

Jonah 1:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Analysis

This verse records God's rescue mission: "Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." The Hebrew vayeman YHWH dag gadol livlo'a et-Yonah vayehi Yonah bimei hadag sheloshah yamim usheloshah leilot (וַיָּמָן יְהוָה זֶה גָּדוֹל לְבָלָע אֶת-יֹנָה וַיְהִי יוֹנָה בַּמְעֵד הַדָּג שֶׁלְשָׁה יָמִים וְשֶׁלְשָׁה לְיְלּוֹת) emphasizes divine sovereignty over creation.

"The LORD had prepared" (vayeman YHWH) uses manah (מן), meaning to appoint, ordain, or prepare. This verb appears four times in Jonah: God prepares the fish (1:17), plant (4:6), worm (4:7), and scorching wind (4:8)—demonstrating His sovereign control over nature to accomplish His purposes. The fish isn't random but divinely appointed rescue vessel.

"A great fish" (dag gadol, זֶה גָּדוֹל) uses the generic Hebrew term for fish, not "whale" (added by some English translations). Whether a whale, large shark, or miraculous unknown creature, the emphasis is God's power to command creation. Skeptics mock this miracle, but Matthew 12:40 confirms its historicity: Jesus references "Jonah three days and three nights in the whale's belly" as a sign of His own resurrection. If Jesus treated it as historical, we must.

"Three days and three nights" establishes the period of Jonah's entombment, which Jesus explicitly applies to His death, burial, and resurrection (Matthew 12:40). This typology makes Jonah's experience prophetic prefiguration: just as Jonah was

entombed and delivered, so Christ would die, be buried, and rise. Just as Jonah emerged to preach to Gentiles, so Christ's resurrection inaugurated mission to all nations. The fish that seemed like death became means of salvation—God's judgment contains redemptive purpose.

Historical Context

Jonah son of Amitai prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:25), around 780-760 BC. God commanded him to preach repentance to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria—the brutal empire that would later destroy Israel (722 BC). Assyrian kings were notorious for extreme cruelty, boasting in their inscriptions about impalement, flaying, and mass deportations. For an Israelite prophet, preaching salvation to Assyria was like asking a Holocaust survivor to evangelize Nazi Germany. Jonah's flight to Tarshish (opposite direction) reveals both ethnic prejudice and theological confusion about God's mercy extending to pagan nations. When Nineveh repented and God relented, Jonah became angry, preferring their destruction. The book concludes with God's gentle rebuke, revealing His compassion for all people.

The book of Jonah stands as a rebuke to narrow nationalism and an anticipation of the gospel's universal scope. Jesus referenced Jonah's three days in the fish as a sign of His death and resurrection, while condemning His generation for not repenting like Nineveh did (Matthew 12:39-41). The early church struggled with the same prejudice Jonah displayed when Gentiles began believing in Christ.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does Jonah 1:17 deepen your understanding of God's character, particularly His holiness, justice, and mercy?

2. What specific attitudes, thought patterns, or behaviors does this verse call you to examine and change in light of the gospel?
3. How does this passage point forward to Christ and His redemptive work, and how should that shape your worship and obedience?

Interlinear Text

וַיְמַכֵּן	וְיֹהֵה	בַּדָּג	וְלֹא	גָּדֶד	וְעַל	לְבָלָעַת	אֶת	יְוָנָה
had prepared	Now the LORD	fish	a great	to swallow up			And Jonah	
H4487	H3068	H1709	H1419	H1104			H3124	
וְיָמִים	וְיָמִים	בְּחֻמֵּת	וְיָמִים	וְשָׁלַשׁ	וְיָמִים	וְשָׁלַשׁ		
H1961	And Jonah	was in the belly	fish	and three	days	and three		
H3124		H4578	H1709	H7969	H3117	H7969		
לְיְלֹות:								
nights								
H3915								

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 12:40 (Parallel theme): For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Luke 11:30 (Parallel theme): For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation.

Matthew 16:4 (Parallel theme): A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And he left them, and departed.

Habakkuk 3:2 (References Lord): O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid: O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy.

Genesis 1:21 (Parallel theme): And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

Jonah 4:6 (References Lord): And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd.

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