

Jonah 2:6b-9

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The LORD delivers Jonah from the sea when Jonah prayed to Him. Now Jonah gives a testimony of his deliverance and promises to pay the vows he made.

In the previous section, *Jonah* said the waters were about to take his life. Weeds wrapped themselves around his head, making it difficult for him to breathe. Worse yet, he “descended” to the lowest depths of the sea and was about to experience death by drowning (v. 6a). Here, however, a major change occurred, which the prophet introduced with a contrastive statement: *But You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.* This statement marks a turning point in the prayer as the prophet now focused on his deliverance.

The verb *brought up* can be translated as causing someone or something to go up. It is the exact antonym of the verb “descend” or go down. In the first part of verse six, Jonah was going down to the bases of the mountains (v. 6a). Now the prophet went up *from the pit* because of the *LORD*’s intervention. It is also possible that Jonah’s spirit left his body while it was in the belly of the fish, and Jonah was actually speaking from the place of the dead, as in the parable Jesus told of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:22-31).

The Hebrew word translated here as *pit* is not Sheol, but rather “sahat.” This word can also be translated “grave” or “corruption.” It sometimes refers to a hole in the ground, a cistern several meters deep, carved in rock to collect and store precious water. Figuratively, the *pit* can refer to a prison (Zechariah 9:11; Genesis 37:22), grave (Genesis 37:20; 2 Kings 10:14), or access to the underworld (1 Samuel 28:13–14). Someone in a *pit* would have a bad experience. But water in the *pit* would make the event more frightening (Psalm 69:1–2). Jonah found himself in a watery grave. He was in the abode of the dead. But *the LORD brought Jonah up* from the waters because He had a relationship with him. Jonah was thankful that *the LORD* delivered him from this watery grave.

Furthermore, *Jonah* recounted how the major change occurred. He declared, *While I was fainting away, I remembered the LORD.* To *faint away* means to be weak or to feel weak. In this case it could refer to Jonah in the process of drowning. The verb *remember* often means more than having a cognitive memory about something. The book of Exodus illustrates this meaning, where “God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exodus 2:24). This does not mean that God had forgotten about the covenant. Rather, it means that God acted upon the promises He had made to them.

Similarly, the statement that Jonah *remembered the LORD* does not mean that he had forgotten Him. Jonah had stated earlier that He “feared the LORD, the God of heaven” (Jonah 1:9). This shows that the prophet had a relationship with *the LORD* and knew Him quite well. So this statement means that Jonah acted upon his knowledge of *the LORD*. And in so doing, he *prayed*. Then, *the LORD* heard *Jonah*’s prayer. As *Jonah* declared, *My prayer came to You into Your holy temple.*

The phrase *holy temple* may refer to the temple in which God dwells in heaven (Isaiah 6:1). The instructions God gave Israel to build the tabernacle and all its furnishings was based on the true tabernacle in heaven (Hebrews 8:4-5). Jonah could also have in mind the temple in Jerusalem, and God's presence there. In either case Jonah looked back at his fatal experience in the waters and realized that his prayer reached *the LORD* in His *holy temple* because *the LORD* spared him from drowning.

Jonah then said, *Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness, but I will sacrifice to You*. The Hebrew word translated here as *idols* is "hebel." It means "vaporous." Some translations render this phrase "They that regard lying vanities forsake their own mercy." The translations that use "vain idols" consider that "lying vanities" refer to false gods.

"Hebel" refers to something that cannot be grasped or used practically, as a wisp of vapor. Sometimes "hebel" is translated as "fleeting" because a wisp of vapor soon vanishes (Ecclesiastes 9:9). Ecclesiastes asserts that attempting to assign purpose to life based on human reason and experience is "hebel"; it is vanity and emptiness (Ecclesiastes 1:2; 12:8).

The addition of the word *vain* ["shav" in Hebrew] along with "hebel" serves to intensify the prophet's negative view of the *idols* (Psalm 31:6). The idea is that the *idols* that the pagans served were worthless. They were powerless and motionless (Psalm 115:5). Thus, when pagans put their trust in idols, they abandoned *their faithfulness* (Deuteronomy 31:16; Jeremiah 1:16). This contrasts putting faith in Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, from whom all things were made, and in whom all things exist (Genesis 1:1; Colossians 1:16-17).

Jonah states that pagans *forsake their faithfulness* to *vain idols* when the idols don't perform for them. But Jonah asserts that he will be faithful, and keep the vow he says he *vowed I will pay*. He asserts he will not be like the pagans who are transactional with their gods. Rather, he will worship Yahweh out of thanksgiving for the deliverance he has received.

The essence of pagan idolatry is humans manufacturing the illusion that they can manipulate spiritual forces to get what they want. As God notes, they cut a tree in half, use part for firewood, to cook their food, then make an image of the other half and say, "Deliver me, for you are my god" (Isaiah 44:16-17). This is *vain*, because it obviously not true. It is further *vain* or empty because by worshipping *vain idols*, they miss the true God who miraculously rescued Jonah. Thus, they missed out on gaining the great benefits of the grace of God, which is received by faith (Genesis 15:6; John 3:14-16; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Having acknowledged the vanity of worshipping *idols*, Jonah promised to *sacrifice to the LORD with the voice of thanksgiving*. He would praise *the LORD* for preserving his life through the great fish. He would not be like pagans and abandon his God.

The prophet Jonah also declared, *That which I have vowed I will pay*. In the previous chapter, the sailors worshiped *the LORD* and made vows when *the LORD* delivered them from the stormy sea (Jonah 1:16). Here too, Jonah stated that he would pay his *vows* to *the LORD*. The prayer does not specify what it is that the prophet had *vowed*, but most vows in ancient times concerned rituals to be performed (Leviticus 3:1-5). Jonah would fulfill his vows with a sacrifice of

thanksgiving. Jonah might have been thinking about returning to Jerusalem, so we might take this as “I will go and sacrifice to you when you deliver me back to the land.”

The prophet concluded the psalm with the declaration, *Salvation is from the LORD*. The noun *salvation* in the Scriptures means “something being delivered from something” and requires context to determine what is being delivered from what. It can refer to an eternal and spiritual deliverance (Acts 16:30–31). In such a case, it speaks of deliverance from being separated from God, and not being reconciled to Him. In other contexts, the noun *salvation* can mean deliverance from danger or suffering (Philippians 1:19). This is the meaning intended here. Jonah spoke of his deliverance from the sea.

Throughout these two chapters, the LORD was at work. When Jonah disobeyed Him, He sent a great storm on the sea to frustrate Jonah’s plan (Jonah 1:4). When the sailors cast lots to determine the guilty party, the LORD intervened and saw to it that the lot fell on Jonah (Jonah 1:7). He also delivered the sailors from the storm. He quieted the sea for them after they threw Jonah into the sea (Jonah 1:15). Here, *the LORD* delivered *Jonah* from the sea by allowing a great fish to swallow him. Therefore, Jonah boldly declared that *salvation* (deliverance) is *from the LORD* alone.

Biblical Text

^{6b} But You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.

⁷ “While I was fainting away,

I remembered the LORD,

And my prayer came to You,

Into Your holy temple.

⁸ “Those who regard vain idols

Forsake their faithfulness,

⁹ But I will sacrifice to You

With the voice of thanksgiving.

That which I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation is from the LORD.”