

Jonah: *Redemptive Confinement*  
Jonah 2:1-9

As we return to Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish, there is still a bit more for us to glean before moving on to chapter three. Let us again stand and read 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!"

Many years ago, I read a book by Eugene Peterson entitled, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (show pic of book<sup>1</sup>). It's a book written for pastors that is largely based upon the book of Jonah. The book so changed my life and inspired my ministry that I later named my son Jonah in honor of its influence. Peterson's insightful work has deeply informed my message this morning that will fall under three subheadings: 1) Preparation for Prayer in the Deep; 2) Contemplation in Confinement; and 3) *Askesis*.

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[https://i5.walmartimages.com/seo/Under-the-Unpredictable-Plant-An-Exploration-in-Vocational-Holiness-Paperback-9780802808486\\_fedb4694-cc15-40e0-8fe3-d2ad538aa1ee.1f1fe9bea53a2225881c0af2fd3171df.jpeg?odnHeight=640&odnWidth=640&odnBg=FFFFFF](https://i5.walmartimages.com/seo/Under-the-Unpredictable-Plant-An-Exploration-in-Vocational-Holiness-Paperback-9780802808486_fedb4694-cc15-40e0-8fe3-d2ad538aa1ee.1f1fe9bea53a2225881c0af2fd3171df.jpeg?odnHeight=640&odnWidth=640&odnBg=FFFFFF)

## **I. Preparation for Prayer in the Deep**

We've taken a few weeks to unpack Jonah's experience that is revealed in his prayer from the belly of the great fish. Jonah recalls what it was like to be cast into the deep. He describes seeing the roots of the mountains at the bottom of the sea as weeds wrapped around his head. He describes coming into the land "whose bars closed upon me forever" and it was there, in "the belly of Sheol"...the Hebrew term for hell, that Jonah cried out to the LORD. According to Jonah's testimony, God answered his cry and delivered his life from eternal death. God "brought up his life from the pit".

It is only after Jonah has been saved from the belly of Sheol, after he has been rescued from 'the pit,' that he prays the prayer of thanksgiving that we are reading in chapter 2 while confined in the belly of the great fish.

In his book entitled *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Eugene Peterson makes several observations about Jonah's prayer that I think are incredibly insightful and worthy of our consideration.

Peterson writes:

So Jonah prayed. That Jonah prayed is not remarkable; we commonly pray when we are in desperate circumstances. But there is something very remarkable about the way Jonah prayed. He prayed a 'set' prayer. Jonah's prayer is not spontaneously original self-expression. It is totally derivative. Jonah had been to school to learn to pray, and he prayed as he had been taught. His school was the Psalms.<sup>2</sup>

Peterson then goes on to identify line by line how the words and thoughts of Jonah's prayers were gleaned from the Psalms he would have memorized as a Jewish prophet. On account of time, I will not read each corresponding passage, but here's what we find:

- 'my distress' is from Psalm 18:6 and 120:1
- 'Sheol' from 18:4-5
- 'all thy waves and thy billows passed over me' from 42:7
- 'from they presence' from 139:7
- 'upon thy holy temple' from 5:7
- 'the waters closed in over me' from 69:2
- 'my soul fainted within me' from 142:3
- 'into thy holy temple' from 18:6
- 'deliverance belongs to the LORD' from 3:8<sup>3</sup>

The form that Jonah uses is also one that was common in the Psalms. Given Jonah's circumstances, we might have expected Jonah to write a prayer of lament, but instead Jonah prays a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. According to OT scholar, James Bruckner, the Hebrew word for this psalm of praise was *todah*, and it typically consisted of four elements: 1) an introduction, including a summons to praise Yahweh and a summary of the theme; 2) a call to

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant-An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1992), p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 100-101.

the congregation to praise Yahweh; 3) narrative account, including the crisis in retrospect and the rescue, often using “I cried,” “you heard”, and “you intervened”, and 4) a vow to praise.<sup>4</sup>

Jonah’s prayer has most (if not all) of these elements, but not in any particular order. This prayer of thanksgiving, had it been offered in the temple, would have normally been accompanied with a sacrifice to Yahweh out of gratitude for being rescued from death due to illness, an accident, or a dangerous situation. This *todah* form of prayer and thanksgiving helps us understand why Jonah concludes his prayer with “I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay” in vs. 9. It also helps us to understand why the sailors made sacrifices and made vows to the LORD after they had been saved from the horrific storm at sea...they, too, were praying a prayer of thanksgiving and praise.

