

# JONAH—WEEK 2

## REPENTANCE



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*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

## *Jonah, Week 2 — Repentance*

Jonah prays from the belly of the fish a prayer of thanksgiving, ending in repentance. Now he's willing to preach to Nineveh and does so.

Nineveh, and its king, repents too.

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1      Jonah 2:1-3 (NKJV)

*Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. And he said:*

*"I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction,  
And He answered me.*

*"Out of the belly of Sheol I cried,  
And You heard my voice.  
For You cast me into the deep,  
Into the heart of the seas,  
And the floods surrounded me;  
All Your billows and Your waves passed over me."*

The Bible doesn't directly record the events from when Jonah hit the water until the fish swallowed him. Instead, we learn them from Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving. Presumably that's because this is how Jonah, who wrote this book, remembers it. The prayer is what sticks out in his mind. There's a lesson in that.

In a way, much of Jonah's prayer sounds silly. What's the point of reciting what just happened? Is he telling God something He doesn't already know?

Of course not. But a prayer of thanksgiving loses something if you don't say what you're thankful for.

Besides, this recitation helps Jonah organize his thoughts and remember them.

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We do well to pray the way Jonah did. When thanking God for answered prayer, it's proper to recite the events. That glorifies God, while it helps us recall and celebrate what the Lord has done for us.

But for major answered prayer, we can take this further. You may never experience anything as dramatic as Jonah's answered prayer, but it's not the drama of an event that matters; it's the impact.

Every Christian has had their life transformed by God at least once. So, you have the material to compose your own prayer of praise.

We all have prayers we recite, such as the Lord's Prayer. We should each have our own, personal, "Jonah Prayer" that praises God specifically for how He has blessed and/or rescued us.

Of course, Jonah is a prophet and can fire off great prayers like this one on the fly. Mary's Magnificat is similarly inspired. Same for Zechariah's song.

We probably need to be more deliberate, even working from a rough draft. Editing a prayer as if you're preparing a speech is unusual, but some things deserve something special.

Reciting, your very own Jonah Prayer is a magnificent way to praise God. Or you could sing it.

2      Jonah 2:4-7 (NKJV)

*“Then I said, ‘I have been cast out of Your sight;  
Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.’  
The waters surrounded me, even to my soul;  
The deep closed around me;  
Weeds were wrapped around my head.  
I went down to the moorings of the mountains;  
The earth with its bars closed behind me forever;  
Yet You have brought up my life from the pit,  
O LORD, my God.*

*“When my soul fainted within me,  
I remembered the LORD;  
And my prayer went up to You,  
Into Your holy temple.”*

Jonah begins by describing how he was sinking—like a descent into hell. *The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; The earth with its bars closed behind me forever;*

Then he *remembered the LORD*. What does that mean? On the boat, he taught the sailors a lesson on who the LORD (Yahweh) is. What is it he’s remembering now?

He’s remembering that Yahweh’s been there the whole time. It’s like suddenly noticing someone who’s been standing right next to you. He’s unforgetting who (and where) Yahweh is.

This is another place where translating Yahweh as “the LORD” loses something. Jonah is remembering that the LORD is the Lord.

And he begins to pray.

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This sounds unbelievably stupid, but we all do it. We forget God “in the heat of the moment.”

This spawns one of the most frightening ideas in Christendom — being too busy to pray.

That’s why the book of Jonah is so important. We need to see ourselves in Jonah and see our mistakes in his mistakes.

Jonah’s case is the ultimate example of being too busy to pray. The situation is obviously God’s doing. He even preached—effectively—to the ship’s crew that it’s God’s doing. And yet, amidst all the action, he disconnects from God.

Then, while he’s sinking and facing death, he picks up the phone.

Must have been a local call.

3      Jonah 2:8–10 (NKJV)

*“Those who regard worthless idols  
Forsake their own Mercy.  
But I will sacrifice to You  
With the voice of thanksgiving;  
I will pay what I have vowed.  
Salvation is of the LORD.”*

*So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.*

The previous passage showed Jonah understanding the truth of who God is. This passage shows Jonah pledging fealty. Rebelling against the LORD isn't just wrong. It doesn't work anyway.

Jonah is remembering that *those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy.*

So now his rebellion is turned into a promise of service. *With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed.*

He needs this. What's coming next is going to be tough.

Now he's ready.

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God obviously created the storm that threatened to destroy the ship and got Jonah thrown overboard, but He is lord over much more than that.

