

# A HOLE IN THE PRAYER

**SERIES: GOD OF A SECOND CHANCE**



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Jonah 1:17-2:10  
2<sup>nd</sup> Message  
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Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, imprisoned for anti-Stalinist behavior in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, penned these famous words in *The Gulag Archipelago*: “Bless you, prison, for having been in my life.” He came to view his prison cell not as a means of confinement but as an instrument of deliverance. He concluded that imprisonment changed him for the better.

God delivers us in surprising, even shocking, ways in order to change us for the better. God delivered Jonah, a prophet of Israel, in perhaps the most shocking way ever. Does it change him for the better? When God delivers us, will it change us for the better?

Extraordinary words have sometimes emerged from those in confinement, Solzhenitsyn among them. We have the prison epistles of the apostle Paul. We have “Spiritual Canticle,” the best-known poem of St. John of the Cross, composed while he was imprisoned. We have Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*. We have Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” In confinement, albeit confinement of a different sort, Jonah composes a beautiful prayer.

## Fact or fiction?

Jonah 1:17:

**And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.**

So, did a fish really swallow Jonah, and did he really spend three days in its belly? The primary question to ask is whether the author intended his original readers to interpret his words historically or figuratively. Some take it that the book of Jonah is something like a folktale or a work of satire, which instructs without being historical. Some of those who read Jonah in this way are inclined to do so simply because the

story it tells is incredible apart from a belief in the supernatural, a belief to which they themselves do not subscribe. In short, because the tale of the survival of a man for three days in the belly of a fish strikes people as either fanciful or impossible, or both, many scholars and readers rule out the possibility that the events so described actually happened.

True, some biblical authors intend for their works, or parts of their works, to be taken figuratively. I take it, however, that the author of Jonah intended his work to be understood as historical. He believes in a God who can and does break into the world that he created in what we would call “supernatural” ways. Actually, if God created the heavens and the earth and all that they contain, is there anything we see or hear or taste or touch or smell that isn’t supernatural? The earth takes another spin because God wills it. A sparrow falls to the earth because God wills it. He could stop the earth from spinning or pull the plug on gravity at any time. Or more to the point, God—if he willed it—could appoint a great fish to swallow a man, and that man could survive inside that fish for three days. If we have no problem believing that God hurled a great wind in Jonah 1, we should have no problem believing that he appointed a great fish at the end of Jonah 1. Or, if we believe that God raised a man from the dead after three days, and if we believe that God will raise every man and woman from the dead at the end of the age, we should have no problem believing that God can keep a man alive inside a fish for three days. From my reading, the author of Jonah believes that Jonah spent three days in the belly of a great fish, and he wants us to believe it too.

Attempts have been made by well-meaning believers in the inspiration of the Scriptures to demonstrate, from a naturalistic perspective, how Jonah could have survived such an ordeal, as if a “supernatural” interpretation might discredit the validity of the book. They don’t seem nearly as eager, however, to come up with “naturalistic” explanations for the great wind in Jonah 1. It matters little whether Jonah survived inside a fish because it’s possible for a man, apart from a “supernatural” explanation, to do so or whether Jonah

survived because of a *miracle*. Jonah himself describes the Lord as the *God of heaven* [literally, ‘heavens’], *who made the sea and the dry land* (Jonah 1:9). However he did it, God whipped up a wind, stirred up the sea, and appointed a fish to swallow Jonah and carry him inside its belly for three days.

## Big fish

Now, back to the story. God hurled a great wind at the beginning of Jonah 1 to keep Jonah from going to Tarshish; he appoints a great fish at the end of Jonah 1 to . . . well, let’s see where the fish takes him. The appearance of a great fish, from the perspective of the Israelites, does not qualify as good news. The sea was the abode of evil, and great and evil beasts resided there, a belief that influenced both Daniel and John, who received visions of great and evil beasts rising from the sea (Daniel 7:1–8, Revelation 13:1–6). Neither would it be good news that the fish swallowed Jonah. When a fish swallows something, it does so to digest it. Moreover, when the word translated *swallow up* in Jonah 1:17 is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures of people being *swallowed up*, it never bodes well for their long-term prospects. After the earth *swallowed up* the Egyptians and after the earth *swallowed up* Korah and his followers, no one survived (Exodus 15:12, Numbers 16:18–34).

