

## Jonah's Lessons on Evangelism

### *"A Psalm from the Depths"*

Passages:   Jonah 2  
                   Matthew 12:38-41

In this beautiful chapter, Jonah (the runaway prophet of God, the rebel, the disappointed young man) comes back **home!** Indeed, you might say that he's been *brought home* by the sudden recognition that his rebellion has only made life worse, not better. He's the Prodigal Son returning to his Father's side.

Now, you might say, "*Home? But Jonah's not home—he's in the belly of a fish!*"

My friends, that is home! It is where Jonah belongs; for he's right back where his life began. He's gone back to zero...back to nothing, stripped bare like a baby. That's why I say, **Jonah has been brought home.** He's been brought back to the place where his pride, selfishness and self-assurance have been taken away from him. He has been brought back to the place where his perspective of life is uncluttered and unhindered by the vanities of this world.

**Jonah, you see, is dead!**

Now I know that is not what most of you have been taught in Sunday School. Given the fact that the vast majority of Children's Bible stories about Jonah have a picture of the prophet, sitting in a chair, perhaps at a table in the fish's belly, it's not surprising that we formed a false picture of what actually happened to Jonah. Indeed, there's often a candle burning on the table, with pictures hung about on the wall of the fish's stomach. In other words, we are given the very distinct impression that Jonah was very much **alive** as he waited three days and three nights in the fish's belly before being vomited out onto dry land. This false idea comes from a false understanding of verse 1. There we read: "***From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.***"

What does this mean? Did Jonah have to be alive in order to pray? Couldn't Jonah have prayed *as he was dying*? An even more interesting possibility is that *Jonah's spirit kept praying* even while his body was dead?

Let's take a good look at the chapter, starting with verse 2:

- **Verse 2.** *“From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.”* The words, *“realm of the dead”* (other versions have ‘Sheol’) set the stage! As Jonah looks back, he remembers how he was drowning. But even as his body was entering Sheol, his spirit was turning to God in prayer. His prayer is roughly based around verses from Psalms 18 and 22.
- **Verses 3-5.** *“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... The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.”* In these verses, Jonah turns to Psalm 69 as he searches for the right words to describe what it felt like to die! How awful it must have been to drown in the sea!
- **Verse 6.** *“To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.”* Here, Jonah remembers the feeling of death’s entrapment. Here, he uses Psalm 116 as his reference point.) Later in this verse, he describes death as *“the pit”*. It must have been a horrible experience for Jonah to feel trapped deep in heart of the earth...like a buried corpse.
- **Verses 7-9.** *“When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.”* Despite his ordeal, Jonah comes to the understanding that his death is actually a good thing! It was exactly what he needed! Why? Because **it brought him back home, to God!** By being stripped of every earthly excuse and argument, Jonah could no longer run from God. He was being forced to return to the place where his life began—in God!

Of course, we can easily take Jonah’s experience of death and apply it to the whole of humanity! After all, **death is the great leveller!** Regardless of what nation, race, tribe or culture you come from; regardless of how much money or fame you may have; **death is no respecter of persons!** In death, every person is stripped bare, with nothing to cling to! In death, all human beings have only two options—they can either curse God, or fall in His arms!

With this in mind, let me go back to something I said last week: Last week, I told you that **the Book of Jonah is primarily about evangelism—about bringing the people of this world back to God**. So, tell me, according to what we've just read, what topic should always be at the heart of evangelism? What is the one topic that all human beings have in common; the one thing that all human beings must, one day, face? Death!

As I said a moment ago, even as our world falls apart and we find ourselves dying in the belly of the fish, we still have **two choices**: We can cry out in defiance, "*Jesus Christ!*", pretending that it's all His fault! **Or**, we can fall on our knees and cry out "*Jesus Christ! Have mercy on me, a sinner!*"

Jonah, obviously, chose the second option, and it was this choice that gave him an extraordinary experience of *peace*—the peace that comes from giving in to God's love and salvation. Hence, the beautiful words that we find in verses 8 and 9. "***Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. <sup>9</sup> 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.'***" What Jonah has come to understand is that he has been saved, not only from physical death, but *from the death that comes from life without God*.

You know, as a parent, one of the most encouraging aspects of Jonah's story is the fact that *his return to God was aided, even prompted, by his knowledge of the ancient Scriptures*. Jonah obviously learned the Psalms as a child. He may not have had a 'word-for-word' recollection of them, but, as we've just seen, **every verse of chapter 2 has roots in a Psalm!** What I sense, therefore, is that, at the moment of death, God's Word kicked in. In other words, he may have been running from God, but God was never far from Jonah! As a result, every sentence Jonah speaks oozes with the reality of his faith-filled upbringing! Clearly, Jonah was born and raised in the home of believing parents—parents who took the trouble to share God's Word with their son and to take him to the temple each week. This is how Jonah took on board so many texts from the Psalms...texts which served him well during his ordeal of dying! It's highly likely that it was only in death that the Scriptures finally made sense to Jonah—in death, God's Word finally became relevant.

It makes me think of my son, Andrew! You all know that Andrew is in the army. You also know that he's been deployed twice to Afghanistan. What you may not know is that, although Andrew doesn't go to church or publicly profess any faith in Christ, he does pray—particularly when he and his men are under the threat of death! In other words, it is death which turns my battle-hardened son back towards God. (I only wonder which passages of Scripture Andrew starts to recite? He memorised so many of them as a child!)

