

Jonah 2 Repentance With Reservations

Jonah 2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly.

2 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. 3 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.

4 Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.' 5 The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me; Weeds were wrapped around my head. 6 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.

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

8 "Those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy. 9 But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD."

10 So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. (Jon 2:1-10)

There is a whole category of non-apology apologies. These are classified as apologies that are made, but which disclaim genuine liability so as to avoid lawsuits. Politicians, sportsmen, celebrities are famous for making these apologies which aren't really apologies. One of them is "I deeply regret". The mayor of Sunland Park, New Mexico, apologized by saying, "If I ever let [the citizens of Sunland Park] down in any way, I deeply regret it."

Another is when a politician says "mistakes were made". A third kind is when you really blame the offence on the offended person. "If anyone was offended by my remarks, I apologise." "A lot of people misunderstood me, and I apologise for that."

These and other ways are ways that people say, "I'm sorry, but it's not my fault." They say, I know people are upset, and I know I have been caught, and I know I need to say something, but I have not actually done anything blameworthy.

It's very possible for people to do that with God. We can agree that we got caught, agree that God is offended, but still act and speak in ways that say, "Don't blame me! Don't charge me with guilt!" This is pseudo-repentance, and it is what we see in Jonah 2.

Jonah chapter 2 is halfway through the book and fittingly so, because Jonah is halfway to where he needs to be. In chapter one he refuses God's will, and in chapter 2 he repents. But he did not repent deeply and thoroughly to where God had his heart. It is only after the events of chapter three, and through the use of an object lesson in chapter 4, that Jonah sees how deeply God wants his repentance to go. Chapter two is the end of Jonah's absolute refusal, but it is only the beginning of his genuine renewal.

Here's why I think this chapter is in the book. In Jonah's prayer we learn how a man can repent while still having reservations. Jonah's prayer shows us how self-deceived we can be: we can feel trapped, defeated, and wave the white flag before God, while still keeping some concealed weapons. We can agree with God's sovereignty, and say we submit, but not do so at all. We can be like the child who was told by his parents to sit down, and she said defiantly, "I might be sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside!"

Now this chapter is here not because God doesn't know what is in our hearts, but because we don't always realise what is in our hearts. When we look at Jonah, we need to see ourselves: how we may think of ourselves as repenting and submitting, when we're really just adapting to God's sovereignty, and finding new ways to go our own way. Jonah is a prime example. He admits defeat, he asks for deliverance, and then he acts as if he's devoted. But we all know from chapter 4, that his heart is very far from God's.

I. Jonah Acknowledges Defeat

3 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. 4 Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.' 5 The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me; Weeds were wrapped around my head. 6 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.

After running from God, and thinking he could outwit God, Jonah finds himself completely defeated. He knows that he has come within a hair's breadth of death, and God has preserved him. In verse 2, he speaks of crying from the belly of Sheol, and in verse 7, he speaks of being brought up from the Pit. That's the Hebrew word *shahat*, and both Sheol and shahat refer to the grave, the place of the dead. Some people believe that Jonah actually died, because Jesus gives this incident as the sign which pictures his burial and Resurrection. But I don't think we need to believe that Jonah died. Jonah came close to death. Jonah, from the point of view of the sailors, had been buried in a watery grave, and three days later, he would be almost miraculously restored to the land of the living – that's the picture of resurrection.

But Jonah has finally raised the white flag to God. Look at how he describes his fate: verse 3 – 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. God, not the sailors put him into God's ocean, where God's waves covered him. Look at his description of what it meant to be enclosed within this sea-creature:

5 The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me; Weeds were wrapped around my head. 6 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.

We don't know exactly what Jonah's experience was, but we can imagine part of it. When you think of Jonah within the stomach of a whale or some other sea-creature, don't imagine Jonah in a little cave, with enough light to see around. He was not in a nice submarine with space to sit and some light to read. He didn't write this psalm while in the fish, believe me. No, imagine a pitch dark, slimy tube, where the smell of rotting and digesting fish mixes in with gastric juices. There would be air, but air so odorous that we can imagine the man fainting in and out of consciousness from its sheer pungency. As he feels around, he feels seaweed and bits of other sea-animals. We can imagine Jonah's stomach perhaps revolting at the stench and adding to the overall disgusting mess. We imagine Jonah in the pitch dark as he cannot quite gain his balance or his orientation, not only cannot he not see, but the animal is swimming and moving and diving. He feels sick at the smell, sea-sick at the moving, and the gastric juices are no doubt burning Jonah with a lot of pain.

You think about this experience: pitch-dark, burning, a feeling of bottomlessness, a stench – what else does that sound like? Jonah is receiving a taste of what Hell may be like. Perhaps he can now understand what those Ninevites are doomed to face for an eternity if he doesn't preach to them.

