

“JONAH: A Prayer from the Belly of the Beast”

A sermon by
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TEXTS: Jonah 2:1-10 and Acts 9:1-9

Jonah 2:1-10

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 'I called to the LORD out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. 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. Then I said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?" The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head 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. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!' Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Acts 9:1-9

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so, they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Our daughter, Beth, worked for Walmart when she was in high school. Her first experience of institutional cognitive dissonance centered around conflicting directives. As a minor, she had to take a break more frequently than an adult employee. She had to clock out and at the end of the break, clock back in. She was also trained to always stop to help a shopper if they could not find an item by taking them to the proper location.

On this day, she was headed to the break room. A customer stopped her and asked her the location of an item. Beth dutifully took the customer to the proper location. By the time she arrived at the break room, she had exceeded her allotted work time by four or five minutes. She had violated state law.

Her supervisor wrote her up. That was bad enough. However, she also had to take a paid, “Think It Over Day” to reflect upon her grievous sin of obeying company policy and working too hard. It took her a whole day, but after careful consideration, she decided she would probably do the same thing if the situation ever arose again.

Not so Jonah! Jonah got three “Think It Over Days” and totally changed his mind.

We started the story last week. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, sending him to proclaim God’s judgment on Assyria. Jonah didn’t want to go. Jonah was afraid. Jonah tried to run from the presence of God and sail as far away as he could get in the opposite direction.

God sends a storm. The boat almost founders. The sailors cast lots to determine who is causing the storm. The lot falls to Jonah. At his instruction, they throw him overboard. They praise the God of Jonah and God sends a large fish to swallow Jonah and save his life. Jonah spends three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. Then, something changes.

We find the change at the beginning of chapter two. “Then Jonah prayed to the Lord . . .”

WHEN JONAH PRAYED

When did Jonah pray? Jonah did what many of us do. My dad was a Navy World War II veteran. He used to tell me, “You’ll rarely find an atheist in a foxhole.” He had a good point. In verse 7 we read, “*As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord.*” Just this past week, Florida high school students were rescued two miles off the beach in St. Augustine, Florida when they were swept out to sea by the current. Almost exhausted, the two prayed. Tyler Smith, one of those rescued said, “I cried out: ‘If you really do have a plan for us, like, come on. Just bring something.’”

They were rescued by a passing boat headed from Delray Beach back to New Jersey. Oh, yes, the name of the boat was “Amen.”

I believe that Jonah was near death when the God whose presence he sought to avoid rescued him. How like Jonah we all are!

So often, a cry to God is the court of last resort. Jonah cried out to God when he had given up all other hope. We do that, as well. He was ready to pass out. His life appeared to be at an end. Like Jonah, God must sometimes use the circumstances of life to bring us to a place of surrender. Jonah learned what we all eventually learn, if we are wise.

Our arms are too short to box with God.

The more stubborn we are, the harder it is for us. It’s like those Chinese Finger Traps we used to get at novelty stores as children. The problem with a Chinese Finger Trap is that the harder you struggle, the more securely bound you become. The Prodigal Son had to lose everything. When he surrendered and headed home, he had hope for the first time. The Apostle Paul had to surrender. When his vision of Jesus knocked him off his “high horse,” he spent three days in total darkness, fasting from food and water before becoming whole again.

Only you know if you are resisting God in some area of your life right now. Is the struggle pleasant? Are you enjoying the battle? What will it take for you to surrender? What is it going to take to bring you to your knees?

WHY JONAH PRAYED

One of my favorite authors is pastor, author, and leadership coach, John Maxwell. Maxwell says that there are three things that motivate people to change. He says, “People change when they hurt enough that they have to, learn enough that they want to, and receive enough that they are able to.”

In verse 2, Jonah says, “*I called to the Lord out of my distress and He answered me.*” How often are we driven to prayer out of adversity? Yet, even these prayers are prayers that God desires to hear. Note the significant change in this story. Jonah is in this situation because he was seeking to flee the presence of the Lord. Suddenly, in his distress, he realizes that God is his only hope. He realizes how much he needs God. He is fully aware of how disobedient and rebellious he has been.

I once knew a young Christian man who disciplined his children by first getting them to acknowledge why they were getting a time out or loss of privileges. The father would ask the three-year old, “Do you know why Daddy is putting you in the corner for five minutes?” The son would nod and say, “Because I being dis’bedient and ‘bellious.”

Jonah is being dis'bedient and 'bellious.

God loves us. God loves us so much and desires to hear from us so greatly, that sometimes, He will use hardship to get our attention just so that he can be in relationship with us. God seeks our good. Yet, God will use circumstances to bring us back to Him.

In verse 7, Jonah says, ". . . I remembered the Lord." Jonah was never out of God's sight or God's care. However, until the storm, Jonah forgot about God. He was sincerely trying to forget about God and avoid God. Isn't it wonderful that even when we rebel, God still loves us? Isn't it great that when we try to ignore God, God never forgets about us? There is wonderful passage of Scripture in Isaiah 49:14-16, where God speaks of His relationship with His people after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, "*But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.' Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.*"

Though we may forget God, God never forgets us.

