

Jonah 2:1-6

¹From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the LORD his God, ²saying:

“In my distress I called to the LORD,
and He answered me.

From the belly of Sheol I called for help,
and You heard my voice.

³For You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the current swirled about me;
all Your breakers and waves swept over me.

⁴At this, I said,
‘I have been banished from Your sight;
yet I will look once more
toward Your holy temple.’

⁵The waters engulfed me
to take my life;
the watery depths closed around me;
the seaweed wrapped around my head.

⁶To the roots of the mountains I descended;
the earth beneath me barred me in forever!
But You raised my life from the pit,
O LORD my God!

Berean Standard Bible, UK

1

That moment your life flashes before you. Jonah 2:1-6

Life ends in death. 2:1

No miracle for Jonah. He died.
The miracle of Jonah. He survived.

Life before death. 2:2-4

Dismay. 2 “In my distress”
Decision. 4 “yet I will look”

Life beyond death. 2:5-6

Realising. 5 “to take my life... closed around me”
Remembering. 6 “You raised my life”

2

Death: a participants' guide. Jonah 2:1-6

Despair. 2:1-2

Helpless. 2a "In my distress"

Hopeless. 2b "From the belly of Sheol"

Devotion. 2:3-4

The end is real. 3 "You cast me... Your breakers"

The end has hope. 4 "yet I will look once more"

Delight. 2:5-6

Descent into death. 5b "closed around... wrapped around..."

Lifted into life. 6b "But You raised my life from the pit"

3

Y'all gotta do this. Jonah 2:1-6

We all must die. 2:1-4

Death is a step with the Lord. 1-2 "I called... He answered"

Death is God's plan for me. 3 "You cast me... Your breakers"

Death is overcome by faith. 4 "I said... yet I will look..."

We all must live. 2:5-6

My life is temporary. 5a "to take my life"

My life is beyond death. 6b "But You raised my life from the pit"

My life is God's life. 6b "O LORD my God"

4

The God of the living and of the dead. Jonah 2:1-6

The God of compassion. 2:1-2

Responsive. 2a "He answered me"

Receptive. 2b "You heard my voice"

The God of justice. 2:3-4

Wrath. 3a "You cast me into the deep"

Judgement. 3b "Your breakers and waves swept"

The God of mercy. 2:5-6

Generous. 6b "You raised my life from the pit"

Sovereign. 6b "O LORD my God"

5

How a dying man looks. Jonah 2:1-6

Looking back on death. 2:1-2

Prayer of a dying man. 2a "In my distress I called"

Prayer of a dead man. 2b "From the belly of Sheol I called"

Looking back on dying, Part 1. 2:3

God is sovereign over me. 3a "You cast me into"

God is sovereign over circumstances. 3b "Your breakers and waves swept over me"

Fear and hope in dying, Part 1. 2:4

I am a sinner. 4a "I have been banished"

I am saved. 4b "yet I will look once more"

Looking back on dying, Part 2. 2:5

Death is coming. 5a "The waters engulfed"

Death is certain. 5b "the watery depths closed"

Fear and hope in dying, Part 2. 2:6

Life is a one-way journey. 6a "barred me in forever"

Life is an eternity journey. 6b "But You raised my life"

Other possible titles

Deathbed conversion

The song of a dying man

What will it take to turn you to God?

You can also pray powerful prayers

Praying through the veil

When an imperfect person dies

Don't leave it till the last minute

When am I dead?

Between life and death

Where are those who have died?

Dead men do pray

Dead men do tell tales

When you've got minutes to live

What to pray on your deathbed

How to pray through your grief

Quotes and illustrations

Don't become so engrossed with the drama of what was happening inside that sea creature, that you miss the drama that was happening inside Jonah himself.

Warren Wiersbe said concerning Jonah's prayer, "His prayer was born out of affliction, not affection. He cried out to God because he was in danger, not because he delighted in the Lord. But better that he should pray compelled by any motive than not to pray at all. It's doubtful whether any believer always prays with pure and holy motives, for our desires and God's directions sometimes conflict."

