

PRAYER FROM THE DEEP

Jonah 2:1-7

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“Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple’ (JON. 2:4).

There are things about the realm of grace that those outside it simply cannot understand. This is demonstrated by much criticism of the second chapter of Jonah. Among liberal scholars, this chapter is almost universally regarded as ingenuine, for the simple reason that its message seems unbelievable. Therefore they argue that a later editor sought to explain the story that Jonah was swallowed and then vomited forth by a whale with a psalm that seemed to make sense. Jacques Ellul comments: “The great argument against the validity of this psalm, however, is that it is not a psalm of appeal and petition, but an act of thanksgiving and praise.”¹

PRAYER IN THE DEEP

Jonah chapter 2 records one of the Bible’s great prayers. This is especially remarkable in that up to this point Jonah has not been found praying. When God summoned him for a mission to Nineveh, Jonah did not pray to consider the right response. When fleeing to Joppa, Jonah did not pray for guidance. When purchasing passage aboard the ship bound for Tarshish he did not pray, nor would Jonah even pray when the captain besought him during the great storm. This is not coincidental, for this progression charted Jonah’s descent into folly, rebellion and ruin – a path that is always marked by prayerlessness. Jonah did not pray because he did not want to talk with God, much less to hear from God. The whole

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 47.

objective of Jonah's flight was to escape "away from the presence of the LORD" (Jon. 1:3), and prayer would hardly have served that end. We will find the same to be true in our lives. Disobedience leads to prayerlessness, prayerlessness leads to folly and sin, and folly and sin lead to disaster.

What has changed in Jonah's life so that now he prayed? Back on the great ship, he refused to pray even when the captain implored him. But things are different inside of the great fish. What has happened? The answer is that God in his grace has brought Jonah low. Now brought to the ultimate destination of his foolish flight, Jonah is faced with the real consequences. He is separated from God, from the fellowship of God's people, and from the witness of God's Word. For many of us, the journey that Jonah took will involve the whole of our lives – a slow but steady descent into darkness. But God in his grace gave Jonah a sudden experience of where he was heading. Call it a sneak preview of coming attractions. Cast overboard, Jonah is encased in the living grave that is the belly of the fish, deep beneath the surface of the waves. And there he found grace finally to pray.

In his best-selling book *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey explores the experience of an increasing number of people who express their disappointment with God. One was a young mother whose joyful faith turned to bitterness after her daughter was born with spina bifida. She wrote of ruinous medical bills and a marriage that broke under the strain of the child's disease. Unlike Jonah, whose situation was caused by his own sin, her life had descended into the abyss simply as a result of this childbirth. Having trusted God, she now wrote of anger and doubt. In another case, a homosexual wrote Yancey to tell of the hell of his life. For a decade and more he had sought a "cure" for his sexual orientation, involving every manner of treatment including electrical shock. But nothing seemed to work and finally the man abandoned himself to perverse promiscuity and rejected Christianity. Yet another woman wrote of her ongoing depression. She really had no reason for her despair, but most days she cannot think of a single reason to go on living. She

wrote to say she had pretty much given up on God and doubted that he even cared.²

These are all examples – common enough in our day – of people who found their lives descending into the deep and who responded with resentment towards God. Their one theme was that God has disappointed them by not delivering them from their severe trials. We can imagine Jonah doing the same thing. He might have commiserated that God was wrong to ask him to go preach to the Ninevites and that his flight on the Tarshish-bound ship was only a reasonable response. But that is not what Jonah did. Instead, Jonah acknowledged that it was God who had cast him into the deep and it was only God who could rescue him. His key insight is found in verse 3, where Jonah says, “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.” Jonah realized that while it was the sailors who physically tossed him over the rails, and while this was all his own idea, it was God’s sovereign hand that had cast him into the deep. It was “your waves” and “your billows” that passed over him.

In other words, Jonah acknowledged that everything that had happened to him was caused by God, yet he also realized that it was all his own fault. There is no accusation against God’s justice. As he explained to the sailors, “I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you” (Jon. 1:12). Now, he might have added, “And I know it is because of my sin that I am dying in this great fish.” Instead of turning on God, Jonah was willing to turn on himself, on his sin.

