

## Prayer in the belly – Jonah 2 – Vic. Lim Yi Jin

Jonah 2 records a psalm that Jonah prayed inside the fish's belly. Before we continue, as Christians, we believe that the whole of the bible is God's words. However, some parts of the bible cannot be taken at face value.

There are three reasons for this:

1. Some words in the Bible were quotations spoken by someone evil who tried to deceive those who hear them (Matthew 4:9)
2. Some words in the Bible were spoken as a general description of the sinful reality. For example, in the book of Ecclesiastes the preacher mentioned something controversial, that the good man suffers while the evil man prospers. Clearly, we are not encouraged to be evil, it is simply a description of the sinful world.
3. Some words in the Bible were spoken by people who can make mistakes. The only time a human can speak or write without error is when he is inspired by the Holy Spirit to write the words of the Bible. Any other time, human speeches quoted in the bible can contain errors, such as those in the book of Job.

There are only 3 cases where we can take the words of the Bible at face value:

1. God's direct speech
2. The narrator or the writer's speech, because they were inspired by the Holy Spirit – they cannot make mistakes
3. The words and actions of people who are portrayed in a good light by the narrator.

The passage in Jonah 2 is controversial. While most of the book of Jonah is the narrator telling the story of Jonah, it is not so in chapter 2. Instead, chapter 2 records a psalm that Jonah prayed inside the fish's belly - his self-reflection. But we need to be careful when we read this psalm. We need to understand who Jonah was before he was thrown into the sea - he was portrayed as a disobedient prophet. Throughout Jonah's entire journey, God gave Jonah many opportunities to choose to be obedient. However, Jonah rejected God's commands and ignored his responsibilities every time. In fact, Jonah was willing to die rather than obey God, he was willing to be thrown into the sea. Just as he thought he was going to die, God sent a big fish to save him. He lived in the fish's belly for three days and three nights. As Christians, we know this is where Jonah should have confessed his sin and repent.

If we examine his prayer closely, we cannot locate the part where he confessed his sin. Firstly, he praised God for His sovereignty, then he thanked God for His covenantal faithfulness - that he always kept His promises. He also mentioned his obedience to the law of Moses. Jonah thought that God saved him because God remembered His covenant – that God kept His promises that He made with the people of Israel. What is wrong with his prayer? Jonah did not repent. He did not express any sorrow for his disobedience - he did not admit that it was because of his sin that God sent the storm. His thankful prayer is deceptively beautiful. We can see that Jonah has some big misconceptions about salvation:

1. He ties salvation to his nationality.
2. He ties salvation to his outward religiosity.

Jonah did not realise that the basis of His salvation is no other than His mercy and it's not about nationality and not even obedience. Like Jonah, we tend to think about our sins lightly, while we consider other people's sins to be worse. We think that because we sin lightly, we deserve God's forgiveness. We often think other people don't deserve forgiveness because their sins are bigger than ours. Only when we comprehend how dark our sins are, can we understand how much we need God's mercy. Without God's mercy, we should have died under God's judgement. The good news is God's mercy is greater than His judgement.

The Lord did not only want Jonah to understand God's mercy, more than that God wanted Jonah to subsequently apply this mercy to the people of Nineveh. This psalm uncovered the hypocrisy of Jonah. Jonah received undeserved mercy, but he didn't want the people of Nineveh to also receive that mercy. The experience of Jonah in the fish belly is a foreshadow of Christ (Matthew 12:38-41).

Jonah's psalm also tells us about separation from God. While Jonah was inside the fish's belly, he did not hear any responses from God. This is unusual for a prophet at the time – they typically have access to direct two-way communication with God. This is a foreshadow of Christ's sufferings. Separation from God was the punishment that Jesus bore for you and me. We are the ones who have sinned, we are the ones who should be separated from God, but Jesus took our punishment and put it on himself. He suffered separation from God so that you and I will never be separated from Him ever again. In this way, Jesus Christ is the better and greater Jonah.