

Text: Jon 2.1-10

Our question today is this, “Was Jonah alive in the fish or dead then resurrected?”

You might think that this is a foolish question. Does it really matter? Perhaps it does not.

However, it’s not one that has been wholly settled among Bible teachers. Notably, J. Vernon McGee taught that Jonah died in the fish and was raised again. I’ll quote extensively from his *Thru the Bible* commentary in a moment.

Let’s read Jonah 2 first: Jon 2.1-10

Now for McGee:

“I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me.”
Notice first that God heard Jonah’s prayer.

“Out of the belly of hell cried I.” *The New Scofield Reference Bible* translates this as “out of the belly of *sheol*,” and that certainly is accurate for that is the original Hebrew word. *Sheol* is sometimes translated in Scripture by the word “grave” and in other places as “the unseen world,” meaning where the dead go. This is a word that, anyway you look at it, has to do with death. It is a word that always goes to the cemetery, and you cannot take it anywhere else. Therefore, my interpretation of what Jonah is saying is that the belly of the fish was his grave, and a grave is a place for the dead—you do not put a live man in a grave. Jonah recognized that he was going to die inside that fish and that God would hear him and raise him from the dead.

Many years ago when I was still a young seminary student, I was asked to preach for a brief period of time at the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. I made the Sunday evening service an evangelistic service. One night several young people came forward when I gave the invitation. After the service I talked to them, and then I went to the rear of the church. A young fellow was standing there, and he told me, “I’m a student at Georgia Tech, and I would like to accept Christ, but I have a hurdle, a problem that I can’t overcome.” I asked him what his problem was, and he replied, “I just can’t believe that a man could live three days and three nights inside a fish.”

I said, “Who told you that?”

“Well,” he said, “I thought the Bible said so, and I know I’ve heard preachers say so. And I’ve got a professor at school who spends his time ridiculing that.”

“My Bible doesn’t say that Jonah was alive inside the fish,” I told him. Then I opened my Bible to the second chapter of Jonah and said, “To begin with, this man Jonah makes it very clear that the belly of the fish was his grave. A grave is a place for the dead.”

“Do you mean that he *died*? Then that means that God raised him from the dead!” the young man said. I told him he was exactly right—that is exactly what happened. He said, “That’s a greater miracle than Jonah’s being kept alive in the fish for three days.” I agreed with him that it was a greater miracle because, as we shall see, we have records of other men who have lived through such experiences.

The important thing to note here is that Jonah cried unto the Lord out of the fish’s belly, out of the belly of hell, out of the belly of *sheol*, out of the belly of the grave—and that is the place for the dead. Jonah felt like he was there to die and that he was in his grave. You must remember that he did not write this account while he was inside the fish but afterward.

I realize there are those who will not accept my viewpoint concerning this. When I wrote my first booklet on it, I felt very much alone. However, when the late Dr. M. R. DeHaan also took this viewpoint, many folk accepted it because of their confidence in him.

If you hold the other viewpoint that Jonah was alive, that’s all right. God certainly could have kept Jonah alive. But, my friend, don’t hold that viewpoint to the extent that you prevent a lot of young people from defending the Bible. This young man from Georgia Tech went back to college, and when his professor again brought up the subject of Jonah, he said to the professor, “Who told you that Jonah was alive inside the fish?” The professor said, “The Bible says so.” This young fellow said to him, “Not my Bible.” When they got out a Bible (which they had trouble finding) and looked at the Scripture, they found that it does not say that Jonah was alive inside the fish.¹

¹ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 749–50.

You can see how McGee explains it, and from what Constable says, McGee's view was the most notable exception to the *majority* view, that God kept Jonah alive in the belly of the fish.

How do we solve such a question? And what does it mean for us?

I. The arguments for the state of Jonah

A. Jonah was dead, then resurrected

1. The argument leans heavily on the word "Sheol" in 2.2

a. I've read several Dictionary / Lexical entries for this

b. The main meanings

1) The grave

2) The place where the dead are

3) A pit (like a grave)

c. Lexicons:

1) "wasteland, void, underworld" HALOT

2) "*the underworld, ... condition of righteous and wicked*"
BDB

3) "the Underworld, Hades, the Grave, i.e., a place under the earth where the dead reside, the realm of death"²

Since Jonah cried from *Sheol*, he cried from the grave, *i.e.*, he as dead.

2. The argument is supported, it is said, by Jesus (Mt 12.39-40)

Mt 12.39-40 But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet;⁴⁰ for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

² James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

- a. Since Jesus would die and be resurrected
- b. Jonah must also have died and been resurrected

B. Jonah was alive in the fish

1. Counter arguments to McGee et al

- a. Jonah 2 is poetry, words don't have to maintain a literal meaning in poetry
- b. The words of Jesus focus on the "three days and three nights," not Jonah's state

2. Jonah 2.1:

Jon 2.1 ¶ Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God **from the stomach of the fish,**

- a. If Jonah is praying *from the stomach of the fish*, he is alive
- b. Jonah prays "out of my distress" (in which he would be!)
- c. The line about the distress parallels the line, "the depth of Sheol"
- d. Poetically, Jonah is comparing his terrifying experience in the stinking darkness *as if he is* in the grave

C. The truth is, Jonah's deliverance was a great miracle, either way

1. Many have gone to great lengths to find examples of great sea creatures who could accomplish this
2. Apparently some record events where whale sharks or similar creatures have swallowed large living creatures who survived
3. These stories aren't necessary to "prove" the miracle: God can do anything he wants to do
4. Jonah 2.1 is decisive for me: Jonah prayed "from the stomach of the fish" — not *after* being "brought up" on the beach

II. The content of Jonah's prayer

- A. God answered Jonah's prayer (2.2)
- B. Jonah testifies to his faith in God (2.3-4)

- C. Jonah testifies to his terrifying experience, but glorifies God for deliverance (5-6)
- D. Jonah didn't forget God (7-9)
 - 1. He was fainting away, but remembered the Lord (7)
 - 2. Those who follow idols would forget *their* gods (8)
 - 3. Jonah vowed to worship his God regardless (9)

Notice that there are no petitions: just praise.

Jon 2.10 Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.

III. The heart of the matter: faith in God's word

A. Was J. Vernon McGee wrong? Probably

- 1. But not a false teacher: this is an interpretive difference
- 2. Most interpreters disagree with McGee
- 3. McGee is fine with that

"If, after I have had a little talk with Jonah in heaven, I learn that he was *alive* for three days and three nights inside that fish, then you can come by and say, 'I told you so.' Then I will have to confess that I was wrong."³

B. The heart of the matter is faith in God's word

- 1. McGee is committed to the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture
- 2. Many who disagree with him likewise have the same commitment
- 3. Either way, the truth is what God says, and the pursuit of such questions has a holy motive
 - a. We want to understand God's word correctly
 - b. We believe everything God said is true
 - c. We seek to reconcile things that seem almost too wonderful to believe
 - d. We want to honor God by taking his word seriously

³ McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, 751.