

Jonah: *Faith in the Deep*  
Jonah 2:1-9

As promised, we are spending a few weeks in the prayer of Jonah because there is a great deal here that we can learn and apply to our lives. So, please stand and let us read Jonah's prayer in Jonah 2:1-9:

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup> saying,

"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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Then I said, 'I am driven away  
from your sight;

yet I shall again look  
upon your holy temple.'

<sup>5</sup> The waters closed in over me to take my life;  
the deep surrounded me;

weeds were wrapped about my head  
<sup>6</sup> 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.

When my life was fainting away,  
I remembered the Lord,

and my prayer came to you,  
into your holy temple.

<sup>8</sup> Those who pay regard to vain idols  
forsake their hope of steadfast love.

<sup>9</sup> But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to you;

what I have vowed I will pay.  
Salvation belongs to the Lord!"

My sermon will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Sense of Despair; 2) A Cry of Faith; and 3) The Gift of Faith.

### **I. The Sense of Despair**

Last week we stepped back to simply observe Jonah's experience as revealed in this prayer. If we take Jonah's words as a literal description of his experience, it seems as though Jonah literally descended into hell. Everything that Jonah could observe through his senses led him to utter hopelessness.

I want us to revisit Jonah's testimony for a moment, and as we imagine Jonah's experience, please place yourself into this story. Imagine what Jonah is seeing, what he is

feeling, what his body is enduring, what thoughts must be rushing through his mind. Set aside your own life for just a minute and take on Jonah's experience. Here is Jonah's testimony of how his situation looked and felt like, beginning with vs. 3: For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and billows passed over me. Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight.' The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.

Jonah is describing the experience of utter despair. He is describing the deepest darkness of human existence. Can you relate? Have you ever experienced despair?

Church, and particularly you who are younger, please pay very close attention to the painful, horrific situation that Jonah is in. When we encounter hardships, we often believe that no one understands our situation. We believe that our suffering is exceptional. We believe that no one has ever endured the kind of sadness, loss, loneliness, pain or suffering that we are currently enduring. That is simply not true. There are many, many stories of people in the Bible who endured unthinkable hardships. Are you barren and unable to have children? There are numerous women in the scriptures who understand your pain such as Sarai and Elizabeth. Have you been betrayed by your siblings? Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. Have you been struck down by a horrible disease along with the loss of close family members? Job is your biblical representative. Do you carry the burden of leading an ungrateful group of people who constantly whine and complain? Moses understands that burden. Has your heart been crushed by an adulterous spouse? Hosea understands that nightmare all too well.

The scriptures present very real and painful stories of very real and broken people who lived out their stories in relationship to God. Jonah's story is no exception. Jonah, however, represents a certain kind of suffering...it is the suffering that comes from God's own hand. It is the suffering of God's justice. It is the suffering that comes when we experience God as our enemy. Jonah writes, "For *you* cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas...all *your* waves and *your* billows passed over me." Jonah understands his current suffering to be the direct result of God's fierce anger against the prophet's rebellion. The cancer patient can find hope in the God who heals; the one who loses a loved one can find hope in a reunion that awaits in the life to come in God's presence; but what hope is there for the one who is pummeled by God in the deep? If God has cast us into the deep, who can save us?

As far as his senses are concerned, Jonah's plight is hopeless. Darkness surrounds him in the deep. As the weeds wrap around his face, he hears a hideous voice whispering, "You are driven away from His sight—you are doomed forever. Abandon all hope—you who have entered into the place of eternal torment." We can assume that the Enemy of our soul, the Accuser, was having his way with Jonah in the deep, convincing him that God had turned His face away...that all hope was lost. Hugh Martin writes:

If God is my enemy; if He and I are separated and put asunder; if He finally has done with me and has cast me out of His sight; then infinite darkness begins to settle down on my soul—irretrievable wreck for eternity is befalling me. In Thy presence is fulness of joy; out of Thy presence...is the second death for evermore.<sup>1</sup>

Friends, I don't know what your circumstances are this morning, but I hope that you can see that Jonah's situation is as dire as ever there was in human history. His disobedience and sin against God has landed him in the belly of Sheol...the center of hell itself. Everything that he can see and everything that he is experiencing tells him that there is no hope, that God has abandoned him, that his fate is sealed. His senses have left him in a place of utter despair. Have you had this experience? Is that how it looks to you now...as though you have no hope?