OK...now...why is this important? You didn’t come to church this morning to get a history lesson on the Psalms, so how does Jonah’s use of the Psalms in the deep make any difference in your life? Well, I’m getting to that!

Eugene Peterson articulates what many of us are thinking when it comes to prayer, and then he gives us an incredible insight. He writes:

Prayer, which we often suppose is truest when most spontaneous—the raw expression of our human condition without contrivance or artifice—shows up in Jonah when he is in the rawest condition imaginable as *learned*. Our surprise lessens when we consider language itself: we begin with inarticulate cries and coos, but after years of learning we become capable of crafting sonnets. Are infant sounds more honest than Shakespeare’s sonnets? They are *both* honest, but the sonnets have far more experience in them. Honesty is essential in prayer, but we are after more. We are after as much of life as possible—all of life if possible—brought to expression in answering God. That means learning a form of prayer adequate to the complexity of our lives.<sup>5</sup>

Church, it is comforting that the Spirit intercedes for us in our times of hardship with “groans too deep for words” as we observed last Sunday in Romans 8, but Peterson’s point here is worthy of our attention. The Psalms provide the language of prayer that captures the complexity of our human condition. The more time we spend in the Psalms, the more equipped we will be to pray in the deep.

Again, Peterson says it better than I ever could:

The Psalms are the school for people learning to pray. Fundamentally, prayer is our response to the God who speaks to us. God’s word is always first. He gets the first word in, always. We answer. The Psalms are [the means by] which our Lord the Spirit leads us to get out of ourselves, to rescue our prayers from self-absorption and set us on the way to God-responsiveness. Israel and Church put the Psalms into our hands and say, “Here, this is our text. Practice these prayers so that you will learn the full range and the vast depth of your lives in response to God.”<sup>6</sup>

You might recall my story from last Sunday when I was so sick that I thought I was dying. As I was blacking out, I remembered the LORD, and immediately Psalm 23 was given to me, and I prayed those words with all my heart. I prayed a prayer that was *learned*, but that prayer was as

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<sup>4</sup> James Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 78.

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, p 101.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 104.

raw and as honest as any prayer I have ever prayed in my entire life. There is nothing as powerful and as comforting as praying God's Word when we find ourselves in the deep. For some of us, that means praying the prayers of lament that we find in the Psalms. For others, it is praying the prayers of thanksgiving...or both! At the minimum, we should pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, right? The Lord's Prayer is a learned prayer, but who would deny that the Lord's Prayer is powerful and adequate for the complexity of our lives when we pray it?

When we read the prayers of Jesus, we find earnest, heartfelt prayers that seem original to His voice, such as the high priestly prayer in John 17. But if you are listening to Jesus in the deep...when His life is ebbing away on a Roman cross...Jesus is praying Psalm 22! When Jesus cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", He is literally praying Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

If praying the Psalms was powerful and adequate for Jesus in the deep, as it was for Jonah, we should give careful attention to the study of the Psalms. A time will come when we find ourselves in the deep, and there is no better preparation for prayer in the deep than memorizing and praying the Psalms and other biblical prayers.

## **II. Contemplation in Confinement**

I've mentioned to you on several accounts that this little story of Jonah is full of irony. One of the most ironic observations is that Jonah, the prophet of God, refuses to pray in the storm when, in contrast, the heathen sailors all call out to their gods. Even when the captain of the ship awakens Jonah and commands the prophet to pray, Jonah refuses. It's only when Jonah has been cast into the deep and then swallowed by a great fish that we finally hear Jonah pray. I've touched on this irony before, but I want us to take a deeper look for just a moment.

Peterson observes that:

Prayer is the most deeply human action in which we can engage—the attentiveness and responsiveness of the human being before God—this is *human*. When we look at the uniqueness of the human experience across the ages, prayer sticks out as a behavior that is at the center of the human enterprise.<sup>7</sup>

Sadly, based on their own reporting, most American pastors spend very little time in contemplative prayer.<sup>8</sup> I wish I could say that your pastor is a shining exception...but then I would be lying. So why is it that pastors, along with many busy, faithful, hard-working church members and officers so often neglect prayer?