And now it must occur to Jonah, he is completely trapped. He is alive, but he has no way to get out, or get to the surface. He could die or drown inside this animal. He understands that he is living and alive by God's permission. He knows this fish is either his destruction or his deliverance, and it is entirely up to God. So he admits he is defeated.

I can think of many people who admitted some kind of defeat, but they weren't deeply and genuinely repentant. How many times did Pharaoh say to Moses, "Okay, okay. I am sorry. Ask the Lord to remove this plague."? But he went on to defy God. I think of Balaam the prophet, who

accepted God's stopping him from cursing Israel through the donkey. He admitted defeat. But he still went on to find a way to get his money and teach Balak how to destroy Israel. I think of Saul, who admitted he had been wrong, and he knew why God would no longer speak to him. But he still went on to consult a witch. Or even Nebuchadnezzar, who saw the three men rescued from the fire, and made a decree that everyone should speak well of Israel's God. He knew he had been defeated that day, but he was still holding out to be a proud king.

It is very possible to admit defeat before the power of God without genuinely surrendering to Him. I see people with terminal diseases, admitting that God can take them at any time. But they don't surrender to His lordship. You meet the man or woman who is succumbing to age, and knows it, and is not trying to fight God's curse of death any longer, but he still doesn't give the throne of his heart to Christ, she will not bow the knee to Him. You find the man who has been brought from heights of power and wealth down to bankruptcy and ruin, but he won't say like Job, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord. The man who is now on his fifth marriage, a trail of ruined relationships in his wake, but he won't yield to God's Word.

Search your heart. Have you ever admitted that God has won, and that you cannot arm-wrestle Him in the area of your health, or your finances, or your work, or your life circumstances, but you are still not going to give him what He is seeking. You say to God, "Okay, I'm outgunned. Checkmate." But under your breath you say, "But I'll live to fight another day."

Remember *Invictus*, that truly wicked, satanic poem which was celebrated in a recent movie? In that poem, William Henley essentially says, it does not matter if God sends me to hell itself, at least I have not surrendered to him.

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.*

Jonah admitted defeat. But he did something else, which on the surface can seem pious.

II. Jonah Asks For Deliverance

Jonah 2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. 2 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.

Once Jonah realises he cannot win against God, Jonah prays. This is the first time Jonah prays in the book, and the only other time we read of him praying, he is arguing heatedly with God in chapter 4. I don't believe this is the cry of a surrendered soul; this is the cry of a man who wants to get out of his predicament. Verse 2 – I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction.

Jonah calls for deliverance. There is no way out for him. He understands that this is God's doing, so he decides to look back to God.

4 Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.'

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

But you cannot help feeling that Jonah is praying because it is his absolute last resort. He has tried running away on a boat. He has tried hiding his disobedience and his identity. He has tried assisted suicide, and none of it has worked.

Now he finds himself in a black pit, incarcerated by the will of God. It is die a slow and painful death, or submit to God. So Jonah, as he has run out of options, submits to God. He asks that God would deliver him.

I read many commentators who think this is a beautiful psalm of repentance. I don't see it. I see Jonah admitting defeat, and asking to get out of the situation. This is the child who before a spanking starts saying, "Okay, I won't do it again." The heart hasn't really changed; there is only a distaste for God's chastening.

I can think of many prayers of Scripture that are nothing more than, God don't let any more bad things happen to me. You've got Your way, now get me out of this!" Simon the magician in Acts 8 is promised that his money will perish with him. Simon says to Peter, "*24 Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."*(Act 8:24)

8 Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and said, "Entreat the LORD that He remove the frogs from me and from my people; and I will let the people go, that they may sacrifice to the LORD. (Exo 8:8)

9 And men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory. (Rev 16:9)

Just because someone is praying, does not mean he or she is repenting. How many times has a drunk prayed, "God, if you get me out of this one, I'll never touch another drop." How many times has the adulterer said, "God, I'm sorry, but just don't let my wife find out." The chronic gossip says, "Sorry, Lord, just don't my friend find out that I was the one who revealed her secret." One of the signs of false repentance is that all you are concerned with is escaping the consequences of your sin. Now it is natural to want to lessen the pain of the consequences, but if that's all you're worried about, and you don't see the gravity and weightiness of having refused to love what God loves, then you haven't really repented yet.

How many people think they are Christians because they heard a message about Hell, and said to themselves, "I need to get out of that. If Jesus is offering me a free gift out of there, I'll take it." No

sense of why God wants to save you from sin, not just its consequences, but its offensiveness to Him! Not just from the penalty of sin, but from its power in your life and its very presence. The man who hates Hell but still loves the sin that will take him there has not understood what it means to truly turn to God.

How many Christians feel they have repented because they admit their sin is ruining their lives, and they pray prayers like, “God, get me out of this. God take this away from me. God don't let others know.” They are praying because God is their last resort, not because He is their first love.