Consider Jonah's rebellion. Jonah needed to go through that. The lesson he learned (relearned, really) will get him through the coming trials. So, it makes sense that God masterminded that too.

We don't have a problem with the idea that God caused a storm—even insurance companies call them acts of God—but Jonah's rebellion? Could God have foreordained Jonah's rebellion against God?

Absolutely. Just as the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, He hardened Jonah's

*But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh; and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses. — Exodus 9:12 (NKJV)*

We're can't fully understand God's perspective – we're stuck inside time and space – but we can at least recognize our limitations and realize that these limitations don't apply to God.

Everyone is going to have a time when they question God's choices. Things are sure to happen that we disagree with. Even if we pray about it—fervently, frantically, desperately—the desire of our hearts can be denied.

Sometimes we get to see why. Sometimes we aren't given that privilege.

4      Jonah 3:1-5 (ESV)

*Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.*

This feels like something's missing. The Bible doesn't say why *the people of Nineveh* even listened to Jonah. Why didn't they just assume that he's a nutcase? And he's an Israeli; the Ninevites hate Israelis as much as Jonah hates the Ninevites. They could have stoned him.

The only clue we have comes in Chapter 4, verse 2, when Jonah announces that his expectation that Nineveh would repent is why he fled to Tarshish. *“O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish;”* (ESV)

Jonah wasn't afraid they'd use him for target practice; he was afraid they'd repent. He doesn't even use fear for his safety as an excuse for why he fled to Tarshish. This sounds like Jonah was already a familiar face in Nineveh.

Otherwise, he'd have been more worried about being assaulted than being believed.

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What Jonah gets wrong is that he doesn't see Nineveh as part of his personal mission field. God specifically sent him on a mission to preach to them, and Nineveh appears to be within his sphere of influence. Plus, he's confident in the success of the mission.

Still, he refused to go. How crazy is that?

This gets back to the theme of this book being about a change in perspective. Jonah wants to choose his personal mission field, instead of discovering it. He misunderstands who he is and who God is. The LORD gives out the assignments. Jonah's job is to execute them.

The same concept applies to us. Do you know what your personal mission field is? Have you ever thought about it? Prayed about it?

Every Christian needs to discover their role in the Kingdom of God. The phrase “personal mission field” may sound like it's strictly about preaching and evangelizing, but it's not. Anything can be a mission.

God might want you to fix something in the church or for a neighbor in need. He might call you to make coffee on Sunday morning before church. That was my calling for years.

You don't choose what to do; God calls you to a mission.

That's why it's known as a “calling.”

5 Jonah 3:6-9 (NKJV)

*Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying,*

*Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?*

The king of Nineveh takes the popular response and makes it mandatory. Plus, just to put an exclamation point on it, he includes all the livestock. He isn't first in recognizing the truth of Jonah's preaching, but he's still showing true leadership in "leading from behind".

His taking off his robe and covering *himself with sackcloth* is very symbolic and surprisingly humble. The king of Nineveh is a major king. Nineveh has a population of over 120,000.

Yet when *he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes*, he declared his subservience to Yahweh.

The LORD is the king of kings.

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As we showed in yesterday's lesson, Jonah was probably familiar in Nineveh, but that only explains why they listened to him. That doesn't explain why they repented. How is it possible that a people, and their king, could be so evil and yet so ready to repent?

Obviously, something inside of them was a walking contradiction. They were aware of what is right but had suppressed it. Jonah didn't teach them about right and wrong, he reminded them. They were in a state of denial.

But remember, Jonah was in denial too. In fact, as we'll soon see, he's still in denial. That's the great irony of this book—and it's lesson.

There are two parallel plots going on here: Jonah's and Nineveh's. While their sins are very different, their need to repent is the same. Nineveh responded well to their wake-up call and thus avoided a lot of pain. Unfortunately for Jonah, he still doesn't get it. More suffering is coming.

The lesson for us is to remember that we're no better than Jonah. Sometimes our sinful nature turns us into walking contradictions too. You do it. I do it. Great saints did it.

*For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. — Romans 7:15 (NKJV)*

The struggle with sin never ends.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What would your prayer of thanksgiving say?
2. When have you forgotten God?
3. Have you ever been rescued in a way that felt supernatural? Had you prayed?
4. Do you know your calling?
5. When have you seen someone's sin be illogical?

*Items for prayer:*