But—surprise!—Jonah survives inside the fish for some time.<sup>1</sup> The great fish doesn’t devour him; instead, it keeps him from drowning. Why three days and three nights? In ancient mythology, it required three days to journey to the underworld. Jonah later depicts himself as visiting Sheol, the Israelite version of the underworld. Moreover, in the biblical story of redemption, Jonah’s chapter prepares us for a later chapter, when the Son of Man spends *three days and three nights in the heart of the earth* (Matthew 12:40).

God surprises us—even shocks us—by the way he delivers us. Isn’t that the way we need it to be? If we could figure out what he’s going to do and how he’s going to do it, we might think we’re in control of our own deliverance, and there would be little need for faith. When it looks as if evil is going to win, the circumstances that would devour you instead may keep you from drowning, so to speak.

Solzhenitsyn, contrary to what he may have thought, was not devoured by his prison cell, though

evil men had placed him there. Instead, he was kept from drowning in his worldview. Imprisonment, instead of destroying him, gave him a new and necessary—even biblical—perspective.

Jonah, from the belly of the fish, now does something he hasn’t done since we became aware of him: he prays. What does he pray? What do we pray?

## From the belly of the fish

Jonah 2:1–9:

**Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup> saying, “I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. <sup>3</sup>For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. <sup>4</sup>Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ <sup>5</sup>The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head <sup>6</sup>at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. <sup>7</sup>When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. <sup>8</sup>Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. <sup>9</sup>But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”**

Jonah had a death wish. He preferred death to fulfilling his commission to preach in Nineveh. He

more or less asked the sailors to throw him overboard. But when they complied, Jonah didn't die. Shockingly, he didn't drown. Shockingly, the fish swallowed him but didn't kill him. Shockingly, he's still alive. Jonah was heading off on the high seas for Tarshish, a distant land known for its riches, for a limitless adventure that had everything to do with him and nothing to do with God. Now, inside the fish, all exits have been closed off. He's alive, but he has nowhere to go. The limitless adventure has become a claustrophobia-inducing underwater prison.

When you're alive, though you had wished you were dead, when you find yourself in a tight place with no exits, when your destiny is beyond your influence, you just might pray. Plus, when you're stuck in a tight place for a while, you have some time and, perhaps, the inclination to think about how you ended up there. From the belly of the fish, Jonah prays.

Jonah was in distress, in *the belly of Sheol* (in the sea, not the fish). We know little about what the Israelites believed about Sheol, especially because it was spoken of mostly in poetry, "a medium in which imagination normally trumps realism."<sup>22</sup> It was not thought to be a place that the living visited, only the dead. Jonah wasn't dead, of course, when he called out, but the language of poetry allows him to speak as if he were dead, for he considered himself a dead man when the sailors threw him into the sea.

## Recalling recent events

Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish recalls recent events, which included a prayer prior to his prayer from inside the fish. When the storm raged in Jonah 1, threatening the lives of everyone on the ship, the captain implored Jonah to "call out" to his God, but Jonah is not reported as doing so. In his psalm, however, Jonah recalls that he *called out* to the Lord *after* the sailors threw him overboard. Why pray not in the ship but in the sea? Jonah says he *remembered the Lord*. Certainly, he hadn't forgotten the Lord entirely, for he told the sailors that he feared the Lord and who the Lord is (Jonah 1:9). But he had wanted nothing to do with the Lord or the word of the Lord, which commanded him to do something he felt strongly against. In a poetic sense, he forgot the Lord: he dismissed him. When, underneath the sea, his life was *fainting away in the belly of Sheol*, when he finally came face to face with death, he called out to the Lord, apparently for deliverance. Although he had wished

himself dead, he found himself, in the end, not where he wanted to be, drowning in the sea.