Every Sunday morning, I step into this sanctuary with the solemn awareness that there are souls present who are walking through the deepest darkness. Even this morning there are those among us who carry such a deep and heavy burden that they despair of any hope for deliverance. Perhaps it is cancer, perhaps it is divorce, perhaps it is the loss of a loved one, perhaps it is a wayward child, perhaps it is a world of painful consequences that awaits you for the sinful choices you have made. It is not an uncommon occurrence for human souls to find themselves in the deep where all that can be observed by the senses leads to hopelessness. But let us learn from Jonah. When all hope is lost, when we can see no way out, it is then that we must fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. We are not saved by the senses, we are saved by grace through FAITH. When we are in the deepest darkness, we must cry out to God in faith. And that is the turning point in Jonah's story.

## **II. A Cry of Faith**

Jonah testifies in vs. 1, "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."

Jonah finally prays. He prays out of his distress. Church, don't miss the purpose and meaning that often accompanies our times of distress...it is a season that is ripe for prayer. Matthew Henry writes:

When the heart is humbled, and softened, and made serious—then God expects our prayers ("in their affliction they will seek me early, seek me earnestly") and, though we bring our afflictions upon ourselves by our sins, yet, if we pray in humility and godly sincerity, we shall be welcome to the throne of grace, as Jonah was.<sup>2</sup>

Jean Calvin writes: God especially invites us to Himself when we are reduced to extremities.<sup>3</sup>

A time will come when our judgement is set, and prayer will no longer reach the Lord. But in the deep that we encounter in this life, no matter how dark and desperate our circumstances, there is hope still. We have yet the power to pray and the assurance of being heard. Matthew Henry writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Martin, Jonah; p 195.

<sup>2</sup> The Ultimate Commentary on Jonah: A Collective Wisdom on the Bible (Kindle Edition, 2016); p 248. This commentary features several commentaries on Jonah written by Barnes, Calvin, Clarke, Henry, MacLaren, Spurgeon, and Wesley.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 138.

There is a hell in the other world, out of which there is no crying to God with any hope of being heard. But whatever hell we may be in the belly of this world, we may there cry to God.<sup>4</sup>

Jonah calls out to the very God who has pummeled him in the deep. Jonah cries out to the God who has pursued him in the storm. Jonah cries out to God in faith, not because he thinks God is being unfair or that God is being unjust, but because Jonah *remembered the LORD*. In vs. 7 we read, “When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.” So, what did Jonah remember about the LORD that led him to cry out in faith?

First of all, we know that Jonah remembered the LORD in His holy temple. As a Jewish man, Jonah remembered the prayers of King Solomon when the temple was dedicated to God in 1 Kings 8:28-30. In that prayer, King Solomon prayed:

Have regard to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers towards this place. And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

Jonah remembered the Word of God. Jonah remembered that there was hope and forgiveness in the house of the LORD. Earlier in vs. 4, even though Jonah sensed that he was driven from God’s sight, he states “yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.” God promised to hear the prayers of His people in His holy temple. Forgiveness was available in the temple, where atonement was made for the sins of God’s people. Therefore, Jonah cries out to God in faith, and his testimony is “my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.” Even though God’s wrath had thrown Jonah into the sea for his sin and rebellion, Jonah did not limit his faith in God to his current experience. Jonah’s faith was informed by the Word of God.

Far too many people make up their minds about God based upon their current circumstances. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve seen people declare themselves to be atheists because they experienced hardship or because someone they loved experienced hardship. Their senses told them that if God was loving, He would never let good people suffer, thus there can be no God. Never mind that we live in an ordered universe; never mind that all creation points to the existence of a Creator; never mind the undeniable influence of Jesus of Nazareth—for so many people, feelings, intuition, and senses dictate what they believe to be true about God. But friends, listen: Our feelings cannot be trusted to determine what is true about God. We must look to what God has revealed about Himself in His Word. God’s Word reveals the nature of God as both fully just, and yet infinitely merciful. Jonah was experiencing God’s justice—it’s all his senses could see and discern, but then Jonah remembered the LORD...he remembered God’s promise of mercy for those who would repent and call upon His name.

