

Jonah 2

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 16 June 2009 14:19

What is your idea of 'faith'? In this study we will challenge the usual idea of 'faith', and will show that the most imperfect of people can have faith. Jonah was certainly imperfect, yet God helped him to survive. Remember – Jesus speaks of just a tiny portion of faith, as big as a mustard seed. Do not think that the Christians you might admire have faith any bigger than that! Maybe they do – but most struggle and only have a pin-head size faith! Yet, Jesus says it is enough to move mountains. Never give up on God or on yourself. Keep on running the race until you reach the end.

It took a dire circumstance to show Jonah his error and what he should do next. In my own life I sometimes need a swift 'kick' from God to get going! There is not always a smooth path from command to doing in our lives. And faith does not usually come easily or quickly. I had to learn time and again until the truth stuck in my heart and soul. So, do not lose heart.

Jonah describes a position some of us have been in – that of being close to obliteration. Yet, he survived and flourished. He was not the easiest of prophets, yet God used him and gave him new life. Some think I am not the easiest of Christian teachers (depends on their own state and whether or not they have 'crossed swords' with me and do not like my answers!); even so, God gave me this ministry and gives the increase. Jonah is typical of so many in their sin or reluctance to obey... but he is one of the few to be mentioned by Christ.

I see this book as one of hope for all who fall short of God's standards – that means every one of us. Yes, Jonah was in error, but God had plans for his life and these were accomplished despite Jonah's reluctance. You may have sinned, or run away from your Christian duty, but if you repent, all will be well with your soul. God gives everyone their own ministry. Some try to avoid it. Yet, God will do His own bidding and will transcend our reluctance and failures.

Verses 1 - 3

1.

Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly,

2.

And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.

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3.

For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me.

The whole fish incident is laughed-at by unbelievers, who put forward so many of their own theories to 'explain' what 'really' happened. Let me tell you what 'really' happened: Jonah was thrown over the side of a ship into a raging sea. God guided a huge sea creature to the spot, and the creature swallowed Jonah, who remained in its belly for three days. That is what 'really' happened. I know it because that is what God's word says. And that is enough for me.

Is the incident just a story, or an allegory? After all, that is what sceptics and unbelievers wish it to be! No, it is written in straightforward literal words and is to be taken literally. It is also used as a reference by Jesus, and He, too, used it literally. He said that Jonah's experience was a sign of His own entombment and resurrection. Jesus' incident was actual and really occurred. So did Jonah's. Read Jesus' words – they are expressed in literal terms, not as an allegory.

We are told that Jonah "prayed unto the Lord". The word for 'prayed' in this text is palal. It has a primary meaning of 'judging'. This is derived from (amongst other meanings), to decide or 'rolling', which (again, amongst other meanings) can be used to describe something being rolled out flat; that is, to roll out with a roller to lay something even. From this we arrive at the meaning of laying out a cause for judgment. Hence, in this case, Jonah is laying out his predicament before God, even whilst he lay in the belly of the creature. He laid out his plea and acknowledged that his downfall was his own fault, and so supplicated God for help.

I have explained the word as an example of how we arrive at interpretation. I have omitted a number of variants that do not apply in this particular text. So many Christians think they can just give their own meanings to texts, even when the words themselves cannot support those meanings. And then they dare to call it 'interpretation'! A number of these well-meaning but meddling believers, even point to meanings they find in, say, a Strong's or similar book (forgetting that the book was written by another human being). But, a penny-worth of words in a book do not take the place of actual meanings coupled with Holy Spirit guidance of a called teacher.

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I bring this to you after receiving a string of emails from an Arminian 'believer' whose 'interpretations' were arrogantly and obviously wrong, and yet he maintained his rightness against what scripture truly said. Christians should beware of arrogantly making their own 'interpretations', when scripture says something very different.

In the most basic of terms, then, Jonah was saying to God 'Please get me out of this mess. I know I was in error and I apologise'. That is a modern rendition of the word 'prayed' in this text.

Jonah prayed "out of the fish's belly". He had no choice and certainly could not get out. If he stayed there much longer he would have been dissolved and digested! Again, we may look at possible meanings of 'belly'. It can have either a mental or a physical meaning. The mental meaning is that of a man calling out from a dark place of the emotions, crying out in mental anguish. Another meaning is that of 'inward parts', or 'digestive organs' (amongst others, but all referring to actual body parts).