Genuine repentance understands that sin has a consequence. When Nathan told David of the consequences of his sin, he accepted it. He understood that the worst part of his sin was not its consequence, but its sinfulness. That's why he prays in Psalm 51 *4 Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight-- That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge. (Psa 51:4)*

There's nothing like that from Jonah here. I don't see a single reference to his having done wrong. I've occasionally watched one of those shows where Judge Judy or Judge Mathis. What I find amazing as I watch those is to see people who acknowledge they have done something wrong, but they do not acknowledge the wrongness of doing wrong! “Yes, I did that, but so what! He made me! She did worse! I was provoked! You don't understand!”

When we are getting right with God, one of the signs is that we begin to think about what we did the way God thinks about it. We begin to see not why we were so justified in doing it, but why it was so outrageous to do that in God's world under God's eye. The start of true repentance is when we are not simply asking God for deliverance, but we are beginning to hate what God hates – our sin, and love what He loves – His purity.

Do you remember those two thieves on the cross? They both start out mocking. And what do they call out for? Deliverance! “If you be the Christ, save yourself and us!” But then then one has a change in heart. And his change looks like this: he says to the other, “Don't you have any sense of what pleases and displeases God? You are mocking this innocent man, while we are guilty, and getting what we deserve.” The man has come to fully own the sinfulness of his own sin. And then, his request to Jesus is not so much for immediate deliverance from the consequences of sin, but to be included in Christ's consideration when He reigns, “Lord, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”

Jonah goes one step further.

III. Jonah Acts As If Devoted

8 "Those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy. 9 But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD."

Jonah prays, and God, in His mercy chooses to deliver Jonah, for His own purposes. Jonah sees God as having answered his prayer.

*2 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.***

6 Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God.

But now Jonah feels that because he has acknowledged defeat, and because he has asked for

deliverance, that somehow he is again a devoted servant of the Lord. I can't help detecting a note of pride in verses 8 and 9.

8 "Those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy. 9 But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD."

Those people who are idolaters, like the Ninevites, forsake the only mercy they will find – the true God. End of verse 9 – salvation is of the Lord. Only Yahweh brings true mercy, deliverance, salvation, in this life and the next. Yes, everything Jonah says is true. Just like Job's three friends said a lot of things that were true, but they came from hearts fundamentally wrong.

Jonah says in verse 9, "But I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving, I will pay what I have vowed." In contrast to those pagans, I am pointed towards Your Temple, and I will sacrifice and keep my commitments to You." Not, I have sinned. Those pagans have sinned, but I hold to the true God.

Jonah quotes portions of the psalms several times in this chapter. He is quoting the Bible, and praying. He really seems devoted. But we know there were many people who made a show of piety but had no real desire to please God.

When Samuel tells Saul that the kingdom is to be pulled away from him, what is Saul concerned about? His public appearance – he wants Samuel to play the part of a priest who still supports King Saul. Looks devotional, but isn't. When the Pharisee went up the Temple to pray, he was there to supposedly deal with his sins, but all he did was make a boast of his devotion.

Our hearts are so deceptive that we can make ourselves feel right with God because we have prayed and read Scripture, and made some motions. I remember as a teenager the kind of Protestant penance that would take place every week at the youth group. There would be a message about living for God, and then a secret altar call (raise your hand while no one is looking), and all these hands would go up, from teenagers who were still committed to clubbing and drunkenness, and promiscuity. As if, because you have just heard a message from the Bible, and are now praying, that this means repentance. That's Protestant Penance – I don't have a confessional booth, I hear a message, and say, "I'm convicted", but then I happily go my way, like the Mafia bosses who would confess to their priests while living in organised crime.

Here's what is missing from Jonah, and it is the difference between true repentance and false: *brokenness*. What is brokenness?

The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. (Psa 34:18)

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart-- These, O God, You will not despise. (Psa 51:17)

9 Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. (Jam 4:8-10)

Brokenness is when you are coming to feel grieved for the same reasons God is grieved. Not, "I'm sorry I got caught." Not "I'm sorry I broke Your rules." I'm sorry that I did this to You. I'm sorry I grieved your heart. It pains me to think that I have offended You."

Put simply, brokenheartedness is coming to love what God loves, and hate what He hates. We sing the hymn by William Cowper, "I hate the sins that made Thee mourn And drove Thee from my breast." The old Puritans used to pray for 'the gift of tears.'"

Alan Redpath was a British “God will never plant the seed of his life upon the soil of a hard, unbroken spirit. He will only plant that seed where the conviction of His Spirit has brought brokenness, where the soil has been watered with the tears of repentance as well as the tears of joy. (1907-1989)

You can't fake brokenness. You can't manufacture it. But you can pray that God would give you His heart, and enable you to love what He loves and hate what He hates.