of praise (confer Hebrews 13:15 regarding the fruit of lips that confess His Name as a sacrifice of praise).

*what I have vowed I will pray*: confer our discussion about the mariners’ vows back at 1:16. Jonah’s vow would seem to be more than the sacrifice of thanksgiving. *TLSB* speculates, “Perhaps Jonah’s vow was to obey if God should again call him”. *CSSB* comments, “In the book of Psalms, prayers were commonly accompanied by vows, usually involving thank offerings.”

*Salvation belongs to the Lord*: *TLSB* comments, “Statement sums up Book of Jonah. Salvation is God’s possession, which he freely bestows. Jonah experienced that for himself and also saw how the Lord saved the sailors and would spare the people of Nineveh.” We might wonder whether or not Jonah “saw” how the Lord saved the sailors, apart from Divine inspiration. On the statement, confer Revelation’s repeated refrain about salvation being “from” God and the Lamb (Revelation 7:10; 19:1). *CSSB* comments, “The climax of Jonah’s thanksgiving prayer. It is Jonah’s second confessional statement (1:9) and stands at the literary midpoint of the book.”

2:10 *And the Lord spoke to the fish*: *TLSB* comments, “God rules over all creation, including animals and fish. His Word, as at creation (Gn 1:20-22), accomplishes His purposes. The Lord who teaches donkeys to speak (Nu 22:28) likewise teaches fish to listen.” Or, the statement could simply be a way of expressing the idea that God caused the fish to act the way that it did.

*and it committed Jonah out upon the dry land*: if not “digesting” Jonah, the fish could have vomited Jonah out into the wet sea, so the depositing of Jonah on dry land anywhere is no small miracle. *TLSB* comments, “The fish could have become Jonah’s tomb, but at God’s command it instead provided transportation back to dry land.” Keil-Delitzsch speculates, “The land upon which Jonah was vomited was, of course, the coast of Palestine, probably the country near Joppa” (on Palestine, confer Kretzmann, who at least at times seems to follow Keil-Delitzsch verbatim). Luther refers to fish’s changing from serving death to serving life. Allen’s final comment is a seemingly apt reference to the fish: “It obediently and doubtless gladly spews up this indigestible object and swims off with a flick of its tail, its distinguished mission accomplished.”

What are you taking home from the prophecy considered tonight?

*TLSB*’s Law and Gospel Application Note for 2:1-10 says, “All sinners deserve the sentence of everlasting death. But the God to whom salvation belongs has, in Christ, rescued us and give us new life.” And we might especially think of our sinful nature “drowning” first in Holy Baptism and again in our daily remembrance of Holy Baptism.

Next time, January 7, Jonah 3:1-3, 4-10

Closing Prayer & Benediction