Although the sailors hurled Jonah into the sea, Jonah understands that the Lord was ultimately responsible for what the sailors did, that they were acting, albeit unknowingly, at the behest of the Lord: *For you cast [literally, 'hurled'] me into the deep / into the heart of the seas*. First the Lord hurled the great wind; then he hurled Jonah. The Lord sinks enemies in the deep (Exodus 15:5, Nehemiah 9:11). Had Jonah, in opposition to the Lord's purposes, become his enemy? It appears so in verse three, inasmuch as all of the Lord's waves and billows had passed over him, and inasmuch as he understands that he had been *driven away* literally from *before the Lord*. Jonah, however, had fled from *before the Lord* (Jonah 1:3). Did Jonah run away from the Lord, or did the Lord drive him away? Or did the Lord drive him away because Jonah ran away from him?

Jonah's plight in the sea could not have been more dire. The *flood*, a poetic expression for the current of the sea, *surrounded* him. The deep also *surrounded* him. The Lord's waves and billows passed *over* him. The waters, not just part of the waters, also closed in *over* him. Weeds, or kelp, were wrapped *about* him at the root of the mountains, which extended to the bottom of the sea. Finally, the bars of the land of Sheol closed *upon* him, and closed upon him forever. He was trapped underwater with no way to get to the surface, which would be his only hope. Moreover, he understood himself to have been driven *away* from the Lord, the only one who could help him in his helpless plight. Jonah's flight, beginning in Jonah 1:3, is depicted as a descent—down to Joppa, down into the inner part of the ship, down into the sea, down into Sheol, the underworld.

## Prayer breaks through

Finally, when he could descend no further, when he hit bottom, and at the eleventh hour—even past the eleventh hour (the gates of Sheol had closed upon him forever)—the Lord rescued him. Jonah's prayer came to the Lord in his holy temple, his earthly dwelling place in Jerusalem. Solomon, when the temple was dedicated, prayed that the Lord would listen from heaven and forgive the sins of his people when they prayed toward the temple (2 Chronicles 6:21, 1 Kings 8:29). Prayer broke through the deep and the seas the waves and the billows and the waters and the weeds

and the bars and the belly of Sheol. The Lord heard Jonah's voice and answered his prayer. He brought his life up from the pit, up from Sheol, up from the grave.

How so? He appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah—probably not the kind of deliverance Jonah had in mind! In fact, the fish no doubt at first seemed not an instrument of deliverance but a means of death. Jonah at some point became convinced, probably after he had been in the fish a while, that he would again look upon the Lord's holy temple and worship there. Whether or not the Lord drove Jonah away from his presence, it became clear, as events unfolded, that the Lord wanted him back. He gave his petulant prophet a second chance.

Indeed, salvation belongs to the Lord, not to the useless gods that the sailors called out to, and not to the great fish, which was simply the Lord's instrument of salvation.

## Calling out to the Lord

When you're in crisis, you might do something you hadn't thought of earlier. You might pray. Nothing improves one's prayer life like a crisis. James Taylor sings:

*Been walking my mind to an easy time,  
My back turned toward the sun  
Lord knows when the cold wind blows  
It'll turn your head around.<sup>3</sup>*

Often, a crisis motivates you to pray for deliverance from the crisis. When you're sinking down, when you feel as if your life is *fainting away in the belly of Sheol*, when you're trapped, when you hit bottom, you might do what Jonah did: you might call out to the Lord. Rest assured, the Lord hears your prayer, just as surely as he heard Jonah's prayer. However far you've run, and wherever you are, your prayer breaks through the deep and the seas and the waves and the billows and the weeds and the bars and the belly of Sheol and comes to the Lord. If the Lord heard the desperate prayer of Jonah, who sinned in defiance of the Lord and put as much distance as possible between himself and the Lord, surely he hears our prayers also.

## Giving thanks

Has the Lord answered your prayers in surprising ways, by sending something like a great fish, which looked as if it would devour you but instead ended up saving you in some way? Has the Lord in some way brought your life up from the pit?

What do you do in the belly of the fish, so to speak, when the limitless adventure you had hoped for turns into a prison, when you're in a tight space with no exits, when you recognize that your destiny is beyond your influence? Could it be that the fish God sent you, the circumstances that were going to devour you, has turned out to be an instrument of deliverance? When you're stuck in a tight place for a while, you have some time and, perhaps, the inclination to think about how you ended up there. After all you've been through, a simple yet profound insight may occur to you: you're alive. You're still alive. What does that mean? Here's another simple yet profound insight: it means the Lord wants you. It means he wants you back, just as he wanted Jonah back. It means the Lord still has work for you to do.