And yet it is clear that the reality did not break through to Jonah until he began descending into the deep. While still on the boat, his doctrine was right but his heart was not right. That is why he didn’t pray. But it was only when final darkness gathered around him, when all the options had closed down, leaving only his just condemnation, that Jonah’s heart responded to his formal confession of sin. Now only God can help him, so Jonah turns in prayer to God: “I called out

² Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 21-22.

to the LORD, out of my distress,” he reports (Jon. 2:1). Jacques Ellul writes:

Obviously, when man has somewhere to turn he does not pray to God and God does not come to him. As long as man can invent hopes and methods, he naturally suffers from the pretension that he can solve his own problem... When the sailors tried to save the ship by their nautical skill, Jonah slept. All these aids had to be shattered, all solutions blocked, and man’s possibilities hopelessly outclassed by the power of the challenge, to cause Jonah to return to God.³

The contrast between the call of the ship captain to the response of God is revealing. The captain cried, “Arise, call out to your god!” (Jon. 1:6). But God sent Jonah not up, but down to pray. It is as if God was saying, “Go down before me and then you will be able to pray, Jonah.” And it is for this reason that sometimes the very best thing that can happen to us is the very thing we most dread, for the simple reason that it strips away our self-reliance, strips away our pride, and removes from us every other hope save that of God. Sometimes this is what it takes for us really to pray.

The Bible does not specify any particular posture for prayer. We see people standing or sitting in prayer, and either is fine. But in the Bible, as in life, when men or women pray out of the anguish of desperation and terrible need, how often we will see them falling to their knees before the Lord. And in order for Jonah to look away from his own willful plans and turn to God in hope, he first had to be brought to his knees. We read in the Bible, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you” (1 Pet. 5:6). Yet we do not readily humble ourselves before God, so God in his grace will do it for us, all out of his wonderful purpose of salvation.

How does this fit the case of those who find themselves in despair with no obvious blame to themselves? What about the woman who despaired of God because of her daughter with the birth defect? The answer is but a variation on Jonah’s theme. In order truly to turn to God we must accept that God is sovereign. And not only that, but God is holy, just, and good. In other words, we must acknowledge

³ Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah*, 57.

and admit who and what God is: he is the sovereign, saving Lord. And just as Jonah had to bow to God's sovereign call in his ministry, we must bow to God's sovereign purpose in our circumstances. In some cases, God may be calling us to repent of some open sin. In other cases, God may be fitting us for a particular calling or trial. In either case, God is humbling us into a right sense of worship and reliance on his grace. He demands, "I am God and there is no other." Therefore, our salvation is found, first, by acknowledging God's holy, right, and good sovereignty in all our callings, and, secondly, by turning to him as the only One who is able to save us.

Indeed, in the end, it is not merely out of his knowledge of God's sovereignty or God's holiness that Jonah repents and prays. In the end, it is his remembrance of God's grace that turns his heart to the Lord. "Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight,'" Jonah recalls. This is his admission of God's sovereign justice in his life. But he adds, "Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple" (Jon. 2:4). That is Jonah's remembrance of God's merciful grace, and it is by renewed reliance on God's grace that Jonah is moved once more to pray.

When we come to such a point of surrender to the one true and living God, the result will always be the same: we will pray. We will seek his mercy and power for our salvation. We will later be able to say, "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" (Jon. 2:2).

JONAH'S PSALM

This raises an important question, however. The question is How did Jonah remember God's sovereign grace? We have considered *when* Jonah remembered God's grace so that he returned in prayer: it was at his final extremity within the great fish in the deep. But *how* did Jonah remember God's grace?

To answer this, imagine plucking Jonah's prayer out of this book and hearing it read. What book of the Bible would you think you were hearing? There is one answer that everyone who is familiar at all with the Bible will give: it is the book of Psalms. We might find ourselves saying, "Now which psalm is this? I should know this

psalm!” In fact, Jonah is not quoting any particular psalm, but rather he is rehearsing the themes of the psalms in general. A study of Jonah’s prayer will show allusions or references to Psalms 3, 5, 16, 18, 31, 42, 50, 65, 88, and 120.

What really is happening is that the whole perspective of the Psalms – on God and man, life and death, despair and hope, fear and faith – is flowing out through Jonah’s heart and mouth. And how is it happening that Jonah suddenly becomes an oracle of psalmody while in the belly of this great fish? The only answer can be that he had been raised and nurtured in the psalms. He had recited them and sung the psalms all his life. The psalms were inside of him due to his life among the people of God. So now, brought to this terrible extremity beneath the waves and inside the great fish, when Jonah is moved to pray, it is the vocabulary and faith of the psalms that finds expression in his prayer.