Peterson is awkwardly accurate when he writes:

The moment any of us embarks on work that deals with our fellow humans at the core and the depths of being where God and sin and holiness are at issue, we become at that same moment subject to countless dangers, interferences, pretenses, and errors that we would have been quite safe from otherwise. So-called "spiritual work" exposes us to

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<sup>7</sup> Peterson, p 111.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p 111 "It is rare to find American pastors who are true contemplatives, who embrace the disciplines that nurture a continuous and ready access to the soul and God, who understand themselves as persons of prayer set in a community of prayer."

spiritual sins. Temptations of the flesh, difficult as they are to resist, are at least easy to detect. Temptations of the spirit usually show up disguised as invitations to virtue.<sup>9</sup>

I think Jonah is a perfect example of what Peterson just said. Jonah is a man of God. He is busy for God. He is confident that he is hard at work doing God's will. But the temptations of the spirit have corrupted his heart. Jonah has fallen into the trap that many pastors, missionaries, and well-intended church goers fall into every day: he has forgotten his own need for God amidst his great works for God. His ministerial pride, along with his nationalistic commitments, have led him to set aside prayer...and it leads him straight into the storm.

Peterson writes: This vocation-exacerbated pride usually originates in a hairline split between personal faith and public ministry. In our personal faith we believe that God has created, saved, and blessed us. In our ministerial work we embark on a career of creating, saving, and blessing on behalf of God...we set about acting on behalf of the Savior. In our zeal to proclaim the Savior and enact His commands, we lose touch with our own basic and daily need for the Savior...most of us end up so identifying our work with Christ's work that Christ Himself recedes into the shadows. The work may be wonderful, but we ourselves turn out to be 'not so wonderful', becoming cranky, pushy and patronizing in the process.<sup>10</sup>

I can relate with Jonah, and I can relate with everything that Peterson just said. It is so easy to allow our busyness for God and our activity on God's behalf to eclipse our personal, daily need for the Savior. Ironically, those of us who hold the highest offices of leadership in the Church are often those who pray the least.

And here's what the story of Jonah tells us about that: our prayerlessness will not end well. As Peterson states it: If we do not develop a contemplative life adequate to our calling, the very work we do and our very best intentions, insidiously pride-fueled as they inevitably become, destroy us and all with whom and for whom we work.<sup>11</sup>

Church, take this teaching to heart, and hold me accountable to take this teaching to heart. The contemplative practice of prayer fuels the Christian life and all of life. Prayerlessness will sink our ship...or at least get us thrown off the ship!

I know that's hard to hear, and many of us are right now squirming in our seats, but hear the good news of the Gospel according to Jonah: God does not give up on His prayerless servants. Instead, He meets them in the deep, and He leads them to pray in the place of confinement.

The belly of the great fish is not a place anyone would choose to hang out. It should be, for all intents and purposes, a place of death. Instead, this suffocating place of confinement is exactly the place where Jonah remembers his personal need for a Savior...it is a place that leads him to pray...it is a place where Jonah's spirit is reborn.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p 113.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p 113.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p 114.

I have a friend who recently was diagnosed with a very serious form of cancer. He has been taking treatments now for a few months, and those treatments are horrendous. He is constantly sick, weak, and often bedridden either at home or in the hospital. Prior to his battle with cancer, my friend lived at a frantic pace, like most of us. He was always on the go, and those of us who have known him for years would agree that he has been an outstanding Christian man and leader. But there has been a change in my friend since he entered into this place of confinement. Because his activity is limited...because his choices are few...because of his weakness in the body...he has become a man of deep and devoted prayer. Almost weekly he sends me a text on Tuesdays stating that he is praying for me because he knows that Tuesdays are my writing days. I mentioned to him that my brother is going through a divorce, so he has been praying for my brother, even as he has been praying for my wife, our marriage, and our children. I have been so humbled by his prayers of intercession on my behalf, and when I mentioned my gratitude, he said, "I'm not a big fan of cancer, but this whole experience has shown me how little I have prayed throughout my life. Cancer has ignited my prayer life. I have time to pray, and I feel closer to God than ever before."

Church, so much of our spiritual growth does NOT happen in our frantic activity for God. It happens in the place of confinement. The Apostle Paul wrote a great portion of the New Testament from the confines of a prison cell. Martin Luther King wrote one of his most inspired letters from a jail in Birmingham. Many of the fathers and mothers of the faith spent years in monasteries or other similar places of confinement in order to focus their hearts and desires on the Lord. King David's faith grew stronger in a cave than it did on a throne. All throughout history, God has met His servants in the place of confinement, and it is there...where options are limited, where distractions are quieted, where comfort is compromised, where the needs are great and opportunities are denied...it is there in the deep that God reminds us of our need to pray. It is there in the prayers of our confinement that God reminds us of our need for Him.