How then do you pray? You might do what Jonah did: you might give thanks. Listen to Solzhenitsyn's reflections:

*In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts . . . That is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: "Bless you, prison!" . . . I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: "Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!"<sup>4</sup>*

Solzhenitsyn's prison cell delivered him from his worldview. He had believed that he was good and that his enemies were evil, but he came to see himself as



also beholden to evil. He even said, comparing himself to his enemies, “So, were we any better?”<sup>5</sup> Solzhenitsyn gave thanks for imprisonment, for it showed him that “the line separating good and evil” passes “right through every human heart,” including his own.

## What’s missing?

Jonah’s prayer is beautiful, but something is missing from it. The poem qualifies as a Thanksgiving Psalm. He’s thankful to the Lord for delivering him. Delivering him from what? From the sea.

The Lord hurled him into the sea, but why did the Lord do so? Jonah doesn’t say. Jonah says he was in distress, but how did he end up in distress? Jonah doesn’t say. Jonah says the Lord drove him away, but why did the Lord do so? Jonah doesn’t say. Jonah says he called out when he was in distress, in the sea, but wasn’t he, not to mention a shipload of sailors, in distress *on* the sea, when the storm was raging? Why didn’t he call out to the Lord back then, when the captain of the ship urged him to do so? Jonah doesn’t say. Jonah declares that the Lord has heard his voice, but why doesn’t he thank the Lord for using his voice to speak to him in the first place, when he commissioned him to go to Nineveh? Jonah doesn’t say. In the fish, Jonah made a vow to offer sacrifices to the Lord, but why didn’t he make such a vow when he was on the ship, in the manner of the pagan sailors? Jonah doesn’t say.

In Jonah 1, the pagan sailors became aware of their sin (Jonah 1:14). In Jonah 3, the pagan Ninevites become aware of their sin, they confess their sin, and they repent of their sin. In Jonah 2, the prophet of Israel acknowledges no awareness of sin, confesses no sin, and repents of no sin, even though he—unlike any other prophet of Israel—refused his commission and fled from the presence of the Lord.

What’s missing from Jonah’s prayer? Contrition. Brokenness. Confession. There’s no contrition, not even a hint of it. Jonah’s prayer is a Thanksgiving Psalm, which does not necessarily require contrition. In Jonah’s case, however, what *should* he be thankful for? He should be thankful not only that the Lord rescued him from his distress but more specifically that the Lord rescued him from *self-created* distress. He was in distress because he sinned against the Lord, not in *ignorance* of the word of the Lord but in *defiance* of the word of the Lord. Jonah, in composing

his psalm, echoes Psalm 130, which speaks of *iniquities* and *forgiveness*, words missing from Jonah’s composition. Jonah is all thanks, no contrition.

Jonah vows to offer sacrifices to God? Jonah, who quite clearly knows the Psalms well, would do well to remember Psalm 51, in which David confesses his *transgressions*, his *iniquity*, his *sins*, and his *bloodguiltiness*. David prays to the Lord:

**For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.** (Psalm 51:16–17)

There’s a hole in Jonah’s prayer. He has sinned against the Lord, the Lord has rescued him from his sin, and Jonah quite properly gives thanks to the Lord—but quite improperly fails to give thanks to the Lord for rescuing him from his sin. Salvation belongs to the Lord? The Lord’s greatest salvation is not salvation from the sea but salvation from sin, yet Jonah neglects to mention this aspect of salvation, the aspect that should be most meaningful to him. His prayer, despite its artistry, rings hollow. His prayer is a good prayer for a different occasion. This occasion, however, begs for contrition.

## Filling the hole

Is there a hole in our prayers? Is contrition missing from our prayers? Are we all thanks and no contrition? Solzhenitsyn’s words of thanks in *The Gulag Archipelago* are shot through with contrition. Whatever you find to be thankful for, by all means, give thanks, and give thanks often, for God gives good gifts. Never forget, however, that God’s greatest gift is salvation from sin—really, in the most surprising of ways. Who would have ever thought a man would be saved by a fish? Who would have ever thought we’d be saved by the execution of a man? It is easy to forget that salvation from sin is God’s greatest gift because we have increasingly become a society that favors entitlement over contrition. If there’s a heaven, people in our part of the world think that they deserve it. On the other hand, if there’s a hell, no one, save perhaps a few heinous offenders, is thought to deserve it anymore.

