

JONAH-DEAR OR ALIVE?

By

J. Vernon McGee Th.D., LL.D.

No Copyright

Bible Memory Association St. Louis, Missouri 63112

LECTURE-3

SALVATION IS OF THE LORD

“As Jonah...So Jesus”

“The sign of the Prophet Jonas”

“And he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; but there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12:39-40).

After giving a message at the Westminster Presbyterian Church (U.S.), Atlanta, Georgia, I was approached by a fine young man, a student at Georgia Tech, with this problem in his mind. He confessed his need of the Gospel message and expressed his desire to accept it. But he was very candid in saying that there was one hurdle which he could not surmount. After asking him what his difficulty was, I was rather astonished to hear him say, "I do not believe that a man can live in a fish for three days," because I had not even mentioned Jonah in my message.

I asked him the question, "Who told you that Jonah lived for three days and three nights in a fish?"

He was thoughtful for a moment and then answered, "Well, I think almost everyone. I have heard preachers say it. Does the Bible not say that he, Jonah, was alive for three days and three nights? My professor at college said that the other day."

In answer to his question, I said, "Not my Bible. It is assumed that he was alive for three days, but JESUS said, **“As Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly, so would He(Jesus), be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” Was Jesus alive or dead?”**

With a puzzled look evidenced by a wrinkled brow, he exclaimed, "He was dead! Then this means that Jonah was raised from the dead."

"That is the whole point," I added, "for the resurrection of Jonah was the sign CHRIST gave to His day of the resurrection of Himself from the dead."

Jonah's Prayer

Now let us look at the second chapter of Jonah and see if it permits this sort of an interpretation:

“Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish’s belly, and said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of Hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice. For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all they billows and thy waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains, the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God. When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto thee; into thine holy temple. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord. And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.”

You will note that the entire chapter, except for the first and last verses, is Jonah's prayer to GOD while he was in the belly of the whale.

When Did Jonah Pray?

It is assumed that since Jonah prayed unto the LORD out of the fish's belly that he was kept alive for three days.

There is a very normal question which we wish to insert at this point, "When did Jonah pray this prayer?"

If he waited until the second or third day, after being swallowed by the fish, to utter this prayer, then doubtless he was alive for the entire episode. However, if he prayed the prayer when he was first swallowed by the fish, then it presents no obstacle in believing that Jonah was dead. Is it not natural to think that this prayer was uttered the moment Jonah found himself in straitened circumstances, and not a composed and prepared prayer which came through careful consideration?

When Simon Peter was sinking into the sea, having begun to walk on the water at the instructions of the LORD, he, too, cried out in his desperation, **“Lord, save me.”** That prayer is no long drawn-out prayer which Simon Peter thought out carefully. Someone has said that if Simon Peter had begun this prayer as the average preacher begins his pastoral prayer on Sunday morning, he would have been twenty feet under water before he reached the petition which was uppermost in his life at the time.

Someone interjects at this point the objection that Jonah would have been dead before he could have prayed the prayer. Again it is reasonable to suppose that Jonah was conscious for at least three to five minutes after he was swallowed by the fish. That would allow time not only to pray the prayer that is here recorded, but also to recite the entire Book of Jonah.

Jonah's State Within the Fish

Having met these objections, let us turn to the prayer itself and see if it offers any suggestions as to Jonah's state in the fish.

1. "Out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice" (verse 2). When Jonah found he was being swallowed by a great fish, he began to cry unto GOD. He calls the stomach of the fish "**the belly of Hell.**" The Hebrew word here is "sheol." Without entering into any discussion of the meaning of this interesting word, suffice it to say that it does not mean "hell" as we think of it today. The primary meaning of the word is "grave." In this simple form, it is so translated elsewhere, "**Then shall ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave (sheol)**

(Genesis 42:38). The Psalmist uses this language in Psalm 88:3, "**...and my life draweth nigh unto the grave (sheol).**"

It is likewise true that in the Scriptures there is more to the word than just simply "the grave," as other passages in the Word of GOD impressively indicate, but this is the root and basic meaning.

The startling fact here in the second chapter of Jonah is that Jonah considered the fish his "grave." The grave is not for the living, but for the dead. Sheol was the place for the dead, and surely was never thought of as the abode of the living. The remainder of the prayer corroborates this conclusion.

2. "for thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me" This is an apt description of a drowning man and not a living one. A man in the midst of the sea, compassed by floods and swept over by flood and waves is not a picture of a living human being any more than a fish on dry land is a picture of a living fish.

3. "Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight, yet I will look again toward thy holy temple" (verse 4). Here Jonah expressed his great faith in GOD. In spite of the fact that he was cast out of GOD's sight, which can only be adequately explained by death, Jonah expected to look again toward GOD's holy temple. Surely this man believed in the resurrection of the dead.

4. "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me around about, the weeds were wrapped about my head" (verse 5). Again we have expressive description of a dead man and not one who has found hotel accommodations in a fish.