First, this is a strong advertisement as can be arranged for the value of the Book of Psalms. In the psalms of the Bible, through the miracle of inspiration, God places onto the lips of his worshipers the words of faith, worship, and life. In the psalms, we encounter man in every circumstance – frequently in need and distress – looking up to God in search of faith. In the psalms we read the very complaints we have uttered in our own hearts, along with the remedy to those complaints through a renewed grasp of God’s glory and grace. The psalms wrestle with every human emotion, every human experience, every high and every low, all in such a way that the believer finds himself restored to faith in God. In this way, the psalms present the doctrines of salvation in lived experience and struggle. The psalms present the saving truths of God’s Word as light fighting through the foggy mist of human struggle to restore the believer’s vision of heaven. The psalms may be the Bible’s best answer to the remarkable prayer once offered to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk. 10:24).

For these reasons, Jonah’s long experience with the psalms results in the greatest of all helps in his darkest hour of need: his mind is recalled to the Lord and his heart is refreshed in God’s grace. Christians who make it their practice to stroll frequently through the garden of the psalms, who make a practice of singing the psalms and

committing psalms to memory, will be well repaid in their hours of darkness, doubt, and despair with words fitted just for their troubled situation, words designed to take their faltering faith by the hand and lead it once again to the Lord.

We might well speak similarly of the whole Bible, of course. Here again, Jonah provides us with a lesson. His books starts with a disturbing call from God. Jonah's faith is staggered by the call to preach in Nineveh. The sin inhabiting his hatred of the Ninevites rears its willful head and sends him on his flight away from the Lord. Instead of praying, Jonah stops his ears and flees from the influence of God's Word. He finds the solution to his distress in the ship bound for Tarshish. And how many versions of the Tarshish-bound ship there are, to which Christians make appeal in their struggle with God's commands! How many churches today recoil against the difficult calling of faithfulness by boarding ships to Tarshish – worldly remedies conveniently at our disposal and fiendishly made available by our enemy the devil. Yet all along, the true answer to our need and distress is found in the Bible.

It is only when the influence of God's Word is felt again that Jonah-like believers are restored to God in repentance. It is the influence of God's Word that turns our hearts back to God in prayer instead of away from God on ships bound for Tarshish. Therefore, both in the individual believer's experience and in the life of the church, it is always true that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

In other words, the way to experience God's grace is to turn to God's Word. Peter spoke this way of a sinner's conversion to saving faith: "You have been born again... through the living and abiding Word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). Jesus spoke this way of God's grace for the growth and restoration of those already saved: "Sanctify them in the truth," he prayed. "Your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17). So whether we are being humbled before God for the first time or whether we have come for a return visit to the convicting darkness of the fish's belly, the grace of God that we need is found and experienced through the Word of God.

JONAH'S PRAYER OF DELIVERANCE

Exactly what, then, was Jonah trusting when he turned anew to God in prayer? We have considered the *when* of Jonah's prayer: he prayed when God had cast him down into the darkness. We have studied the *how* of Jonah's prayer: he prayed as he remembered the Lord as God's grace was recalled to him through the psalms. Now we should consider the *what* of Jonah's prayer. What did he pray for; what did he seek in his prayer from the deep?

First, we can see that Jonah's prayer is focused on a single theme, introduced at the beginning: "I call out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard me" (Jon. 2:2).

Jonah tells us that finding himself in the tomb of the great fish, he was in "distress" (Jon. 2:2). He was "in the belly of Sheol," so that he considered himself to be in a hellish grave. "The flood surrounded me," he writes, reminding us of psalms that speak of troubles rising up like a flood, though in Jonah's case it was literally true. There, Jonah realized that he was dying: "My life was fainting away" (Jon. 2:7). Moreover, his plight was truly miserable: "weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever" (Jon. 2:5-6). Jonah saw his delivering fish as a kind of prison, fast shut with tightest of bars.

This is a dramatic version of the kind of situation into which sin and folly cast us. None of us are likely to have Jonah's precise plight, but we may feel the same in other ways. For some, it is a career path that has led them to dismay. For others it is an ungodly relationship that has sown destruction in their lives. Some people experience this through financial folly; the burden of their debt seems like a prison.

But worst of all was Jonah's awareness that he was separated from God. "Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight'" (Jon. 2:4). This was the whole point of Jonah's flight from the Lord. But now that he tasted the ultimate fruit of his rebellion against God the full bitterness of his hopeless situation choked his soul. Encased in the fish, Jonah had reached the end, and a bitter one it surely was.

This was, therefore, the defining turning point of Jonah's life, as it is in our own. He realized the folly of his sin. He realized his need of the Lord. How then could he be restored?

The answer is seen throughout this rest of this prayer. First, we read that "Jonah prayed to the LORD his God" (Jon. 2:1). Jonah realized that he had a relationship with God. All along, he had been a man in covenant with God. He was a believer and Yahweh was his God. This makes his rebellion all the more foolish, but it also marks the beginning of his hope.