Friends, the place of confinement is either the place we end up against our will, or the place we choose to enter into as a spiritual discipline. Either way, our souls thirst and wither if we neglect the contemplative life of prayer.

### III. *Askesis*

The ancients had a word for the practice of confinement, concentration, and prayer. It is the Greek word, *askesis*. I learned this word from Eugene Peterson many years ago. Here's what he writes:

The belly of the fish was the unattractive opposite to everything Jonah had set out for. The belly of the fish was a dark, dank, and probably stinking cell. The belly of the fish is Jonah's introduction to *askesis*. *Askesis* is to spirituality what a training regimen is to an athlete. It is not the thing itself, but the means to maturity and excellence. Otherwise, we are at the mercy of glands and the weather. The particular *askesis* that each person embraces varies, but without an *askesis*, a time and place of confinement/concentration, there is no energy of spirit.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp 74-75.

As I mentioned a minute ago, we can either be intentional about practicing some form of *askesis*, or we can wait until *askesis* is forced upon us by a heart attack, a round of cancer, unemployment, some time in jail, or other unsavory forms of confinement. Either way, one of the greatest values of *askesis* is the elimination of our “god lust.” In the belly of confinement, God reminds us that we are not gods.

When we are forced into involuntary *askesis*, certain realities are predictable. Peterson writes: Suddenly, instead of mindlessly and compulsively pursuing an abstraction—success, or money, or happiness—the person is reduced to what is actually there, to the immediately personal—family, geography, body—and begins to live freshly in love and appreciation. The change is a direct consequence of a forced realization of human limits. Pulled out of a fantasy of a god condition and confined to a reality of the human condition, the person is surprised to be living not a diminished life but a deepened life, not a crippled life but a zestful life. God-intensity begins to replace self-absorption; mature wisdom begins to supplant self-importance.<sup>13</sup>

I have witnessed this transformation on countless occasions, including in my own life. Involuntary *askesis* will likely find us all at some point in our lives, and I want to remind you that there is great spiritual value in those seasons IF you are willing to turn your heart back to God. That was true for Jonah, it has been true for me, it will be true for all of us if we are willing to seek the Lord in those seasons of confinement.

That said, I think we can all agree that the intentional practice of *askesis* sounds like an attractive alternative to cancer or prison! So, how can we practice concentration and confinement in such a way as to reap the same spiritual benefits as those times of involuntary confinement? There is no simple formula. Peterson articulates the tension:

*Askesis* is voluntary disaster...it is immersion in an environment in which our capacities are reduced to nothing or nearly nothing and we are at the mercy of God to shape His will in us. We need to find our own place, carve out our own time. It is hard because, however necessary we believe it to be, it does not *feel* necessary.<sup>14</sup>

Church, our feelings will not lead us to practice *askesis*. But without confinement, concentration, and a deep awareness of our limits, we can easily become a “Jonah”, no matter how noble our intentions.

I’m not going to give you a formula for *askesis*, and I’m intentionally going to leave you with more questions than answers. To be perfectly honest, I have not mastered the practice of *askesis*, and I’m embarrassed to admit that to you. That said, like many of you, my greatest seasons of spiritual growth have come in seasons of involuntary confinement, so I am deeply motivated to form my own practice of *askesis* in the days to come. I encourage you to pick up a copy of Peterson’s book (show pic) to learn more about intentionally practicing *askesis*.

One last thought before we close. The great Oxford historian of modern history, Herbert Butterfield wrote many years ago that what Christians do in prayer is the most significant factor in the shaping of history—more significant than technology and art. In light of that conviction,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p 89.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p 90.

and given the loss of monks and the lack of contemplation amongst Christian leaders in the Protestant church, Butterfield writes to the church and states, "...a great responsibility falls on us to give something of ourselves to contemplation and silence and listening to the still small voice."<sup>15</sup>

Church, we must learn to wait on the Lord. Let us commit to the practice of *askesis*...let us commit to a place and a time...however that looks for you. Let us seek the life that is not diminished, but deepened...not a crippled life, but a zestful life. As Jesus said, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all the other things shall be added unto you." Let us pray.

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<sup>15</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *Writings on Christianity and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 268.