In fact, as far as evangelism is concerned, this must be where evangelism begins—in the home! Believing parents are called to teach their children the truths of God from the Scriptures. They need to be evangelised, as Jonah was evangelised. As we can see here in today's story, it wasn't a waste of time! Indeed, if Jonah is anything to go by, **there's a powerful word here for parents:** Even if your child rebels or turns away from God, you should not despair! Trust that God's Word will not return void. Trust that the Word which you've planted in your child will finally bear fruit, even if it takes death for it to kick in!

**There's also a powerful word here for young people**—I know that a lot of Christian young people hide secret thoughts about rebelling—of walking away from God and His church! All I can say is, “Go ahead and try!” The experience of Jonah awaits you! Whether you like it or not, God's Word has already begun to shape you. God has begun His work, deep inside of you. If you run from God now, be assured that you will spend the rest of your life trying to hide from Him...trying to defend your rebellion...trying to justify your behaviour...and trying to prove to yourself and others that God doesn't exist (or that He has no claim on your life).

I have a friend who is currently doing this! He was a strong member of this church 15 years ago. Now, he calls himself an atheist. Even as the TV mini-series, “The Bible”, was airing, he was sending Facebook messages about how silly and unbelievable the Bible is for him. I'm sure we all know someone who is like this! And although we may despair for that person, the story of Jonah gives us the confidence to believe that *there is no place to flee from God's Spirit; there is no place for us to hide* (just like the Psalmist said!). Indeed, as Jonah discovered, *even if we go down to Sheol, God is there!* (Psalm 139)

Let me say it again—The story of Jonah is a story about evangelism! Evangelism happens every time a person is confronted with their own mortality and forced to finally look up to God and admit their own stupidity. This is what Jonah does throughout chapter 2—he repents; he turns back to God; he comes home!

The message of evangelism is not, *“You’re going to die and go to hell!”* ...as if it’s all in the **future**. No! The message of evangelism is very much about the **present!** It says, *“You are dying...right now! You already have a foot in Sheol! By running away from God, you are cutting yourself off from the source of life. Will you let God show you how foolish you are being? Will you let Him show you the paths of life in His Son? Will you let Him bring you home?”*

Keep this in mind as we take a good look at the final verse of this second chapter. Given that *the body of Jonah* was now **dead** inside the fish and that *the spirit of Jonah* was **alive** in *Sheol*, the place of the dead, this final verse tells us that *God has done something for Jonah that few others on earth have ever experienced!* Jonah has been brought back to life from the dead!

In verse 10, we are told: <sup>10</sup> ***And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.***

This is a critical part of the story, and we need to understand exactly what happened... and why! As I said earlier, a lot of people, including many Christians, think that the story of Jonah is a fairy tale (on a par with Pinocchio!), and *they come to this conclusion because they think that the story says that Jonah was **alive** inside the great fish!* But, you and I know that **there is no way that a person can live inside a fish** for three days and three nights! There is no oxygen inside a fish!

This, however, is not what happened! **Jonah wasn’t alive! He was dead!** Indeed, that is the whole point of the story! Jonah’s story is not about the miracle of **staying alive** inside a fish for three days and nights, but about **coming back to life** after he was dead for three days and three nights!

**That’s the only reason why Jesus refers to Jonah. Jesus tells us that Jonah’s death, burial, and resurrection happened as a pre-figuration to His own**

**death, burial and resurrection.** In Matthew 12, when His critics demanded a sign, Jesus gave this amazing response: ***“A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup> 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.”*** (Matthew 12:39-40)

Now, we all know that **Jesus wasn't alive inside the tomb**—he was dead...just like Jonah was dead inside the fish's belly! That is why Jesus points to Jonah's death, burial and resurrection as a pre-cursor to His own death, burial and resurrection. In fact, Jesus went so far as to say that Jonah's death, burial and resurrection was all that was needed to prove the validity of His own upcoming death, burial and resurrection! It would be a miracle of resurrection!

**Now, this idea takes us back again to the subject of evangelism.** If, as we said earlier, the central focus of all evangelism is the fact that *we are all dying*, then the only hope for this world comes in **the mystery of resurrection!**

This means that the most basic evangelistic questions are these: *“Do you want to have a new beginning? Do you want to be raised from your present state of dying into the new life of God's Kingdom? If so, are you willing to die to your self-centred lifestyles, your stubbornness and self-confidence? Are you willing to give in to God and be drowned in the sea of His love and acceptance?”*

But there's one more question that must be asked: *Will you turn to Jesus for your salvation?* You see, the story of Jonah's death and resurrection is not enough. It was always meant to point us to the **greater story** of Jesus' death and resurrection. Why? Because, although Jonah was raised from the dead, he would have to die again, sometime later. But Jesus' resurrection was permanent! Indeed, the Bible says that in His resurrection death has been finally conquered! Furthermore, we are told that Jesus went to Sheol to preach to the spirits in prison. He really is the Lord of both the living and the dead! It is these truths about Jesus that prove His power to save this dying world!

We cannot (we will not) run forever!

Let's pray.