Commentary

Whale, or fish

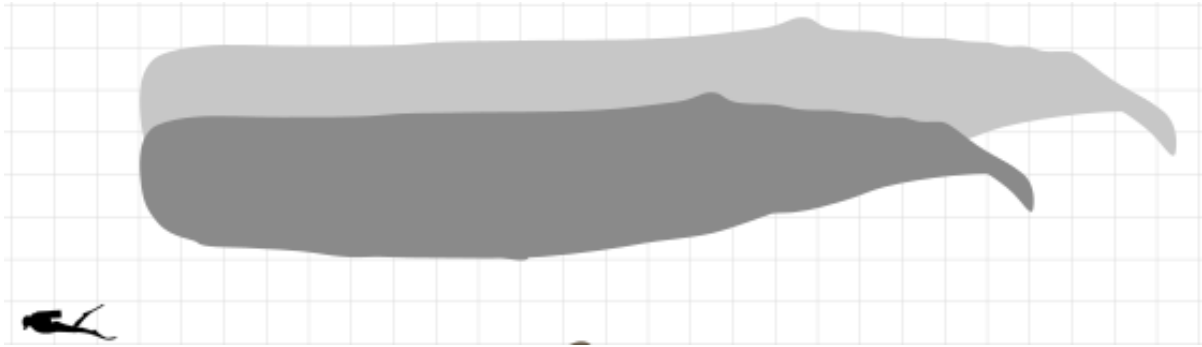
The Hebrew word, דָּג [Strong's 1709] pronounced, 'dawg', occurs throughout the Old Testament and is always translated by the English word 'fish'. It occurs as 'fish of the sea', 'fish in the river', even a gate into Jerusalem was called 'the fish gate'.

All Bible translations use the word 'fish'. It is only in popular culture, where we ignore the fact that "the LORD had appointed a great fish" (1:17a) that we seek to rationalise the unknown or unfamiliar facts of Scripture, history, or biology, that we invent alternatives to what is presented as factual in God's Word. One of those human inventions is to substitute the Biblical word 'fish' with 'whale'.

Could a person survive being swallowed by a whale, or a fish? ¹

There are some sea creatures, including some species of whale that are large enough to swallow a person. The sperm whale is the largest mammal on the planet. An adult sperm whale is typically 16 to 20 metres long. The sperm whale feeds largely on giant squid. These squid are often larger than people. Whalers are known to have found entire giant squid in the stomach of a whale. So, yes, it is entirely possible for a whale to swallow a person.

¹ Image credit, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sperm-Whale-Scale-Chart-SVG-Steveoc86.svg>



There is the story of a whaler, called James Bartley, who, while serving on a whaling ship called 'Star of the East' in February 1891, in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands, was lost overboard, was swallowed by the sperm whale his crew was hunting, but he survived, and he was rescued from the whale's stomach after the beast was caught. It is a great story, but unfortunately it seems to be sadly fictitious. That ship did exist, and it was in that vicinity at that time. But it was not a whaling vessel, and Bartley was not on board, either as a passenger or a member of the crew.

However, there is a true story. On 11 June 2021, The *Cape Cod Times* reported that Michael Packard, a commercial lobster diver, was on his second dive of the day when he was swallowed by a humpback whale, but survived.

This 56-year-old veteran diver reported, "All of a sudden, I felt this huge shove and the next thing I knew it was completely black. I was completely inside; it was completely black." At first, Packard said he thought he was inside a great white shark, which are common in the area. I thought to myself, 'there's no way I'm getting out of here. I'm done, I'm dead.' He realized it was a whale after feeling around the darkness and not finding teeth. "I could sense I was moving, and I could feel the whale squeezing with the muscles in his mouth," he said.

He was able to breathe through his regulator while he was trapped. "Then all of a sudden he went up to the surface and just erupted and started shaking his head," Packard recalled. "I just got thrown in the air and landed in the water. I was free and I just floated there. I couldn't believe it."



Mr Packard was inside the whale's mouth for no more than a minute at the most, before the whale spat him out again. He was rescued by his dive team and taken to hospital suffering from a dislocated knee and soft tissue damage.

The diver was probably spat out because, while humpbacks have large mouths, they only have narrow throats, so Mr Packard would have been too large for the humpback to swallow. However, it is a different story with several other species of whale. For example, the sperm whale feeds on giant squid, so a sperm whale could easily swallow a person.

There is another Jonah story:

A dive tour operator named Rainer Schimpf, 51, was photographing a school of sardines surrounded by predators off South Africa's coastal town of Port Elizabeth. Suddenly he felt everything going dark. He realized that he was accidentally scooped by a whale. The report is dated 10 March 2019.

