

Jonah-A Study In Serving God

Chapter Two

In our last session we witnessed the turbulent calling of Jonah by God who called Jonah to go to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh and preach against it a message of repentance. Jonah took things into his own hands and tried to escape this calling and fled, by ship, toward Tarshish, the opposite way to Nineveh. As God disciplined Jonah and turned events against him we saw how the sailors reluctantly threw him overboard in order to save their lives. This narrative has given rise to a superstition among sailors even to this day. A "Jonah" is a long established expression among sailors, meaning a person (either a sailor or a passenger) who is bad luck, and is based on this Biblical prophet. At the end of chapter one we saw God had "*appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah*", and we left Jonah in the belly of the great fish.

Chapter Two Verses 1-9

This prayer of Jonah stands as a testimony to the heart of the prophet and uses language typical of the poetic descriptions of near death experiences. In his desperation Jonah looks to God's holy temple which is the physical monument of God's saving power. Jonah's prayer is consistent with O.T. narrative style where a narrative is interrupted with a psalm or prayer of thanks for God's deliverance and mercy. Typically this prayer follows the style of a thanksgiving psalm because there is, 1: a petition for deliverance (2:2); 2: a review of the crisis (2:3-6); 3: a review of God's deliverance (2:6-7); 4: it ends with praise to God for His deliverance (2:8-9). In Vs.2, Jonah tells us that God had rescued him from "*the belly of Sheol.*" Sheol can refer to either death itself or the realm of the dead where the wicked go, here by using the word "*belly*" Jonah personifies this place as having an insatiable appetite.

In Vs.3-6, Jonah gives a vivid recollection of his near death experience, both it's causes and it's results. Jonah's crisis is a direct result of God's judgement on him for his disobedience and his brush with death is presented to us in graphic detailed imagery. In Vs.4, we see the thing that all Israelites fear, that death is separation from the presence of God (see Ps. 88:4-5; 10-12). Jonah regrets losing the divine presence he had earlier tried to escape. "*Yet,*" he says, "*I shall again look upon your holy temple.*" The temple at Jerusalem is seen as the earthly presence of God. In his near death experience Jonah sees his descent into the waters depths as a slow, silent journey to the underworld of Sheol. His journey brought him to "*the gates of death,*" (Ps. 9:13), that place "*whose bars closed upon me forever.*" But just as he was resigned to death God intervened and saved Jonah from this watery grave. The word '*pit*' Jonah uses in Vs.6, is another popular metaphor for death (see Job 33:22 & 24; Ps. 49:9; Is. 51:14).

In his now repentant state the prophet says he, "*remembered the Lord.*" The context of this statement tells us that Jonah's prayer had been answered and emphasises the effectiveness of prayer to the one true God as in Vs.2. This contrasts the ineffective prayers of the sailors to their gods (1:5), and Jonah condemns those who put their trust in idols. The "*steadfast love*" that Jonah speaks of in Vs.8, is translated from the word *hesed* which is a Hebrew word commonly translated as "loving-kindness," "kindness" or "love." *hesed* (or *Chesed*), is central to Jewish ethics and Jewish theology and is a common term in the Bible for describing God's love for humankind and God's special covenantal relationship with the nation of Israel. Vs8, warns that those who worship idols will abandon God's *hesed* toward them.

In the closing Vs.9, of this prayer Jonah declares his loyalty to God and confesses Him as the only source of salvation and deliverance. In His saving grace to Jonah God has moved the prophet from a state of disobedience to repentance. Today, under the new covenant, just as it was under the old covenant, God sovereignly moves Gentiles from their disobedience into a state of faith and repentance by His grace. Thereby confirming God's Words when He says, "*I the LORD do not change;*" (Mal. 3:6), and again in James 1:17, we read that God is, "*the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*"

Verse 10

Our attention is turned again to this magnificent fish who obeys it's Creator by vomiting Jonah out. We witness again the obedience of creation to God as the fish projects Jonah *'upon the dry land.'* This must have been quite a spectacle because if the fish was large enough to swallow a man it must have been in deep water, so it must have projected Jonah a long way to reach dry land!

I believe there are lessons to be learnt from this fish. It doesn't matter how small a task God calls us to undertake we have to be obedient, like this fish, and fulfill our role as servants of God. His Will is perfect and He takes care of even the minutest detail of His plans and if that means we are called to a menial or seemingly unimportant task, we must fulfill it. This fish served as a means of God's grace and salvation for Jonah, and it may be that God wants to use us in a similar way so, *'whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'* (Col. 3:17).