

Salvation Belongs to the Lord

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 November 2025

Preacher: Ash Cunningham

[0 : 00] Thanks very much for reading. Do please keep that passage in front of you. My name's Ash. I'm the minister in training here at Christchurch. Welcome back to our series on Jonah. This is the bit that everyone's heard of, or at least most people have heard of, I think, the bit with the big fish.

Jonah's written a bit like a BBC drama, one of the old school ones. It doesn't go on forever, it's just a four-parter with an absolutely mad cliffhanger at the end of every week. Last time, Jonah gets thrown into the sea, swallowed by a big fish. Roll credits.

This week, Jonah's going to get vomited onto the beach. Roll credits again. And these two episodes, we're going to see as we look through the second one, we see the same themes coming out as before.

We see people being rescued at sea. The sailors in chapter one and Jonah here. Both pray to God for salvation. He answers them. And then in chapter one, the sailors sacrifice to God.

And in chapter two, Jonah says that he will. Last time, we asked why a faithful prophet would deliberately run from God's clear command.

[1 : 18] We saw that Jonah wasn't running away from God out of ignorance or of fear, but actually out of anger. He knew God's character and didn't want his enemies in Nineveh to receive the grace and the mercy that he believed should just belong exclusively to Israel.

But we saw that even Jonah's rebellion couldn't thwart God's purposes. The pagan sailors ended up converted while Jonah descended into the depths. The central warning emerged from our passage today that rings across the whole book.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. A promise and also a warning. A warning that we cannot presume upon God's grace simply because we're churchgoers or simply because we're one of God's people. Our assurance does not come from who we are in any kind of worldly identity. But from being in Christ and walking in his way. So that's what we learned.

But we left Jonah in the sea. And a big fish came along and swallowed him whole. Now, if you want to talk about how this is possible, then I'd be happy to chat to you afterwards.

[2 : 41] But the long and the short of it, in my opinion, is that it's not. It's not possible. Any more than turning storms on and off like you've got a switch on the wall is possible.

Or Jesus rising from the dead. And rather not get bogged down in whether or not this fish swallowing Jonah is possible. Because once you believe in a God of miracles, that sort of riddle becomes a lot less puzzling.

But again, if it's a curiosity or a hurdle for you, then we can talk about it. But once we've dismissed that kind of enticing realm of conversation, or is it possible to live in a fish for a while?

Well, we can then refocus our eyes and start to see some of the real riddles in this passage. Why is this poem written in the past tense?

If Jonah is in the fish, when it says the deep surrounded me. Well, no, it's still surrounding you, Jonah. So it seems to be written after the fact.

[3 : 54] Why is Jonah so pleased with himself in this? And how does the Jonah we see here in chapter 2, delighted with his deliverance, become the Jonah we see in chapter 4, furious with God once again for wanting to save sinners?

But the question I want to put in your minds right now, before we look at the answer in some depth, is this. Does Jonah recognize his sin?

Does Jonah recognize his sin? Because the real puzzle of chapter 2 is not whether it's a fish or if it's a whale, or how much oxygen could be in a fish's belly.

The real puzzle is Jonah. How can a man who sings a song of praise after being rescued from the depths, be so furiously angry with God just a few days later?

Because when we get to chapter 4, after Nineveh is saved, sorry for the spoilers, Jonah's going to tell God that he's angry enough with God to die. Angry enough with God to die because he saved these people.

[5 : 07] And he's going to tell God that this is exactly how he felt in chapter 1, before what we've just read. So here's our puzzle. How can children's unchanged at the beginning and end of this book, with this poem sat in the middle?

How can someone this thankful for his own salvation be so angry about the salvation of others? Now why is this chapter here then?

It's a bit of an anomaly if you're just telling the story, isn't it? Imagine if you told the story in summary, you wouldn't linger for a long time about what was going on in Jonah's mental state while he was inside the fish.

The big kind of events are that he's swallowed, vomited up, and the entire city is saved. What's it saying? Why do we have it? Well, it's a song of praise, isn't it?

About a last-minute rescue. And it reveals what Jonah was thinking at the time. You see, up to this point in the story, Jonah hasn't prayed at all.

[6 : 15] In fact, he's the only character who hasn't prayed, bar the fish. He's been stubbornly silent towards God. In chapter 1, it's clear to everyone that God's against Jonah.

And yet there's no mention of him praying. He is absolutely determined to die at sea. Because he's angry enough to die.