We can trace the path of Jonah's thought. He knew he was separated from God in his unbelief and in his circumstances. The Lord had driven him away from his sight (Jon. 2:4). But what he knew about the Lord reminded him that there was a way of hope. God's promise of grace remained despite Jonah's folly in sin. He had deserted God, but the very fact that he had not yet drowned proved that God had not deserted him.

In times of despair, every believer should remember God's promise never to desert his people. God has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5). Paul asked the question in lyrical prose:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39).

Behind this conviction is the Bible's teaching of God's unbreakable love for his own. "I have loved you with an everlasting love," God tells his people (Jer. 31:3). "I will make with them an everlasting covenant," he says, "that I will not turn away from doing good to them" (Jer. 32:40). Therefore, in every trial we may look to the mercy of God as a man in the night looks for the sure coming of dawn.

Remembering God's faithfulness in mercy, received through simple faith alone, transformed Jonah's petitions into praise. This is what the liberal critics of Jonah cannot understand. He now is confident of God's salvation. This is remarkable because at no point do we read of Jonah asking God to deliver him from the fish. He now exults, "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” (Jon. 2:2). This is the sign that we are restored to faith: that so long as we know the Lord’s favor, we no longer need to be delivered from our trials.

But how did Jonah know that God had heard and answered him? The answer is that he recognized the kindling of his own repentance and faith. Simply to remember the Lord is proof that the Lord has answered your cry. Simply to be able humbly to acknowledge your unworthiness and sin and to praise God for his faithful love is proof that God is with you to save.

Jonah sees an analogy between his physical situation and the spiritual situation in which he had languished: “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” (Jon. 2:6). His real prison was the unbelief and resentment towards God in which he suffered in darkness; the stomach of the great fish was merely the analogy. God had delivered him by restoring him to faith, and that was all that Jonah needed to know that he would be restored fully, either in this life or the next: “When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple” (Jon. 2:7). His remembrance of God as Savior was enough to assure him of the certainty of his salvation.

The next feature of Jonah’s prayer is its focal point. For it seems that Jonah regained not only a general confidence in God’s mercy, but that he specifically remembered the provision that God had made for the salvation of people precisely like himself. This focus is discernible in his prayer: “I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple” (Jon. 2:4).

Why did Jonah think of God’s temple? He may have thought of the temple as the place where God dwells, and thus where his prayers were directed. This way of thinking is indicated in verse 7: “My prayer came to you, into your holy temple.” But this does not account for the pivotal statement of verse 4: “I shall again look upon your holy temple.” Hugh Martin therefore takes up the question:

Jonah thought of ‘the temple;’ and why? Because God had placed His name there. Because there He gave the symbol of His presence as a God of love, and especially a God of propitiated favour; a God dwelling

between the cherubim, God on the blood-sprinkled seat of mercy, on the throne of grace.⁴

In short, Jonah remembered that God had ordered sacrifices as a way of restoring sinners to himself. It was for the sake of these sacrifices that the temple existed, as the blood of lambs was shed for the forgiveness of sin.

This is for us as well the greatest incentive to the prayer of faith. For what Jonah looked to in faith received its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Each of us, no matter how fallen, may look to the Lamb of God for reconciliation with God. And each of us, no matter how dark the circumstances of life, may look to the cross of Christ as the proof of God's unrelenting love. The apostle John wrote, "If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 2:1-2). And Paul added, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:31-32). This means that whatever trials and suffering we experience in this life – due to our own sin or not – Christians may see in the cross all the proof they need of God's conquering love, God's holy love, God's providing love, and God's unfailing love. It is with the cross squarely fixed in our minds that the writer of Hebrews urges us, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

SALVATION OF THE LORD

Realizing these things led Jonah to conclude his prayer with the great exclamation, so encouraging to so many of God's people, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" (Jon. 2:9). Jonah may have meant, "Only God can save me," and surely that is something he had learned. Or he could have meant, "Salvation is what God delights to do." That would have been equally true. But speaking personally – and Jonah's was the most personal of prayers – there is little doubt that Jonah had come to a stunning conclusion that changed his

⁴ Martin, 200.

attitude towards everything in his life. For Jonah now realized that God sent him into the deep darkness, into the great fish, not to destroy him but to save him. Do you realize that as you ponder the providence of God in your life? He is not destroying you in your trials. The Lord is saving you. He is restoring you from sinful rebellion, from foolish self-reliance, from ignorant pride, and from unbelieving stubbornness – to which all of us are natively prone in our fallen condition – so that you learn to say: “I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me... Salvation is of the LORD!”