

Jonah 2:2-6a

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The prophet Jonah describes his distressful experience in the waters. As he is on the verge of death, he cries out to the LORD for deliverance.

Jonah struggled for his life and even faced death when the sailors threw him into the sea. According to Jonah, the sea was a realm of chaos. The Bible often uses the sea to picture chaos (Isaiah 57:20; Psalm 74:13-14). The New Earth will have water but no sea (Revelation 21:1). This could indicate that the bodies of water in the New Earth will be tamed, no more to create damage and wreak havoc.

Now Jonah is not only in the sea, he is in the belly of a creature of the sea. The LORD intervened miraculously and directed a great fish to swallow Jonah. The prophet realized that the fish was a source of deliverance for him, and apparently decided that in fact he did desire to live. So he prayed to *the LORD* inside the fish (v. 1). He said, *I called out of my distress to the LORD*.

The verb translated as *called out* is “qāra” in Hebrew. It occurred a few times in the previous chapter (Jonah 1:2, 6, 14). In the context of the psalm of Jonah 2:2-9, the verb refers to a cry of lamentation addressed to *the LORD* (Psalm 79:6; 116:4). Jonah petitioned *the LORD* when he was in *distress*. The word *distress* refers to troubles and afflictions (Deuteronomy 31:17). The school of afflictions often leads to the school of prayer. Jonah remembered to pray when things got bad for him. The *LORD*, in His grace, *answered* the prophet. God was with Jonah all along. Jonah rejected God, but God did not reject Jonah. God disciplines, but never rejects His people (Hebrews 12:5-6; Revelation 3:19).

In a parallel line, *Jonah* said, *I cried for help from the depth of Sheol, You heard my voice*. The verb rendered as *cried for help* is the Hebrew verb “šaw‘â.” It often appears in retrospectives on past *distress* (2 Samuel 22:7; Psalm 18:6; 31:22). In such contexts, it means petitioning God to provide help in a dangerous situation. Jonah reflected on his past experiences in the sea when he petitioned God *from the depth of Sheol*.

The term *Sheol*, used in parallel with the term *distress*, represents the lowest and deepest place, the place of the dead. It is the underworld, the grave, the realm of the dead (Genesis 37:35; Deuteronomy 32:22). The New Testament term “Hades” is used to translate *Sheol* in Acts 2:27, which quotes Psalm 16:10. Hades was the Greek place of the dead. Jesus used the term “Hades” to refer to a place of torment for the wicked (Luke 16:23). However, in the Old Testament, *Sheol* seems to have a broad application to the place of the dead, and can apply not only to the place where the spirit goes, but also to the grave itself. In the KJV, *Sheol* is most often translated “grave” or “pit,” referring to the place of the dead body.

In Jonah’s case, he was buried alive, so to speak. He is apparently still alive, but is in a grave awaiting death in the sea. The relationship between *the LORD* and *Jonah* made it possible for the

latter to cry for help. Such a relationship prompted *the LORD* to answer *Jonah* favorably. With gratitude, *Jonah* testified about his deliverance and said, *You heard my voice*.

Although *Jonah* was disobedient to *the LORD*, he was still His child, and God disciplines those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:4-5; Revelation 3:19). God heard *Jonah*'s prayer, and *the LORD* was merciful to *Jonah*. He *heard* *Jonah*'s *voice*. The verb *hear* ("shama" in Hebrew) often appears in contexts where it expresses not just the physical act of listening but of responding positively to what is stated. In such cases, the verb is synonymous with the verb "obey" (Deuteronomy 6:4). *Jonah* thus tells us that *the LORD* listened attentively to his cry and responded favorably to him.

The prophet switched from third person (*He answered me*) to second person (*You heard my voice*) to address *the LORD* directly. Such a switch not only emphasizes *Jonah*'s gratitude but also demonstrates his relationship *with the LORD*. This truth echoes *Jonah*'s statement in the previous chapter, where he said, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9).

Although the sailors were the ones who threw *Jonah* into the sea, *Jonah* rightly recognized the LORD's hand orchestrating all the events. So, he declared, *For you had cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas*. The verb translated *cast* means to throw something away. It occurs in 2 Samuel 20, where an unnamed soldier threw a garment over the dead body of Amasa, David's chosen commander for Israel's troops. The soldier's action was to keep the advancing army from stopping to look at Amasa to focus on pursuing their foes (2 Samuel 20:12).

The term for *deep* ("meşûlâ" in Hebrew) refers to something which is sunken down. It is synonymous with the phrase *the heart of the seas* (Psalm 68:22; 88:6). These terms describe the prophet's situation. He was on the verge of death and would soon die without divine intervention.