Because he knows that he's being sent to save Nineveh. But as the waters close over his head, and death approaches, life becomes too precious to lose.

And finally, he prays. And the structure of this is very simple. It's something we'll have seen in a number of psalms, similar to the psalm that we sang. In fact, he introduces it.

He says, I called to the Lord, and he answered me. Simple summary. Then there's a rescue narrative within. You threw me in, and you pulled me out. Both reference the temple.

[7 : 17] Both emphasize that even in the depths, prayers can reach God. And then finally, a vow of obedience and a great declaration. Salvation belongs to the Lord.

And that concluding line is theologically perfect. Salvation does indeed belong to the Lord.

But, as we examine this prayer carefully, I think we're going to see three significant errors in Jonah's thinking.

Three ways that his perspective is dangerously distorted, despite his orthodox words. And as we look at each one, we're going to see how Jesus is the answer to Jonah's failure.

In each case, Jesus is everything that Jonah should have been but wasn't. You should see them on the screen. And then we've got that Jonah thinks he's the center. That Jonah doesn't acknowledge his sin.

[8 : 16] And Jonah thinks he's superior. So firstly, Jonah thinks he's the center, even though he isn't. In this passage in front of you, Jonah refers to the Lord a few times, verses 2, 3, 6, and 9.

God certainly receives praise, doesn't he? But notice how this prayer revolves around Jonah. Jonah's distress, Jonah's danger, Jonah's words, and Jonah's positive activity.

Just listen to how many times he appears in his own prayer. I'll just read the pronouns from it. My, I, me, I, my, me, me, me, me, I, I, I, me, my, I, me, my, my, my, my, my, my, my.

I didn't even practice that. I trusted myself to do that. God is mentioned. Yes. But Jonah dominates the landscape of this prayer.

You might say, well, of course, it's about what happened to him. Fair enough. But is this how you'd respond after such a deliverance, after such salvation? Finding yourself alive rather than drowned in God's righteous judgments?

[9 : 28] Would you not rather be overwhelmed with gratitude? If you've ever been in danger, real danger, especially danger that you've brought on yourself, well, your contribution tends to fade from view.

You're just grateful. But verse 7 reveals Jonah's focus. I remember you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you.

In fact, all the active verbs in this are about what Jonah did. I called, I said, I remembered, I will sacrifice. So God's acknowledged Jonah's words about God are orthodox and true.

This is all what we'd expect from a prophet of God to his people. But his fundamental orientation is off. Even as he reflects back on this experience, his thoughts revolve around himself. And what he did in order for God to then hear him and save him. God's there, but Jonah fills the frame. Now, given the circumstances, given how he ended up in that water, doesn't this strike you as a little odd?

[10 : 45] He was sent to preach to pagans, got on a boat going the opposite way, put everyone in danger. He's the only one who doesn't pray to the Lord.

And then he gives up. It is strange, isn't it, that Jonah centralizes himself in this. And we'll return to Jonah in a second, but very quickly, here's a stunning contrast for you.

Jesus compares himself to Jonah more and more clearly than to anyone else. So this is a good exercise to do. Jesus actually is the center.

All things were created through him and by him and for him. He's before all things and in him all things hold together.

So Jesus is literally the center of the universe. Made by him, through him, for him. If anyone has the right to make it all about him, all about himself, then it's Jesus.

[11 : 52] And yet, if you compare Jesus to Jonah, how do they live? Jesus says, I've come down from heaven not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me. When pressed about his glory, he insists I'm not seeking glory for myself.

This is who Jesus is, the one who actually is central. He oriented himself and his life towards the Father's will and towards serving and saving others. Towards saving those who are not to be saved.

Not coming to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom. Think for a second about the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was the night he died. Facing the horrors of the cross, what does Jesus pray?

Not my will, but yours be done. Even in his darkest moment, his Jonah 2 moment, as the depths surround him.

It's not about him, it's about the Father's purposes and our salvation. Jonah's prayer here is full of I am me and my. Jesus' whole life was characterized by the Father and others at your will.

[13 : 05] Same experience of deliverance from death. Jonah from the fish, Jesus from the tomb. Radically different orientation. Jonah makes it all about him.

Jesus pushes away all concern for himself. It's all about the salvation that he's bringing. Now what we'll see is that this is fundamentally the difference between relying on land religion and relying on the gospel.

Because Jonah, remember, he centralizes who he is. He centralizes his relationship with God based on his ethnicity, on the fact that he is an Israelite.