As his soul was fainting away, Jonah no doubt remembered the promise that God made in 2 Chronicles 7:14: If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p 249.

and heal their land. Jonah cried to the LORD in faith. In turning his heart to the LORD, he turned away from his sinful rebellion and placed himself at the mercy of God, and God honored His promise. God forgave Jonah of his sin and “brought his life up out of the pit.”

Jonah would have also remembered God’s covenant that He made with Israel as revealed in God’s Word. God chose Israel, and God made a commitment to cherish His people even when they were stiff-necked and disobedient. Matthew Henry writes:

Jonah had been fleeing from God, but now he sees the folly of it, and returns to him by prayer. He draws near to that God from whom he had gone aside from and engages his heart to approach him. In prayer he has an eye to him, not only as the Lord, but as his God, a God in covenant with him for, thanks be to God, every transgression in the covenant does not throw us out of the covenant.<sup>5</sup>

Church, our sin may alienate us from God and lead us into a world of hurt. Our senses and emotions may lead us to conclude that God is done with us; but as those who have been adopted into the covenant of grace, our sin does not cast us out of God’s forever family. When you find yourself in the deep, remember God’s covenant of grace...and remember who made that covenant of grace possible for condemned souls. Remember Jesus.

In our darkest moments, when we remember the LORD and cry out to the LORD in faith, we must always remember that Christ is interceding for us as our High Priest, as our Representative, and He understands our pain, our suffering, and our loss. Christ endured the deepest darkness...He endured the Father turning His face away from the Son so that we would never have to endure the Father turning His face away from us. It is Christ who makes intercession for His Church, based upon His own merit and sacrifice. In Hebrews 4:14-16 we read: Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 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.

When you find yourself in a place of darkness and despair, cry out to God, and always, always, always invoke the name of Jesus. There is power in the name of Jesus. There is forgiveness in the name of Jesus. There is healing in the name of Jesus. There is salvation in the name of Jesus. Hope will always come to those who call upon His name.

Church, a time will soon come when our senses may tell us that all is lost; a season in the deep is inevitable for us all. When that time comes, it is then that we must raise up the shield of faith that repels the flaming arrows of despair. Your Savior is one simple, honest prayer away. There is nothing...no depression, no darkness, no loss, no pain, no suffering, no sinful act that can ever separate us from the love of God through His Son, Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

### **III. The Gift of Faith**

It has been the testimony of many that when they were in the deepest darkness, they found it almost impossible to pray and to believe in the Gospel. That should come as no surprise. When we walk through the deepest darkness, our strength is spent. In our weakness,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p 249.

we have no resource for faith that can be mustered in the flesh. Such is why we must pray for the gift of faith.

Remember in Ephesians 2:8 when Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God.” Jonah was in the deepest darkness. His soul was fainting away; but even there God made a way for Jonah to remember the LORD. God gave Jonah the gift of faith when he needed it most and deserved it the least.

Dear suffering soul, look for the gift of faith in the deep. You may receive the tiniest inkling of faith in that dark place, but remember that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains! You need just enough faith to remember the LORD. You need just enough faith to call upon the name of Jesus.

If you are able to cry out to God at all; if you are able to remember the LORD in the deep; it is because God has given you the gift of faith in your time of trial. Paul writes in Romans 8:26, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words...the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

Many years ago, I had a horrible experience that I’ll never forget. I had been asleep for some time when I awoke in the middle of the night with a horrible pain in my stomach. I went downstairs to avoid waking up my wife, but soon became violently sick. After vomiting for what seemed like hours, I began to black out. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, but for a moment I felt like my soul was fainting...I thought that I was dying. It was then that I remembered the LORD. In a matter of seconds, these words formed in my mind with gentleness and hope: The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me on the path of righteousness for His name’s sake. And yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” I was given a prayer to pray. The Spirit of God was writing the prayer for my soul, and it was my deepest comfort to pray that prayer with every ounce of my heart. I knew then that Jesus was interceding through that prayer to the Father, and that the Father was receiving that prayer and responding with His grace.

The peace of God that passes all understanding filled my spirit. My fear was gone, and I knew that I would be OK, whatever the outcome. I was with my Shepherd, and His presence comforted me.

Church, should you find yourself in the deep, remember the LORD. Practice your faith in the deep...whatever faith God gives you. Remember His promises, remember His covenants, and remember the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Fix your eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. Seek the LORD in prayer, and trust that He alone will lift you out of the pit.

Will you pray with me?

