

## Prayers from the Belly of the Fish

2/4 series on *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet*

Jonah 2

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### Introduction

**Jonah** was sort of a sometimes spokesman for God. Frankly, he was not the most enthusiastic preacher to ever hit the glory trail. The Lord had to drag the reluctant prophet kicking and swimming the entire way.

Last week we saw that the story began—as it usually does—with **God’s call**. “*The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’*”

To put it mildly, Jonah hated the entire idea. The **Assyrians** were Israel’s archenemies and non-Jews to boot. Patriotism and prejudice informed Jonah’s response. God said “Go” and Jonah went—in the opposite direction! He booked passage on a boat bound for Tarshish, hoping to sail away from the Lord’s presence.

But you can’t outrun God. A **storm** arose that threatened to swamp the ship. THEN the sailors discovered that it was Jonah’s fault. When all else failed, they threw the reluctant prophet overboard. The storm immediately ceased, and the ship sailed safely away, leaving Jonah to sink into the depths of the Mediterranean Sea.

This seemed to be the end of our hero. However, God wasn’t done with his would be prophet. The Lord appointed a **large fish** to swallow Jonah. Seldom have God’s mercy and judgment been so artfully combined. The Lord delivered his disobedient servant from drowning, but Jonah became indigestible fish food for the next three days.

### I. A Fish Story

The story of Jonah possesses a fascinating appeal. To paraphrase an old joke, a man swallowing a fish is not news but a fish swallowing a man is headline stuff. Great debates have raged over the details of the tale. What sort of fish could swallow a man whole? Was it a whale or a shark? How did Jonah survive for three days and nights?

Such questions are intriguing; however, they miss the entire point of the plot. Jonah is not a fish story. Focusing on the fish would be like emphasizing the felines in the story of *Daniel in the Lion’s Den* or the fatted calf in *The Prodigal Son*!

Throughout the book of Jonah, we see how God used a variety of different **agents** to accomplish the divine will. In addition to the great fish, the Lord also used the sailors, a storm, casting lots, a quick growing bush, a worm, the sun, and a hot wind. But let’s face it, titles like “*Jonah and the Castor Oil Plant*” or “*Jonah and the Hungry Worm*” don’t have the same pizzazz as “*Jonah and the Whale!*”

Ultimately, Jonah is the story of a reluctant prophet and our persistent God. It describes the human struggle that exists between hearing and obeying God’s Word. Sometimes the Holy Spirit has to give us a hard nudge in the right direction.

**Jonah** is a study in contrasts. He was rebellious and obedient, sinful and pious, hateful and loving, cowardly and courageous, biased and broadminded. In a word, he is just like you and me—an odd combination of sinner and saint. Knowing what is right and

doing what is wrong. Hearing God's word but fleeing its demands. Loving the Lord but rejecting God's will.

Perhaps God's hand is upon your shoulder today. You have heard the Lord speak: a call to repentance and change, a call to ministry and mission, a call to reflection and action. Regardless of how we word our response, there are really only two answers: "Yes" or "No." We either say "*Your will be done*" or "*My will be done.*"

Jonah chose to reject God's call and run away from the Lord's presence. But he soon discovered that there was no place left to hide. Here's the good news that we sometimes experience as bad news. Our Lord loves us SO much that he will not leave us alone. The Holy Spirit nags and worries our hearts and minds. In the midst of our rebellion, God still calls us by name. We cannot escape God's presence, love, and grace.

### **III. Prayers from the Belly of the Big Fish**

But you've got to give credit where credit is due—Jonah elevated the art of stubbornness to new heights—or depths in this case. The first chapter of Jonah concludes with the words, "*But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.*"

Three days and three nights passed BEFORE the reluctant prophet FINALLY decided to pray. I don't think it would have taken me 72 hours until my prayer reflex kicked in. I would have prayed about the time I passed the big fish's tonsils on the way down! But sometimes humans have to hit rock bottom before they are willing to look up.

