

I am Jonah {clarity}
An exegetical sermon

Edward Rowse
NT615: Biblical Exegesis
April 13, 2020

I am Jonah {clarity}

Crisis creates clarity. A number of years ago, the Town of South Windsor, where I live, bought a piece of land near the center of town intending to build a new fire station. They bought the property, cleared the trees and before they could begin construction, a small plant belonging to an endangered species, began to grow in the newly cleared ground. This caused much trouble for the town, but here is our point: with trees removed, the ground became exposed and what was once hidden became revealed. Crisis has a way of clearing the trees that cover our soul, exposing our fears, our priorities and our need. Crisis creates clarity.

In our study of the Book of Jonah it is easy to overlook the man, Jonah. Our attention is easily drawn into the drama of the story: A man called by God but on the run, thrown overboard a ship in a violent storm, eaten by a fish, preaching to violent people, bitter at God. Jonah's story has plenty of drama to detract us from the man himself! Yet, at the core of this book is a man's struggle with God. Amanda Benckhuysen calls Jonah an "anti-prophet who is out of sync with God".¹ Timothy Keller believes that Jonah is the likely author of this book that bears his name.² I concur, and believe he wrote it as a testimony to God's working in and through his life. George Cruz states that unlike other prophetic books, the Book of Jonah has no oracle, it is rather the story of a prophet who discovers God's compassion and mercy toward him through the conflict created by his own bad choices.³ In a way that is similar to his contemporary Hosea, Jonah's life is his message.

¹ Amanda Benckhuysen. "Revisiting the Psalm of Jonah." Calvin Theological Journal 47 (1): 14. <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001902022&site=eds-live>.

² Timothy Keller. *The Prodigal Prophet* (New York: Viking Press, 2018), 228.

³ George Cruz. "Jonah Chapter 2: A Brief Pastoral Exegetical View." *Apuntes*, 21 no 3 Fall 2001, 93.

This brings us to Jonah's prayer, as recorded in Jonah 2. Although the subheading in our Bible lists it as a prayer, it is much more than that. It is part prayer, part testimony. In a poetic way, Jonah summarizes God's great working in his life. Let's take a look at it as written in the 1978 edition of the New International Version:

1From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. 2He said, "In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and You listened to my cry. 3You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all Your waves and breakers swept over me. 4I said, 'I have been banished from Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.' 5The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. 6To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But You brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God. 7When my life was ebbing away I remembered You, Lord, and my prayer rose to You, to Your holy temple. 8Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. 9But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord."

There are three quick observations that need to be made before we dig in. The first observation is that it is a poetic psalm.⁴ Notice some of the common poetic literary devices that Jonah uses in this prayer. He begins with a metaphor: "from the depths of the grave" and he uses hyperbole: "To the roots of the mountains I sank down". To bring in our second observation he uses another poetic device, symmetry. Notice that the phrase "holy temple" is repeated twice. The first time it comes at the end of verse 4. The second time it comes at the end of verse 7. This forms the stanza break of the poem. The third observation is the tense. You'll notice that verses 2 through 7 are written in past tense. Verses 8-9 are written in the present tense. Thus we have identified the shape of Jonah's poem. We have two stanzas, each identified with the words "holy temple". Each stanza is written in past tense, which indicates Jonah is telling us what happened. Verses

⁴ Ibid. 96.

7 and 8 are written in present tense and form Jonah's conclusion. Jonah is telling us what he learned from his experience and what we can learn as a result of his experience.

Jonah's psalm is similar in style to other psalms of repentance found in Scripture. For example, Psalm 74 speaks of being rejected by God and trusting in Him despite devastating circumstances. Jonah 2 also bears striking similarity to Psalm 137 in that it begins with a statement of distress and ultimately looks to Jerusalem for solutions. All of this is to say that a case can be made for interpreting Jonah 2 as a psalm of lament.