Here is the photo of Rainer inside the whale's mouth. (Original source of this image could not be found.)

His upper body was fully inside the whale's mouth while the lower body was just dangling out. The whale spat Rainer out in seconds as it was just accidental, the whale was just scooping some sardines. Rainer was not hurt and lived to tell the tale.

The whale which took Rainer is known as Bryde's whale.



Jesus and Jonah

Jonah chapter 1 ends with the words, "Now the LORD had appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish." Jonah 1:17.

Jesus referred to this verse, saying, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:40). This does not only refer to the time period that both Jonah and Jesus would be 'entombed', but also to the fact that they would both be dead for that length of time. The miracle of Jonah is not that he was kept alive, but that he was brought back to life.

The real message in the Jonah narrative, is not that it is possible to survive for three days and three nights after being swallowed by a whale. In fact, it is not possible to survive. Jonah did not survive. He died. Jonah is not a story of survival. It is a much more exciting, and a much more grand story. It is a story of death and resurrection.

This resurrection from the dead of Jonah is to prepare Jonah for the revival and spiritual resurrection of the city of Nineveh that is about to occur. It is also to remind us that no matter how improbable, it is possible for the unsaved to come into eternal life.

Theology

Foundations of interpretation

We know that all Scripture, that is the 66 books of the Bible, are inspired by God, and are profitable, 2 Timothy 3:16. We also know that not all Scripture is weighted equally. The Old Testament is but a shadow when compared to the reality of Christ, Colossians 2:17, and Hebrews 10:1. That is why we never begin to build doctrine from the Old Testament. Instead, we always begin with, and then build upon Christ.

That is why the foundations of sound doctrine begin in the Gospels. Christ is the Word of God. In all things Jesus must have the pre-eminence.

The second foundation is the New Testament letters which add to, by building on the teachings of Jesus.

Third, is the historical narrative sections of Scripture, which are mostly found in the Old Testament, but which also include Acts in the New Testament.

Finally, we add Poetry and Prophecy, which also mostly occur in the Old Testament. The poetic and apocalyptic language of these sections of Scripture are the least didactic when compared to the other books of the Bible.

Jonah chapter 1 has been entirely in the form of historical narrative. But when we turn to Jonah chapter 2 the genre changes to poetry. We need to study poetry differently from how we study history. Only the first and last verses of this chapter are narrative.

Literary structure

Jonah chapter 2 begins, and ends, with one line of narrative. These opening and closing statements act as bookends enclosing the poetic structure between them. In verses 2

through 9, every verse is a poetic couplet. Verse 2 through 6 are long couplets. Verses 7 through 9 are short couplets.

The long couplets of verse 2 through 6 come in the form of A¹ B¹ A² B². Look at verse 2 as a typical example.

A¹ In my distress, I called to the LORD,
B¹ and He answered me.
A² From the belly of Sheol, I called for help,
B² and You heard my voice.

Notice how the concepts of Line A¹ are echoed in Line A², and the concepts of Line B¹ are echoed in Line B². This structure flows throughout these verses. (You would recognise this structure from many of the Psalms.) However, this principle is not entirely consistent. An exception comes at the end of this stanza. Instead of the second half of verse 6, that is A² and B² being a parallel echo of the first half of the verse, that is A¹ and B¹, the second half of verse 6 is a contrast. A² B² is the optimistic close to the stanza.

Soul sleep

There is a teaching that is occasionally heard, that claims that all those who die are ‘asleep’ or unconscious. This teaching is that both believers and unbelievers are totally unaware of the passing of time between when they die, and when they are awakened to face their final judgement. Thus, from the human point of view, it appears as if we close our eyes in death at one moment, and it seems as if in the next instant, we open our eyes in eternity. In this way, we are unaware of the passing of time while we are dead.