One of Jesus' most familiar stories is *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. It's a familiar plot. A father had two sons. The younger boy demanded his inheritance NOW. Then he went to a far off country where he blew the money on wild and extravagant living. He eventually returned home where his father welcome him with open arms.

A critical moment occurs earlier in the story. After the young boy wasted all his money, he took a job tending **swine**—about the lowest job a Jewish man could do. The boy became so hungry that he longed to fill his stomach with the pig slop. And no one gave him anything. Then the critical moment occurred. Luke's gospel simply says: "THEN he came to himself." The New International Version says, "When he came to his senses." The son finally realized what he had done and determined to go back home.

Sometimes it takes a crisis moment in life before we come to ourselves. We may be knee deep in a pig sty or sinking below the waves. The more obstinate among us may require three days and nights in the belly of a big fish. It is a part of our sinful, human nature that we may not consider praying to God until we are forced to our knees.

During my time of sermon preparation this week, I was reminded of the horrific events of **September 11, 2001**. The images are forever seared into our collective conscious. Kamikaze planes, billowing smoke, imploding buildings, panicked crowds, and broken bodies saddened our souls.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack, the United States experienced a religious reawakening. The catastrophe brought America to its knees in prayer. We did not engage in ACLU approved, politically correct "moments of silence" or "personal meditation." God's people prayed. We prayed in churches, cathedrals, synagogues, and mosques. We

prayed at home, work, school, and worship. We prayed at flagpoles, street corners, courthouses, and city halls. We prayed in words, song, silence, and tears.

People turned to the church for comfort and consolation. In the aftermath of the attack, believers and non-believers alike attended worship services in record numbers. Church attendance increased a dramatic 25% in the days following September 11.

According to a Barna survey, however, church attendance quickly dropped back to normal levels within a month of the tragedy. People who had packed sanctuaries in September found better things to do in October. The immediate crisis had passed, a semblance of normalcy had returned, and people seemed to remain the same.

Military chaplains say that there are **no atheists in a foxhole**. Life-threatening crises can evoke a temporary faith. People play *Let's Make a Deal* with the Lord God Almighty serving as the game show host. As a minister, I have witnessed countless people attempt to strike bargains with God: "IF you will (FILL IN THE BLANK: save my marriage, heal my body, get me a job, let me win the lottery), THEN I will (FILL IN THE BLANK: attend church, serve as a missionary, give you praise, tithe my winnings).

During a memorable scene on the TV series *M\*A\*S\*H*, Father Mulcahy talked to a wounded soldier. The young man confessed that he made a battlefield deal with God:

If the Lord spared his life, then he would become a priest. Now the man faced a spiritual dilemma—God had saved him, and he had no desire to become a priest! I'm paraphrasing Father Mulcahy's response from memory. He reassured the soldier: "Don't worry, son. If everyone who ever promised to become a priest actually did, then the church would have a population explosion of priests!"

There are no atheists in a foxhole; however, it does not take folk long to lose their faith after the crisis. Perhaps this observation is too harsh. It might be more accurate to say that people lose any URGENCY about their faith on the far side of a disaster.

#### **IV. Jonah's Prayer**

It took Jonah a bit longer than most to hit his knees in prayer. But after 72 hours in the belly of the fish, he FINALLY prayed. THAT he prayed was not surprising. WHAT he prayed was quite a shock. Based upon his track record, one might expect a bit of whining and complaining combined with a plea for help. Instead of a petition, however, his prayer was filled with **praise**. It was a song of thanksgiving and trust in the midst of darkness and despair. He prayed like a man on top of the world rather than at the bottom of the ocean. The reluctant prophet declared (Jonah 2: 2; 9):

*In my distress, I called to the Lord, and he answered me.  
From the depths of the grave I called for help and you listened to my cry . . . .  
But I with a song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you.  
What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord!*

It took him a while to get there, but Jonah finally arrived at a place where he could trust and obey God. In an act of extreme faith, he praised God for his salvation BEFORE the deliverance occurred. Jonah remembered the Lord he served.