Jonah may well have been distressed mentally – I cannot quite remember the last time I was in the belly of a sea creature, but no doubt I would also have been in some distress! Even if he was

mentally distressed, Jonah was also *actually*

in the belly of a creature, about to be digested! Therefore, the interpretation could easily accommodate both meanings. However, the primary meaning is that of being in a physical digestive tract. That this is the primary meaning, as confirmed by Jesus and His reference to the physical act of being 'buried'. Therefore, the word 'belly' confirms the actuality of being swallowed by a 'fish'/sea creature. That is another example of proper interpretation.

That this was an actual and not just a mental problem, is also shown in verse 2: "I cried by reason of mine affliction" coupled with "out of the belly of hell". In this we see a combination of both mental and physical explanations for 'belly', making this incident a real historical event. The word for 'belly' in verse 2 (beten) is different from the word for 'belly' in verse 1 (me'ah) and is linked to the word 'hell'. It means (in this text) 'the 'depth of Sheol' or the grave.

This easily transcribes into Jesus' words where He refers to Jonah being in the belly as the same as being in His tomb or 'the grave'. So, the word 'belly' in verse 2 is 'the grave'. It is a figurative meaning even though Jonah was in a physical situation, but the meaning is accurate, for if Jonah could not get out, the digestive tract would indeed have been his grave. Jonah says

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that when he called to God from the belly, God heard him. And so it is with unbelievers. When they call upon God in repentance, from their 'grave' (for they are already dead in God's eyes) of unbelief, God raises them up to new life.

Jonah describes his position, and thus tells us that the whole incident was real and factual. He was cast into the deep (by God's command; an indication of predestination), the sea, where the waves surrounded and buffeted him – factual information.

Verses 4 - 6

1.

Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.

2.

The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.

3.

I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God.

People often say that in such moments of threat to life, their "whole life passes before them". This is what Jonah is now saying. When he landed in the storm-ridden sea, he considered why he had come to this sorry state, punished by God. Yet, he believed, even in his dangerous condition, that he would once again see the Temple of God at Jerusalem (though it may also mean he will know God's heavenly hand when on dry land again). This tells us that God convinced him, though he was humanly going to drown, that all would finally be well.

As one who has been in several dangerous positions, including death by murderous attempts as well as financial and other physical attacks, I know the truth of what Jonah is saying, and know that God will give assurance even when all goes black. Never give in to human emotions! Always look to God, no matter how foul the circumstances appear to be.

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Some Christians will not call on God or be assured, because they think they have sinned too much to deserve it. The point is, we are never good enough and never deserve His love! He promises us His love and care because of His Son, Jesus Christ. Only Christ was good enough and only He deserves the Father's love. Christ is our Mediator and He 'passes on' the Father's love to us. Take heart! You may have done awful things or thought terrible thoughts, but if you repent, God forgives and forgets. Then, you start again, in the knowledge that you are in His hand, nurtured and cared for.

Jonah goes deeper into his recollection: as his body was surrounded by the icy, drowning waters, so his soul was surrounded by the terrifying reality of his condition. He felt both his body and his soul were in mortal danger, and so he cried out for mercy as the "depth closed me round about".

Have you experienced such a near-death experience? Or, a time when your very soul seemed ready to be choked to oblivion? I have known both. And God raised me up! He will do it for you. If you think in your heart that this or that situation is too much for God, then you have already lost faith. God can remove the worst situation and bring us out of the darkest pit. Have faith!

Having faith does not always mean you know 100% that all will be well, or that you already know how God will do it. Faith is to believe God will do something even if you inwardly fear and do not trust your own thoughts. The biggest breakthrough for me was when I said to God that "I WILL believe you will answer my prayer, even if everything appears to go against it. I WILL believe!"

And this is what Jonah was saying. "Weeds", *cuwph*, water plants (maybe seaweed), "were wrapped" around his head – *chabash*, tangled about his head. Some suggest this meant they protected his head from the digestive fluids. That may be true, but all we are told is that they were wrapped about his head. No reason for that is given, except that Jonah was telling us how dire his life was. In our everyday lives some of us can certainly identify ourselves with such dire circumstances.