That's what we saw last time. And it doesn't seem all that different in this prayer. Look at what I did. I remembered. I prayed. I will sacrifice. Well, no, the gospel says look what Christ has done.

He came down. He served. He gave his life for many. He centralized himself and his actions, which we'll see don't appear to be particularly penitent actions.

[14 : 13] That Jesus is the real center of things and only things of God and of those whom he's been sent to save.

We'll return to that in a second, but we'll move to our second point there. Jonah doesn't acknowledge his sin, even though he's in open rebellion.

There are a lot of thanksgiving psalms in scripture. Usually, the danger isn't specified that clearly. We don't know if the pit is literal or metaphorical. But in this psalm, it's different. It's embedded in a narrative in the book of Jonah. Jonah's predicament is not just some random misfortune, is it?

The reason for his danger has been spelled out in chapter one. He is a prophet who's been used mightily for God.

[15 : 12] But he'd rather die than be used by God in Nineveh. His actions towards God are those of an enemy, which again makes this prayer extraordinary.

Third, acknowledges God's hostility. You hurled me in. At no point does it acknowledge Jonah's role in creating the situation. There's no mention at all of his disobedience in this.

He refers to praying for salvation, but never to praying for forgiveness. There's no other passage in the Bible where someone's been rescued from their sin that they don't also acknowledge their sin, none that I could find.

The prayer essentially says, I was in danger. I prayed. God rescued me. But the actual situation is, I was evil.

I ran from God. I chose death over obedience. And yet amazingly, when I finally cried out, God rescued me anyway.

[16:23] There's not a hint of that second reading in Jonah's words. He admits danger, but not disobedience, as one person writes. No confession, no repentance, no acknowledgement that he brought this on himself.

So he doesn't seem to think that he's been rescued from sin, so much as from circumstances. And as it happens, back home in Israel, God's people are currently doing the same thing.

We looked last time at some of the parallels with Hosea and Amos, who were Jonah's contemporaries. They were preaching in Israel at the time. And at this moment, Hosea is confronting Israel with their sin.

They feel the consequences of God's anger. And what do they say? Well, in Hosea chapter 6, they say, God's torn us to pieces, not God's punished our sin. And then they say, but he'll restore us in two or three days.

And sometimes, like Jonah 2, this bit of Hosea is read positively. It's got some lovely poetry. They say, As surely as the sun rises, God will appear. He will come like the winter rain.

[17:39] But God's immediate reaction in Hosea is anger. He chastises them for this casual return. He says that they sacrifice rather than actually forsake sin.

He says they continue in their sin. And that's exactly what Jonah, or little Israel, as I've called him, does as well in the same time period that Hosea is dealing with this attitude in Israel.

When we come to chapter 4, we'll see that he's entirely unrepentant of the sin in chapter 1, and that he hasn't turned from that attitude throughout the story.

He simply felt God's anger and thought, well, I should sacrifice to him. That ought to calm him down. Jonah doesn't acknowledge his sin, even though he's openly rebelled against God.

Let's contrast that again with Jesus. Take a look at him again. He's the only person who's ever lived who genuinely wasn't a sinner.

[18:46] The writer to Hebrews and Peter, but both insist upon the state that he committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth. If anyone could legitimately say, I'm not the problem here, it's Jesus.

So what does Jesus do with his sinlessness? Does he stand apart, congratulating himself, saying, I'm not like them?

Does he keep his distance from the unclean and the morally compromised? He draws very close to them. The Pharisees, in fact, are scandalized quiet.

This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. They meant it as an accusation. Jesus treats it as a mission statement. And when they confront him about it, he says, well, it's not the healthy, you need a doctor, but the sick.

I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Jesus, the only truly righteous one, doesn't stand apart from sinners, doesn't stand above them, doesn't hold himself over such people, but rather he welcomes them.

[19:58] He eats with them. He befriends them. But it does go further than that. Much further than that. The prophet Isaiah had written centuries before about a suffering servant who would be pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our sins, that the punishment that brought us peace would fall on him.

As we approach Advent, this is good to have in our minds, isn't it? Isaiah saw it clearly. That in fact, all of us have gone astray. Every one of us has turned from God.

And yet the Lord has laid on him the sin of us all. That's what happened on the cross. Jesus doesn't just eat with sinners, he takes their punishment.

And on the cross, he cries out famously, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The one who never sinned experiences the consequence of sin, which is separation from God so that he wouldn't have to.

So that we wouldn't have to, sorry. Do you see that contrast? That Jonah, the prophet of the lost, won't acknowledge his sin even after being rescued from its consequences.