## **V. Deliverance**

Jonah ended his prayer with the words “*Salvation comes from the Lord!*” And so it does. Not even the dark depths could prevent God from hearing his servant’s cry. “*The Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the land.*” Granted, being spit out of fish’s gullet was not the most pleasant answer to prayer, but it beat the alternative! According to the record, Jonan did not complain. Once again God’s judgment and grace artfully combined to make a lasting impression upon the prophet.

Today we gather as God’s people in worship and fellowship. We represent a wide diversity of ages, stages, circumstances, and situations of life. It is not always apparent what others are going through. External smiles may disguise internal struggles.

### **Good time in life**

For some, this is a good time in life when the sun is shining and the waters are calm. There is no better time to cultivate a relationship with our heavenly Father through prayer and other spiritual disciplines. One of the striking features of Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the fish is that the man KNEW how to pray. Jonah 2 contains one of the most beautiful and moving prayers contained in Scripture. The prophet learned how to pray long before he set sail on the Mediterranean Sea.

I’ve talked before about taking the Red Cross *Advanced Life Saving Course* during college to qualify as a lifeguard. It’s the closest I’ve ever come to drowning! I’m a sinker rather than a floater, and it took all that I had to pass the course. But the instructors drilled into us that it was better to fail in the safety of the class than in a real life situation.

The best time to learn to swim is BEFORE we are tossed into the deep end. A benefit of faithfully practicing spiritual disciplines in the good times is that it prepares us for the bad times. And brothers and sisters, sooner or later, the bad times DO come. Although Jonah was a stubborn man, when push came to shove, he knew how to pray.

### **Discerning God’s call in your life**

Some come to church today seeking to discern God’s will in your life. Perhaps you seek general direction or specific intervention. You want to be obedient but are not sure what to do. My experience is there are times when we sense God’s specific direction in life. Other times we must interpret the circumstances around us. For the most part, the Holy Spirit does not provide us step-by-step directions like a GPS. Instead, we are given a compass point to by which to steer.

Listen for God’s voice. Prayerfully consider the Lord’s will for your life. Cultivate a spirit sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s touch. You may not hear an audible voice that says, “*Go northeast to Nineveh!*” But those who are faithful will find a way to follow in the footsteps of Jesus in daily life.

### **Running from God's call**

Others today have clearly heard God's call. During the past weeks, the Holy Spirit has convicted of things you need to change in life. Sin lurks within our minds and hearts. We need to give up a worldly habit, a physical addiction, an illicit relationship, a past grudge, future worry, and more. We need to cultivate prayer, Bible study, and worship. There is a ministry and mission that have touched our hearts.

Like Jonah, some here are fleeing from God's presence. The Lord has called you by name, and you want no part of the divine future. Remember that Jonah KNEW how to pray. However, he didn't want to talk to God because he knew what the Lord would say.

Sometimes God allows us to run away because some lessons can only be learned the hard way. Remember that Jonah remained in the belly of the whale three days and nights—a few minutes would have sufficed for me! For the hard hearted and headed, however, it may take the darkness of separation before we understand the glory of God's light.

Today it is time to stop running. Fall to your knees. Answer God's call. Come back home.

### **Storms of life**

Others are experiencing the storms of life, sinking under the dark waters. Your hesitant, halting prayers come from deep in the belly of the fish. Sometimes you don't even know how to pray. Recall Paul's words in Romans 8: 26-27:

*“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.”*

It is in the moments we feel least like praying that we are called to pray the most. In retrospect, we discover that these are the moments when we grow the most in our faith. We realize the God who seemed so distant was actually with us all along.

### **Conclusion**

Regardless of situation and circumstance, we are called to **pray**, in good times and bad, in sunshine and rain, on top of the mountain and at the bottom of the sea. God calls us by name, and we are invited to call upon the name of the Lord.

Hear again Jonah's prayer:

*In my distress, I called to the Lord, and he answered me.  
From the depths of the grave I called for help and you listened to my cry . . . .  
But I with a song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you.  
What I have vowed I will make good. **Salvation comes from the Lord!***

Amen!