Jonah went "down to the bottoms of the mountains", meaning the sea-bed below the land. As he sank, so he thought the "earth with her bars" would claim him forever. The bars are those wooden staves that bolt a door shut, a description of the doors of Hades. Jonah was as close to

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eternity as he could get. Even so, despite his circumstance, he says “yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption (death)”. Remember what I said earlier? This is what Jonah is now saying. At the very door of death God raised him up. As the Americans are prone to say, “It isn’t over until the fat lady sings”! Until we are dead, we are definitely alive! Believe.

Verses 7 - 9

1.

When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.

2.

They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.

3.

But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD.

Jonah admits to his soul ‘fainting’. Do not subscribe to always being filled with joy and assurance, when you are not! It seems the sad and unreal duty of most Christians to pretend to be happy and contented at all times. Let us all be more truthful and admit when we faint in our souls. Do not pretend to yourself, to others, or to God. God knows you anyway.

Here, Jonah’s soul was at its lowest, and he was close to death. Even so, he “remembered the Lord”. Call to Him with truth and belief and He will answer. If you tell me He has never answered in the past, then I say you have never truly believed. To believe is to trust God even when your soul quakes. We must have belief not in ourselves or in our own answers, but fully and only in Christ and in what *He* can do. Some believers regularly ether into a state of depression or nagging doubts: this is usually because their faith is hampered by personal trust in human activity and not fully in God. Look at yourself and you have every reason to feel down!

Jonah knew his prayer had been answered; it was received before the throne of grace, heard by Almighty God, the God he had denied and Whose command he attempted to escape from.

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Jonah muses on his predicament later, and says that when a man denies God's truth and bases his life on lies and worthless things, he thereby rejects forgiveness. This is so very true. I recently counseled a young man who knew that a particular temptation crowded his mind and led him to not just sin, but to live in misery. Though given the answer - to repent and turn away from the source of his temptation - he continued to suffer. In reality, though he wanted the peace of God, he also preferred to be miserable. So, he dwelt on what made him sin and remain aloof from God. In doing that, he did not truly repent and so was not forgiven!

He brought about his own folly and so lacked mercy from God. If you think men and women do not deliberately turn to the things that cause them pain, then think again. Many, even Christians, prefer misery to holiness. In a very strange way, misery is, to them, their life-blood and very poor comfort! In other words, sin grips them. They have lived for so long in sin that they never know the joy of heaven on this earth.

Knowing this to be true in his own life, Jonah was now at the end, close to death. Realizing this, he called out to God, thanking Him for His mercy and grace towards him, though he had tried to run from His commands. He vowed to return to the godly path and to obey God's command to him. Then, he declared the truth: "Salvation (is) of the Lord." Man cannot save himself any more than Jonah could have escaped the sea or the sea creature. He realized that his bodily safety and his soul's salvation were in the hands of God alone. We cannot choose salvation, nor can we escape it.

Very often God will take us to the very sea-bed of our life, to the doors of death itself (mentally or physically), before He shows His hand. We will accept our destruction, and then God acts to save us.

Verse 10

1.

And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.

When Jonah came to his amazing realization and called upon God, God "spake unto the fish". 'Amar' means to speak, to command. The fish was commanded to go to the place where Jonah

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was drowning. Now, it was commanded to do something else. This may have been an actual audible command, but it is more likely that God simply thought it and the creature did as it was told.

God commands all things He created, whether living or dead, animate or inanimate. If unbelievers think this is hilarious, let them laugh their hollow laughs... who cares! God means what He says. His word is truth. The fish did as it was commanded, and "vomited Jonah upon the dry land."

Have you watched great whales coming close to shore? Or, huge killer whales lunging their bodies onto the shore to catch seals? So, even in the 'natural' world, sea creatures can get to dry land. The creature did not go to dry land of its own volition. It was commanded to do so by God. When the creature reached the shore it 'vomited' Jonah out of its belly.

Jonah, after three days, was safe again. God's commands can never be rescinded. If He commands us to do something we must do it, whether by volition or by God's methods of making us obey. By 'hook or by crook' we will do what He says. When we fight God, that is when we suffer and know misery.

At times we may be afraid to obey, because we have mental images of opposition or attack. All that is irrelevant, for if God commands us, He will also pave the way. It is our task to obey, leaving the 'where, what and why' to God. We are all saved sinners, and we all fail to live up to God's requirements at some time. I am not better than you; you are not better than me. We are all in the same life boat!

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