[21:12] And Jesus, who had no sin, willingly takes on our sin so that we can be rescued also. Jesus isn't a sinner, yet he eats with sinners, accepts punishment for sin, and becomes sin for us.

That's the gospel. That's grace. That's what salvation belonging to the Lord truly means. And yet, how many of us, having received such grace, might still fall into Jonah's final mistake?

This last point here. Jonah thinks he's superior. Even though he isn't. This is perhaps the most striking error for me, anyway.

Verses 8 to 9. Those who cling to worthless idols, turn away from God's love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you.

What I vow, I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord. The structure's clear, isn't it? Those idolaters have no hope of God's love.

[22 : 36] But I, I'm different. I pray to the true God. I have access to God's steadfast love. I worship rightly. The pagans? They're worshipping idols.

No hope for them. Now, theologically, he's not at all wrong, is he? That idolatry leads away from God. He's not wrong at all in what he's saying, but given the context, this is breathtaking in its blindness.

There's an unbelievable lack of self-awareness, or anything awareness here. Who was disobedient in chapter 1? Jonah. Who turned away from God's steadfast love?

Jonah. Who had an accurate view of God, the God of Israel? The pagans. The pagan sailors.

Those sailors started praying to their own gods, didn't they?

But by the end of chapter 1, they're praying to Yahweh, fearing him greatly, offering sacrifices, making vows, the same things that Jonah hasn't done, but says that he will.

[23 : 49] The same things that Jonah claims here are marks of the faithful. These sailors don't know much, do they? But what they know, they respond to rightly.

Jonah knows everything, all that a human could know about God, surely, as one of his prophets, and responds disgracefully. Yet here in chapter 2, Jonah looks on the pagans, looks on these sailors, and on the Ninevites to whom he's been sent, and says, those pagans, they're worth the idols, there's no hope for them, but I'll pray to the true God.

The inconsistencies bizarre. Now this is wonderfully encouraging. If you're here exploring Christianity, and feeling a little out of your depth, or if you've not been a Christian for all that long, and you're still figuring it out, you don't need to know loads to respond rightly to God.

The sailors showed that, didn't they? What matters isn't how much you know, but how you respond to the Jesus who has revealed himself to you, to what you do know.

What do you see of Jesus? But it's also a sobering warning to those of us who've been Christians for years. Knowledge can breed arrogance, can't it?

[25 : 26] Spiritual success can breed blindness. We can know all of the right things, and respond in all of the wrong ways.

Jesus, once again, is the perfect foil to all of this. If Jonah wrongly thinks he's superior, if Jonah wrongly situates all of this blessing in who he is, well, then Jesus actually is superior.

He's not just better than other people, he is God himself. Those of you who've been with us for the past few weeks will remember in Philippians 2 how Paul describes what Jesus did.

Paul's saying in your relationships with each other, have this mindset, this mindset of Christ, and he describes Jesus in this way. That Jesus was in nature God.

That he wasn't pretending, he wasn't playing a role. He just was God. And yet he didn't consider equality with God something to be grasped, something to be grabbed, or used to his own advantage.

[26 : 41] Think about that. He had every right to assert his superiority. Every right to demand worship, to keep his exalted position.

But what did he do? Well, he made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, made in human likeness, and then went to those who were not superior.

Went to those who were humble. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by being obedient to death, even death on a cross. He didn't us spread equality with God because he already had it.

And he didn't use it to his own advantage. Instead, he gave it all up. He made himself nothing, took the nature of a servant, humbling himself to the point of the most shameful death imaginable to an Israelite.

And for whom? For our believers, for sinners, for rebels, for people who were lost, for people like Jonah, people like the Ninevites, people like the sailors, people like us.

[27 : 51] And that's why Paul can write elsewhere that God demonstrates his own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, that is, while we were not God's people, visibly, while we were in enmity to him, while we were far more like the Ninevites than the Israelites, far more like the sailors than like Jonah, Christ died for us.

Not once we cleaned ourselves up and dusted ourselves off, not once we proved ourselves worthy, while we were still sinners, while we were still his enemies, Christ died for us.

Do you see what happens? Jonah stands on the boat, looking down on the pagan sailors, thinking he's better. Jesus comes down from heaven to stand beside pagan sinners, to stand in their place, in fact, to die in their steps.

And this is the ultimate irony, that Jonah, who has no right to feel superior, looks down on everyone. And Jesus, who is infinitely superior, gives up everything for everyone.