HOW JONAH PRAYED

We find how Jonah prayed in verse nine, where it is written, "*But with the voice of thanksgiving will I sacrifice to you.*" Jonah begins with praise and thanksgiving. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstance; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*"

Jonah gives thanks. Many of you know that I fractured my right cheekbone in two places in the fall of my senior year of college while playing intramural flag football. I remembered lying on the gurney in the emergency room having a major pity party with myself as the special guest. I was pretty sure I would need major surgery. My face was temporarily disfigured. My head hurt like a banshee. It was right before mid-terms and . . . I continued this litany of woe. Then, something changed my perspective. I began to think of all the things for which I should be thankful. This could be repaired. I was in a good hospital. I had a great doctor. I would get to see my parents. I would receive much sympathy from the fairer sex. Suddenly, things didn't look so bad. Praise and thanksgiving transformed my experience.

You can imagine the circumstances Jonah was facing. Dark, dank, uncomfortable, and suddenly the biggest part of an amphibian breakfast, Jonah begins to praise God. As Paul says, he doesn't praise God for his circumstance. He knows why he is here. He is grateful that God has rescued him. Therefore, he begins to praise God in his circumstances.

We even see evidence that Jonah does what most of us do. I love the line in verse nine, ". . . *what I have vowed I will pay.*"

Your arms may be too short to box with God, but has that ever prevented you from bargaining with God? I know it has not stopped me. It goes something like this, "God, I know I really messed up this time and got myself in a real fix. If you just get me out of this one, I promise . . ." Have you ever prayed a prayer like that? If you have, you are in good company with the Prophet Jonah!

At the end of this prayer, though, is a firm acknowledgment that God is a God of deliverance. Deliverance belongs to the Lord! This is what God does. God is a God who delivers people from affliction, bondage, and distress. Are you struggling? Are you without much hope? God is a God of deliverance and is waiting to help you.

THE RESULTS OF JONAH'S PRAYER

Jonah's prayer begins with a statement of near amazement. In verse two, Jonah says, "*I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol [the place of the dead] I cried, and you heard my voice.*"

This is such a marvelous mystery. When we pray, God hears us. When we pray, God answers us. You might be saying, "Wait a minute! I prayed and never got an answer." Allow me to

make a distinction. Because you did not get the answer you desired does not mean God did not hear you and that you did not get an answer. God answers prayer in three ways. Yes. No. Wait. Last Wednesday in the Men's Prayer Breakfast group where we are studying Andrew Murray's classic, With Christ in the School of Prayer, one of the groups mentioned that he was grateful God does not always answer our every prayer. I agree. We are finite creatures praying to an infinite, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent God who knows past, present, and future. When I pray, I can only pray within the limited scope of my own knowledge and power. I may be praying for something that is totally wrong for me or for someone else. I may be praying for fifth or sixth best when God wants to give the best.

If God should say to me, "From now on, Doug, I am going to answer all of your prayers, I think my first prayer would be, 'Please don't. I really want you to answer my prayers only as you know best.'"

The ultimate result of Jonah's prayer is that the fish spews him out on dry land. If you read between the lines of Scripture, there is great humor. Jonah is back on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, likely not far from where he started. He ran away from God's call. He gets swallowed by a great fish. God saves him and the fish spits him out on dry land. It is still a five-hundred-mile journey to Nineveh.

I remember getting in trouble as a kid or teenager. After the difficulty was over, my mom or dad would ask the dreaded question, "Well, what did you learn from this?" AAAUGH! I hated that question. I produced and directed this horror movie! Now you want me to watch the reruns and write a review?

Fortunately, we can learn from the lives of others. What do we learn from Jonah? First, we learn that we often believe the lies we tell ourselves. The first lie is that we can shut God out of our lives. We may make the attempt, but we cannot stop God from loving us or trying to reach us. The second lie is that we can run from the call of God. We can run, but we cannot hide. There is no place we can go that God cannot reach us, and it is not because God is angry with us. It is precisely because God loves us that God comes looking for us.

The third lie is that we can forget God. We may try, but God remembers us. Psalm 103:13-14 affirms, "*As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows how we are made; he remembers that we are dust.*"

The fourth lie is that we do not need God. That lie works until we come to the end of our own abilities and resources. Then we discover how hollow that lie is and how true are the opening words of Psalm 46, "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.*" The next thing we learn from Jonah is that we often forsake our own blessings and mercies. God's way is the best way, even when it doesn't seem the best way to us. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and Jonah said, "I know better than that." We do the same when we know what Scripture says and then qualify it by saying, "I know what Scripture says, but . . ." You can resist the will of God or you can rest in the will of God.

You can't do both. They are opposed to one another.

Jonah realized that he was in the belly of the fish because he was disobeying and resisting God. He was running from the presence of the Lord. Finally, he realized that he didn't need to be struggling there anymore.

We make it so hard on ourselves. When we run, we are running from our own best good. We are settling for our own best, not God's best for us.

Last, we need to remember the Lord. It took Jonah a long time to remember the Lord. It took much struggle and bitter experience. When Jonah remembered God, Jonah suddenly realized that God had never forgotten Jonah. Jonah realized that he could have easily drowned. After all, it is doubtful he could swim.

Yet, God saved him. Nevertheless, God rescued him. Even so, God preserved him.

Upon reflection, it is amazing the lengths to which God will go to bring us to repentance. Look at Jonah. For three days God left him alone with his thoughts. For three days, God let him marinate in his disobedience and the fish's gastric juices. Often God loves us enough to give us exactly what we think we want, merely to bring us to the point of discovering something better. Jonah must have felt helpless, trapped and completely immobilized. He thought he had come to the end of his journey. He imagined he was going nowhere.

What Jonah failed to realize is that the entire time the big fish was moving! Jonah didn't know where he was until he got outside the belly of the fish. Through it all, the Lord in His grace and mercy was taking Jonah exactly where he needed to go.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory! AMEN!