

Fact Sheet for **“The Problem with Psalms”**
Jonah 2

Pastor Bob Singer
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We normally think of Psalms as that 150 chapter book in the middle of our Bibles. But psalms also show up in other places, like the book of Jonah. But there is a problem with Jonah's psalm that is instructional for us today. See if you can get a hint of it before I point it out. Review Jonah 1 to start.

^{2:1} ¶ **Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,**

Jonah prayed while he was in the stomach of that fish, but of course he wrote it down after he was back on land. This prayer we have here was *not* a plea for deliverance, but a psalm of thanksgiving to God for using the fish to save him from drowning. Jonah *had* prayed for deliverance (verses 2 and 7), but that prayer was not recorded here. Instead this was Jonah's psalm after he was again safe on dry land. And Jonah knew that this great fish was God's means of delivering him. He prayed....

² **saying,
"I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.**

Jonah was drowning when he cried out to the LORD. The LORD's answer to Jonah was to be swallowed by the fish. The "belly of Sheol" does not refer to the belly of the fish. Instead it refers to the fear of death that gripped Jonah as he floundered in the waves.

³ **For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.**

Even though it was the sailors who cast Jonah overboard, and at Jonah's own direction, Jonah knew that this was the LORD's doing. It was God who hurled the great wind upon the sea (1:4). The waves and the billows were His (compare Psalm 88:7). And it was God who caused Jonah to be cast into the sea.

⁴ **Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.'**

Jonah knew that he had been driven away by God, and was in danger of drowning, because he had chosen not to preach against Nineveh as God had commanded him (1:1-2). But now that he was back on dry land he expressed confidence in the second half of this verse that he could again look upon God's holy temple. This *may* be a reference to the Jerusalem temple. But more likely is God's heavenly temple. In verse 7 Jonah would write that his prayer came to the LORD in his holy temple. Psalm 11:4 is a verse that has that same thought.

⁵ **The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head**

Jonah was going down!

⁶ **at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.**

Here is how the New American Standard Bible put it....

"I descended to the roots
of the mountains.
The earth with its bars
was around me forever,
But You have brought up
my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.

This was Jonah's description of what appeared to him to be a watery grave.

**⁷ When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.**

Jonah had come to the end of his rope. It was then that he prayed to the LORD. The God of scripture is really God. He's really there. He really answers prayer. Other so called gods are no gods at all. But God heard Jonah's prayer and appointed a great fish (1:17) to be that answer. And notice that, although Jonah thanks God for saving him from drowning, he doesn't thank God for the great fish.

**⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.**

"Vain idols" translates the words "vapors of emptiness". They do not hear the prayers of their followers. They cannot answer their prayers. Perhaps Jonah had in mind the sailors struggling to keep the ship afloat and calling on their gods. *I wonder here if Jonah had Nineveh in mind.*

Now the tone of Jonah's psalm changes at this point from past tense to a commitment for the future.

**⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the LORD!"**

Jonah ends his Psalm with this great statement of personal dedication to God. Jonah does not tell us what he vowed, but it likely included obedience to the LORD's command for him to preach to Nineveh. Now we go back a pick up a detail.

¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

YUK! Presumably this was on the coast of Israel. Jonah would now make the long trek to Nineveh to preach against it.

But what is the problem with Jonah's psalm? Revisit verse 9. This certainly sounds as if Jonah was now both willing and eager to follow God's command and preach against Nineveh. But how deep did those words go into Jonah's soul? How much was he willing to follow and trust in God's plans? He now was willing to go to Nineveh, but he also would get very angry (4:1-4) that the people of that city actually listened and repented. In fact he would even fault God. The problem with Jonah's psalm is that his praise of the LORD in verse 9, though valid, was still on Jonah's terms. He wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. Verse 9 was not a complete acceptance of God's desires by Jonah. When God chose not to destroy the city Jonah did not feel very much like giving praise to the LORD. So there is a measure of hollowness at worst and spiritual immaturity at best, in verse 9.

There's a lesson here for us. We often give voice to great statements of God's wisdom, power, and sovereignty. We encourage others to follow Him and live holy lives. We thank God for who He is and what He has done. We praise Him for His great promises toward us who believe. We could even write our own psalms, not as scripture, but as expressions of what is in our hearts and minds. But a question we all, including myself, should ask ourselves is, "How deep do we let those expressions sink into our souls?" Do we live out what we know to be true? Do we give praise to God only when His choices for our lives are on our terms, or do we praise God even in the difficult times? 1 Thessalonians is a great verse from the NT. Take a lesson from Jonah.