Jonah thinks he's superior, though he isn't. Jesus is higher than every creature, yet didn't grab hold of his status, but gave it all up for those who are lost.

[29 : 14] That's what salvation belongs to the Lord, really means. It cannot, it must not mean, I'll be saved because I'm one of the good ones.

It must not mean, I'll be saved because I go to church, or go to the right church, or the right type of church. It means salvation comes from the Lord alone, from his mercy, from his grace, his sacrifice, and he extends it to the undeserving.

Praise God. Where does that leave us? We have these three troubling errors in Jonah, and three glorious truths about Jesus.

So Jonah thinks he's the center, and Jesus is, and they behave in opposite ways. Jonah minimizes the extent to which he's a sinner. Jesus isn't a sinner, yet becomes sin for us.

Jonah thinks he's superior. Jesus is superior, yet gives it all up. Why is this prayer being preserved for us? Well, I think it's been preserved for us to show us two things.

[30 : 33] To show us ourselves, and to show us Christ. Just a quick reminder, because it's been a while since we looked at chapter one, and before we flicked back to two kings, Jonah's been blessed before the story starts.

Back in Israel under King Jeroboam II, things went well. God used Jonah mightily. Two kings 14 tells us that his prophecy was fulfilled.

Military success, expansion, blessing. But two kings 14:24 reveals the truth. Jeroboam was doing evil in the eyes of the Lord, and he didn't turn away from any of the sins of his father.

His father had set up these golden calves, left the nation into idolatry, and 100 years later, nothing's changed. Jonah's been blessed.

His nation's been blessed. But fundamentally, that nation is idolatrous. And Jonah knows it. Verse 8. Verse 8 again.

[31 : 43] Those who claim to work as idols turn away from God's love. This is exactly what's happening back home. Yet Jonah's confident that he's among the faithful.

Comfort and success breed pride and blindness. It's possible then. And this is a hard thing to swallow.

It's possible for God's people to be in the right place. Saying the right things. Ticking the right doctrinal boxes. Even experiencing God's blessing.

And yet be blind to their own spiritual condition. That was true of Israel. And it was true of Jonah. And it can very much be true of us.

We can be orthodox, blessed, useful, and still far from God. We can be making it all about ourselves. Minimizing our sin. Looking down on others.

[32 : 45] All the while thinking that we're the faithful ones. Salvation belongs to the Lord, is Jonah's declaration. And it's true. But how much does he understand it?

How much do we? Well, as we close, let's examine our own hearts for a moment. Are we making things all about ourselves?

Or are we like Jesus, oriented towards God and towards others? When we pray, is it full of our achievements and our efforts and our sacrifices?

Or are we simply grateful to God for what he's done? Secondly, are we minimizing our own sin? Acknowledging difficulties, sure, but not disobedience.

Disobedience. Or do you see yourself, as you truly are, a sinner saved entirely by grace? Rescued not just from unfortunate circumstances, but from the wages of sin itself.

[33 : 52] And then finally, are we looking down on others, confident in our own position, while dismissing those we consider less faithful?

Or do we remember well, that Christ came for the loss, that he died for the ungodly, and that he welcomes sinners? That uncomfortable truth is true.

We can be orthodox, blessed, and useful to God, while being profoundly blind to what's going on in our own hearts. It's a success and privilege, breeding that pride that distances us from God.

But the wonderful thing is, that Jesus is everything that Jonah should have been, and far more besides. Where Jonah failed, Jesus succeeded. Where Jonah was self-centered, Jesus is self-sacrificing.

Where Jonah minimized his sin, Jesus took yours and mine. Where Jonah felt superior, Jesus humbled himself to death. Salvation truly does belong to the Lord, and he will dispense it wherever he wills.

[35 : 05] It doesn't belong to our efforts, our prayers, our sacrifices, our knowledge, our orthodoxy, our position. It belongs to him alone. It doesn't belong to our expectations.

Imagine you're a 20-year-old Mongolian Christian in 1990, in the early church, and where are you now at 50? Salvation belongs to God alone, and if he wills for a, keep quoting Martin, for a thousand men and women to be trained in gospel mission every year from Magalab, then he will do it.

Salvation belongs to him. It will define our expectations. It will define what we think is just, because we've done so well.

And yet he extends it freely. To sailors who barely met him. To Ninevites who've not yet heard of him.

To rebels like Jonah, and to sinners like you and me. What a saviour we have. Salvation belongs to the Lord.