Listen to the definite language here, "**The waters compassed me about**" Here is a man who finds himself in the environment of the fish world entirely surrounded by water. Those who insist that Jonah was alive will have to maintain the thesis that he not only lived in a fish, but like a fish. The language here is very vivid; note the phrase, "**even to the soul.**"

Let me interpose at this point to say that GOD has not asked us to believe anything ridiculous. The Bible is filled with miracles from Genesis to Revelation, but none of them is ridiculous, having an appeal only to the credulous. They are all reasonable and reveal the

power of an omnipotent and omniscient GOD. He never acts foolishly, and He moves in mighty power His wonders to perform.

In this day, when the miracles of Scripture are under attack by the enemy, it should make GOD's children very circumspect as they put forth the miracles of GOD's Word. Let us not be guilty of taking any miracles out of Scripture, and also, let us not be guilty of reading any in where there are none. Many college students have their faith numbed under the constant pounding of godless professors. This is the weak place where the enemy hits the hardest. Let us give our young people a faith that will stand all the pressure of the enemy's attack. That faith must be consistent with the pages of Scripture.

The young man to whom I referred in the beginning of this chapter told me later that, after he had listened to another tirade of a godless professor, he asked the professor why he thought Jonah was alive. The professor looked puzzled for a moment, and then said, as the boy had to me, "Preachers say and the Bible says it." It was quietly suggested that he examine the Bible record in order that he might speak with authority.

A Mighty Miracle in the Book of Jonah

Before we continue with the suggestion in Jonah 2 with reference to Jonah's state within the fish, let us mention the mighty miracle in the Book of Jonah. This miracle does not pertain to a man living for three days inside of a fish. Rather, it is a miracle where GOD raises up a man from the dead. If the miracle of the resurrection daunts you, then you are going to have difficulty with the resurrection of CHRIST from the dead. If GOD raised up JESUS from the dead, then He could raise Jonah from the dead. If GOD could not raise Jonah from the dead, then He would not be able to raise JESUS from the dead. If you do not believe that GOD could raise Jonah and did raise JESUS from the dead, then you cannot be a Christian. Your trouble is not with a fish story, but with the Gospel story.

Your trouble is not intellectual, but due to the fact that you are a natural man, a stranger from the grace of GOD, "for natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned"(1 Corinthians 2:14)

The trouble is not with Jonah but with yourself. You need to have a generous portion of eyesalve to open your eyes to the truth of the Gospel.

Let us now return to the vivid account of Jonah's state within the fish. As we continue in the fifth verse, we note further confirmation of the thesis that Jonah was not alive, but dead: **"The depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head"** A man who has the weeds of the sea wrapped about his head does not seem to be in a place where he is enjoying health. Surely this is an apt and vivid description of a man who is wrapped up in the contents of the fish's stomach.

5. "I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me forever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God (verse 6). If there has been any doubt in the reader's mind up to this point that Jonah was dead, then this verse should dissolve every dubious thought. This language can only be explained on the

basis of death. Language has lost its meaning and Jonah must be charged with exaggeration if all he is saying can be dismissed on the pretext that he was frightened. Surely he was frightened, but that does not justify exaggeration in Scripture.

The one word to which we wish to draw attention is a synonym of death, "corruption." Only of CHRIST could it be said, "**Neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.**" Martha said to JESUS at the tomb of her brother, Lazarus, "**Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days**" Jonah said, "**yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God**"

When Jonah was swallowed by the fish, he died, and it seems that it is the intent of Scripture to convey this thought.

The mighty miracle before us in this book is one of resurrection.

This is the sign given by our LORD to the wicked and adulterous generation of His day. He prepared a gainsaying world for the mightiest miracle of all. They asked for a sign, and they were to receive the greatest. The reason that He chided them for looking for a sign to give substance to belief was expressed by Him in the parable concerning the rich man and Lazarus, the beggar, "**...If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead**" (Luke 16:31).

Before the second chapter of Jonah was given over the radio program of the Lincoln Avenue Presbyterian Church of Pasadena, California, I received the following communication by mail from one of my listeners who reveals an insight into the book of Jonah which is above the average, and since the brief message is self-explanatory I give it just as it came to my desk,

"Dear Dr. McGee:

I have been an interested listener to your Sunday broadcasts for quite some time. The program has been a real blessing to me.

The series of lessons in the Book of Jonah has caused me to read and re-read the book. I find it most interesting.

The thing that particularly puzzles me is the portion in the second chapter that seems to indicate that after Jonah had been thrown into the sea, he apparently repented and called on GOD, but he apparently drowned. GOD must have brought him to life again and thus Jonah voices his

prayer and his thanksgiving to GOD. I have never noticed this before and wonder if this is the real teaching."

We are not insisting upon this interpretation as the only one, but we do believe that it is one which stands the test of the science of hermeneutics.

The value of it is evident for young people who are in the school of scoffers where every vestige of faith is brutally taken from so many. Jonah is the place where the skeptic begins, and he is totally disarmed if he discovers that the Bible may not present a fish which sustained the life of a man for three days.

The believer is given another wonderful illustration on the Resurrection, the fact which was the center of New Testament preaching and the heart of the Biblical Gospel. Of course the believer can accept the record of a man living for three days in the stomach of a fish. Surely GOD could sustain Jonah for three days.

The problem is: Did He?

~ end of chapter 3 ~