One can imagine Jonah, a broken man, recounting his struggle with God. He poetically and beautifully exposes his own faults and all God did to discipline him. He does not portray himself in a positive way. Using irony, Jonah reveals that even in his desperate place while inside a fish's gut, he remained prideful. The irony is found in the words of verse 1: "Jonah prayed". The verb "to pray" here is written in the *hithpael* form.⁵ This Hebrew verb form would establish an expectation for the original hearer that what Jonah is about to do is pray a petitionary or intercessory prayer. Instead, we get a desperate acknowledgment of trouble and then, thanksgiving. Jonah doesn't make one request in this prayer! It's as if Jonah expected mercy from God. In verse 3, Jonah acknowledges that justice is being served as God "hurled him" into the deep. So justice was served but mercy was expected. Thankfully, mercy is what Jonah found. Let's look more closely.

Verses 2-4 form the first stanza of Jonah's poem. Verse two serves as his preamble setting the stage for his encounter with God. The language of verse 3 depicts Jonah's experience as he sinks deeper in the waters. Jonah begins by acknowledging God's justice, "You hurled me into the depths." Wayne Grudem says that the life of

⁵ Benckhuysen, *Revisiting the Psalm of Jonah*, 15.

Jonah illustrates how God’s sovereignty interacts with human free will. The sailors on board the ship “threw Jonah overboard”⁶, yet Jonah declares at the beginning of this poem that it was in fact God who “hurled” him into the seas.⁷ God works through people to bring about His plan.

Using poetic language, Jonah describes his experience as the currents swirled about him and the waves and breakers swept over him. Jonah had become “banished” from the sight of the Lord. The word “banished” carries with it the sense of being “rooted out”.⁸ It is as if God got rid of the dead weight and it was Jonah! As Jonah sank, he prayed. Or, as he put it poetically, “I will look again to Your holy temple.” Why this language? Jonah knew that it was over the mercy seat in the temple that God promised to speak to us (Exodus 25:22).⁹ The temple was where God dwelled. When King Solomon dedicated the temple in 2 Chronicles 6:38, he prayed and specifically asked God to hear the penitent prayers of His wayward people when they looked toward the holy temple. For Jonah, crying out towards the temple was his best hope at receiving a merciful response from God. As stated earlier, it also serves as a stanza break.

Verse five opens the second stanza of Jonah’s poetic prayer. In this stanza he depicts his experience while inside the belly of the huge fish. Notice he speaks of “seaweed” being wrapped around his head. You can picture Jonah sloshing inside the belly of this fish along with everything else it ate that day. He continues in verse 6 by talking about being “barred in forever”. One can almost picture the inside jaw line of this fish might look like the bars of a prison cell and Jonah says he is “barred in forever”!

⁶ Jonah 1:15, NIV.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 326.

⁸ William Wilson. *Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 28.

⁹ Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet*, 76.

This is also a statement of Jonah's helpless circumstance. There is nothing Jonah can do to escape. His life is in the pit and as verse 6 says he is sinking to the very "roots of the mountains." Running from God caused Jonah to sink to the very bottom of the earth.

This is a good place to be reminded that Jonah is a prophet from Israel. While God called him to preach to Nineveh, we must not forget that his life and story also had impact back in his homeland with his own people. One has only to quickly glance through the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Kings to discover that Israel went from bad to worse in her rebellion against God. In fact, 2 Kings 14:25 places Jonah squarely within the reign of King Jeroboam II. Jonah's run from God is representative of Israel's run from God. God's justice and mercy towards His rebellious prophet ought to be a wake up call to any Israelite who heard about it.

In verse seven Jonah's life is ebbing away and while there, at the very "roots of the mountains" (v. 6), at the lowest of points, Jonah remembers God. Presumably with one of his last remaining breaths, the penitent prophet lifts his prayer once again "to Your holy temple." This is the second time that this formula is used and it signals the end of stanza two. From here, the tense changes and Jonah brings his language into the present. The change of tense signals a shift in emphasis. Jonah moves from what happened, to what he learned. The lessons he learned form a valuable resource for both his original readers and for us, his modern readers. As Timothy Keller notes, "we don't find grace in the high points of our lives but in the valleys and depths."¹⁰ Jonah found grace in the depths and he spends verses eight and nine showing us how to find it too.