How do we recapture a sense of contrition?

First, take a look at yourself, as best you can, as you really are. “The unexamined life is not worth living” (Socrates). Our capacity for self-deception knows no limits. Particularly, consider your effect on others, how you’ve withdrawn from them on the one hand or dominated them on the other. Jonah withdrew, endangering the sailors, but he seemed oblivious to the effect of his sin on them. The line separating good and evil passes right through all human hearts, including our own.

C.S. Lewis would have been considered a gentleman and a scholar, literally, certainly not beholden to evil, but he writes about when he took a look at himself:

*For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me; a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was legion.*<sup>6</sup>

Second, take a look at God, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, with the train of his robe filling the temple, and hear the seraph call out, *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; / the whole earth is full of his glory* (Isaiah 6:1-3). Nevertheless, though we have defied him and run from him, he does not give up on us but instead, in his love, pursues us even as we damage others who are made in his image. In view of our sins, we should all be in worse shape than we are, for all of us, like Jonah, have sinned not simply in ignorance of the Lord but also in defiance of the Lord. If God has delivered you from some sort of self-created distress, as Jonah was, then you have a special opportunity—an opportunity that Jonah missed, by the way—to give thanks to God from a posture of contrition.

Simon Tugwell writes of God,

*He has followed us into our own darkness; there where we thought finally to escape him, we run straight into his arms.*<sup>7</sup>

Have you run from God, only to run straight into his arms?

Save Jonah’s prayer for another occasion. Instead, pray Psalm 51. Or fill the hole in your prayers with something like this:

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul  
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!  
What wondrous love is this  
That caused the Lord of bliss  
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul  
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul*

*When I was sinking down,  
Sinking down, sinking down;  
When I was sinking down, sinking down  
When I was sinking down,  
Beneath God’s righteous frown,  
Christ laid aside his crown  
For my soul, for my soul!  
Christ laid aside his crown  
For my soul!*<sup>8</sup>

Finally, when all else fails, beg. If you dare, ask God to give you a broken and contrite heart.

Back to Jonah. He prays from the belly of the fish. Now what?

## Full circle

Jonah 2:10:

**And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.**

When Jonah heard the word the Lord, instructing him to go to Nineveh, he was on dry land. The sailors, when the storm threatened their lives, desperately tried to get Jonah back to dry land, but they failed. Now the Lord, having appointed the fish to swallow Jonah, speaks to it with orders not to carry Jonah to his doom, as we might have expected, but to do what the sailors couldn’t do: take him back to dry land. However, that the fish “vomited” Jonah, instead of giving him a gentle landing, may have something to do with the hole in his prayer. Jonah has traveled much—my goodness, has he traveled much!—but he’s back to where he started from.

This kind of journey—flight, crisis, deliverance, return—can change a person so that he or she is ready to do what God wants. Or not. Is Jonah ready? Or is the crisis wasted on him? Are you ready, or is your crisis wasted on you? Jonah’s story continues. Your story continues. Don’t waste your crisis. Look to

yourself, for the line separating good and evil passes through your heart. Look to God, who pursues you even as you run from him and damage others.

Salvation belongs to the Lord!

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### (Endnotes)

- <sup>1</sup> The conjunction translated “And” at the beginning of verse 1 could equally be translated “But,” heightening the contrast between what would be expected (death) and what actually happened (life).
- <sup>2</sup> Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: The Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press), 171.
- <sup>3</sup> James Taylor, “Fire and Rain” (Warner Bros., 1970).
- <sup>4</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956*, Vol. 2, 615–617.
- <sup>5</sup> Solzhenitsyn.
- <sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1955), 228.
- <sup>7</sup> Simon Tugwell, *Prayer*, quoted by Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983), 161.
- <sup>8</sup> Anonymous hymn “What Wondrous Love is This,” first published in 1811.