We know this teaching is wrong, because it is rooted in the Old Testament, instead of the teachings of Jesus. There are a small number of Old Testament verses, which, if taken in isolation, are claimed by the proponents of this odd teaching. For example:

Among the dead no one proclaims Your name. Who praises You from the grave?
Psalm 6:5, NIV

The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any who go down into silence. Psalm
115:17, ESV

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or
thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. Ecclesiastes 9:10,
ESV

However, these verses present the viewpoint of those who are still alive. Furthermore, these verses are a selected pick, and not a true representation of the whole teaching of the Old Testament. For example, from the Old Testament:

Sheol beneath is eager to meet you upon your arrival. It stirs the spirits of the dead to greet you—all the rulers of the earth. It makes all the kings of the nations rise from their thrones. They will all respond to you, saying, “You too have become weak,

as we are; you have become like us!” Your pomp has been brought down to Sheol, along with the music of your harps. Maggots are your bed and worms your blanket. Isaiah 14:9-11, BSB

Throughout Scripture, death is referred to with the term ‘sleep’. This is not because we are unconscious, but because the dead are just as alive as a person who is asleep. This is in contrast to a similar, but different, false teaching that the dead are obliterated. Examples of believers being ‘asleep’ in death, include:

He said, “Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.” But they laughed at Him. Matthew 9:24, NIV, UK (Jairus’ daughter)

After He had said this, He told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up.” ...So Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, John 11:11, 14, BSB

While they were stoning him, Stephen appealed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Falling on his knees, he cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. Acts 7:59-60, BSB

However, Jesus taught that the dead are both alive, and fully conscious, in the Realm of the Dead. One of the most complete expressions of life after death was given by Jesus when He explained the death, and the afterlife, of a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus, in Luke 16:19-31. There are some people who seek to minimise the truth of Jesus’ words by stating that this was only a parable, rather than a narrative. But they willingly forget that every one of Jesus’ parables was based on real-life facts.

That parable is also backed-up by narrative Scriptures. For example:

Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” Luke 23:43, NIV, UK

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit, in whom He also went and preached to the spirits in prison. 1 Peter 3:18,19, BSB

When Jesus was confronted with the false teaching of soul sleep, Jesus answered by speaking, not of only a future life, but by speaking of the dead, alive in the present tense.

He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to Him all are alive. Luke 20:38, NIV, UK

The New Testament builds on Jesus’ teaching that the dead are fully conscious. For example:

I am torn between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better indeed. But it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Philippians 1:23-24, BSB

We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 2 Corinthians 5:8, NIV

Jairus' daughter had been dead for several minutes. The son of the widow at Nain, had been dead for several hours. Lazarus of Bethany had been dead for several days. A question to be answered is, if those who died, and were raised by Jesus, were alive in another realm even while their bodies were dead, why do we have no record of their experience of being in the afterlife? The experience of Paul is the best answer we have.

[He] was caught up to Paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. 2 Corinthians 12:4, NIV

The partly-Biblical false teaching of Soul Sleep, is answered by the Biblical doctrine of Progressive Revelation. This explains that the Old Testament does not have all the answers. The Lord has revealed Himself and His truth step-by-step, a little at a time as we are able to receive it. Thus, we need to grow into an ever-deepening knowledge of His Truth.

(There may be enough material here for the basis of a sermon on the believers' assurance of life beyond the grave.)

Music and songs

Songs based on this text

Jonah-man Jazz, 5. Jonah sank into the sea... Go down, Jonah

Songs about Jonah inside the fish / God with us in trials, "From inside the fish" 2:1

God on the mountain

It is well with my soul, H 707

Thank You Lord for the trials, Ot 53

Tower of strength, Ot 102

What a friend we have in Jesus, H 421

Songs about prayer, "I called to the LORD" 2:2

I'm praying for you, Ot 33

Let us pray (S C Chapman)

Workers' prayer (Getty), Ot 98

Songs about from life to death to life, "But You raised my life from the pit" 2:6

God's not dead (Newsboys)

I will trust in You (D Daniels) Ot 112

In the likeness of You, (Petra)

Lifegiver, You are the Christ (J Owens)

When the roll is called up yonder, H 708

Thought starters for personal reflection or group discussion

1. What is one of your most memorable stories of going fishing?
 2. Before today, what did you think Jonah was doing inside the fish?
 3. If you were told you had only three minutes to live, what would be your top prayer requests?
 4. Why was God so mean to Jonah? Is God tough on true Christians?
 5. Why do you think we need to be dead before we get our true rewards?
 6. Read Psalm 7:11. God is described with two attributes. How is it possible to be both of these at the same time?
 7. From Philippians 4:6, what are the attributes of a good prayer?
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