First, let's quickly notice the chiasm of verse 8. The word "cling" works in tandem with the word "forfeit". The words "worthless idols" work in tandem with the

¹⁰ Ibid. 79.

words “grace that could be theirs.” If you cling to idols, you will forfeit grace and any idol is worthless when contrasted with the grace of God. This is a message aimed squarely at Jonah’s own people, the Israelites. As noted previously, Jonah was a contemporary with King Jeroboam II and a quick glance at 2 Kings 14:23-29 reveals a grim snapshot of life in his kingdom. Quite simply, Jeroboam was evil in the eyes of God. He encouraged the worship of idols and Israel suffered as a direct result of this sin. Yet, the grace of God is revealed even in Jeroboam’s wicked rule, for God saw their bitter suffering and He “saved them by the hand of Jeroboam.” (2 Kings 14:27)

Interesting isn’t it? Jonah ran from God and suffered, yet found grace at the bottom. Jonah’s people ran from God and suffered, yet they also found grace. The major difference between the two is that Jonah gained a deeper appreciation of God’s grace and a willingness to obey. The same cannot be said of Israel.

In verse 9, Jonah’s challenge to abandon worthless idols is coupled with a personal declaration of trust in God. The final five words of Jonah’s prayer/psalm can easily summarize the message of the entire Bible: “Salvation comes from the Lord.” Salvation is a comprehensive word. It speaks of deliverance, restoration, even a complete removal of evil or misery.¹¹ Jonah’s experience with God in the belly of a fish brought the partly digested prophet to a revelation that is central to all of Scripture: God is the One for Whom our hearts are truly aching. We can run, search and cling to the people and things of earth but ultimately “salvation comes from the Lord.” God is the hero of all biblical narratives¹², and our own lives as well.

¹¹ Wilson, *Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*, 367.

¹² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 106.

The Apostle Paul gives us the same caution in 2 Corinthians 6:1, “We urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.” God’s grace is available. On the cross Jesus literally took our sin upon Himself in order that we might be made right. (2 Cor. 5:21) This verse contains a shocking truth: Jesus became as bad as us so that we might become as good as Him. Paul went on to say, “now is the time of God’s favor” (2 Cor. 6:2). Can you think of any reason why we would not want to receive such a gift?

Crisis brings clarity. At present we sit under a government mandated lock down. People are dying, our economy is in shambles and fear runs rampant. Our national idols have been exposed as frauds. We have spent trillions of dollars on national security, yet we are as vulnerable as ever. We have dizzied ourselves with busy-ness and now, are told to stay indoors. We have pursued entertainment to discover that it too is empty. We have chased material comforts to discover that they do not mean much in the face of global hysteria. Like trees getting cleared from a forest, our idols are toppling. Like Jonah, we are beginning to see more clearly, even as we sink lower. And like Jonah, when all else is lost and we find ourselves at the lowest of lows, may we also declare, “salvation comes from the Lord.”

In closing, notice that Jonah began to praise God even before he was rescued from the belly of the fish. His circumstances remained the same, but Jonah had changed. This is the power of God’s grace. God’s grace is the only agent strong enough to change us from the inside out. It has the power to change a rebellious prophet into a faithful one. And, having exposed our nation’s idols as empty, God’s grace has the power to restore us to Himself. With clarity that can only come from severe crisis and loss, let us declare with Jonah, “Salvation comes from the Lord!”

Bibliography

Benckhuysen, Amanda. *Revisiting the Psalm of Jonah*. Calvin Theological Journal 47 (1): 5-31. <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=ATLA0001902022&site=eds-llive>

Cruz, George. *"Jonah chapter 2: a brief pastoral exegetical view."* In *Apuntes*, 21 no 3 Fall 2001, 93-97.

Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Keller, Timothy. *The Prodigal Prophet*. New York: Viking Press, 2018.

Mann, Steven T. *"Performative Prayers of a Prophet: Investigating the Prayers of Jonah as Speech Acts."* In *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 79 no 1, Jan 2017, 20-40.

Sauter, Gerhard. *A God so near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in honor of Patrick D. Miller*. Brent A. Strawn & Nancy R Bowen, ed. Penn State University Press, 2002.

Ramp, Stephen W. *"When the Wheels Come Off: Homiletical Reflections on Jonah 2."* in *Word & World*, 19 no 4 Fall 1999. 414-423.

Wilson, William. *Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990.