That *Jonah* was on the verge of death in the very *heart of the seas* is clear from the next verse, where he said, *The current engulfed me. All Your breakers and billows passed over me*. The verb *engulf* means to surround or to go around. That means the waters were continually around *Jonah*. They surrounded him on every side, causing him to become a prisoner of the sea.

The *breakers* refer to a heavy sea wave that breaks into foam. The *billows* refer to a large undulating mass of something, usually smoke, cloud, or steam. As the prophet recognized the divine orchestration of all the events, he saw *the breakers* and *billows* that *passed over* him as belonging to *the LORD*. He called them *Your*, suggesting that they were the instruments God used to carry out His plan. It could be at this point that *Jonah* changed his mind about dying, and decided he would rather live.

As *Jonah* experienced all these calamities, he thought *the LORD* had abandoned him. He said, *I have been expelled from Your sight*. To be *expelled* from God's presence is to experience shame, humiliation, and even death (Psalm 44:23-24). Conversely, to live in God's presence is to live in safety and prosperity (Psalm 23:6; 31:16). In the previous chapter, *Jonah* attempted to flee from

the LORD. Now he felt that *the LORD* had abandoned him because of his sin of disobedience. He expressed his agony as he found himself destined for *Sheol*.

Jonah was not without hope, however. He was confident that he would live to serve *the LORD*. For he declared, *Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple*. The phrase *holy temple* likely refers to the temple in Jerusalem, where the people of God used to worship Him (Joel 3:17). Jonah hoped that one day he would go back to the temple to worship the LORD and fellowship with the other Israelites.

Having expressed his hope to worship the LORD again in Jerusalem, *Jonah* returned to describing the waters that had closed in over his head. He issued three similar statements to describe his life-threatening situation: *Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head*.

In the first statement, Jonah used the Hebrew term “nephesh,” which means “soul” or “life” to describe the seriousness of the situation. Using the term “nephesh,” Jonah made clear that the waters threatened to take his life as they surrounded him on every side. The prophet was one foot in the grave when the sailors threw him into the sea because the *great deep engulfed* him.

The term for *deep* is “tehom” in the Hebrew language. God used the word in Genesis 1 to explain the elements that characterized the state of the world before creation (Genesis 1:2). The word “tehom” refers to the abyss of the deep sea. It is beneath the earth and is the groundwater that feeds the waters on the surface of the earth (Psalm 78:15).

In the third statement, Jonah used the term *weeds* to describe his situation. The term refers to plants that grow in the sea. The book of Exodus uses the term for the reeds where the mother of Moses hid him when he was a child (Exodus 2:3, 5). Similarly, the book of Isaiah uses the term for the reeds in the Nile of Egypt (Isaiah 19:6).

Jonah said that *weeds/grass wrapped itself around his head*. As such, he could not do anything to get rid of this watery prison. He was sinking. He was about to die by drowning. His situation was painful and deteriorating. He made that clear when he declared, *I descended to the roots of the mountains*. To descend is to go down. Jonah was already in the sea. But as his situation got worse, he was going down *to the roots of the mountains*.

The *roots of the mountains* likely refer to the bases or foundations of the mountains, which extend down to the bottom of the sea. Thus, the phrase pictures the prophet going down to the lowest depths of the sea. The situation was so difficult for Jonah that he thought he was going to the realm of the dead, as he said, *The earth with its bars was around me forever*.

The word *earth* likely refers to the underworld (*Sheol*). Jonah saw *Sheol* as having a gate secured with *bars*. In the ancient world, *bars* were part of the security equipment of the city gates (Deuteronomy 3:5; 33:25). They were usually made of wood or metal that slid into openings in the posts. The bars would keep the gate closed to prevent someone from entering to hurt others. Here in the book of Jonah, the bars refer to the locking system of *Sheol*, a figurative way of

saying that Jonah was in a prison. He saw himself as being locked in *Sheol forever*. He almost lost all his hope in the sea.

Biblical Text

²And he said,

“I called out of my distress to the Lord,

And He answered me.

I cried for help from the depth of Sheol;

You heard my voice.

³“For You had cast me into the deep,

Into the heart of the seas,

And the current engulfed me.

All Your breakers and billows passed over me.

⁴“So I said, ‘I have been expelled from Your sight.

Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple.’

⁵“Water encompassed me to the point of death.

The great deep engulfed me,

Weeds were wrapped around my head.

⁶“I descended to the roots of the mountains.

The earth with its bars *was* around me forever.