

Jonah: Return to His Presence

Jonah 2:1-10

As we return to our journey through Jonah, we will return one last time to the prayer of the prodigal prophet in the belly of the great fish. Please stand and let us read Jonah 2:1-10.

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, 2 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.

3 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.

4 Then I said, ‘I am driven away

from your sight;

yet I shall again look

upon your holy temple.’

5 The waters closed in over me to take my life;

the deep surrounded me;

weeds were wrapped about my head

6 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.

⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols

forsake their hope of steadfast love.

⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving

will sacrifice to you;

what I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

We will look at our text under three subheadings: 1) An Honest but Suspect Prayer; 2) In His Presence; and 3) Humbled.

I. An Honest but Suspect Prayer

One of the reasons I love the story of Jonah is because it speaks to us on multiple levels. We learn much about God’s nature; we learn much about human nature; and all the while this story points beyond itself and serves as a sign that ultimately points to the Gospel. Because of these various angles of learning, we have spent three weeks unpacking Jonah’s prayer.

Now, as we return to Jonah’s prayer for the fourth week in a row, you are rightfully asking, “What could we possibly find in this prayer that we have not already observed?” Well, there’s at

least one last awkward observation that we have to acknowledge because it's there, and it represents a tension that we will see up close and in living color in the second half of this story.

If we're being honest about Jonah's prayer...as beautiful as it is...as honest as it is...as poetic as it is...as wonderfully based upon the Psalms as it is...we must also acknowledge that it's awkwardly "Jonah-centric." OT scholar James Bruckner observes that Jonah employs the word "I" ten times and the word "my" on seven occasions in eight verses of the prayer (vss. 2-9).¹ He also uses the word "me" seven times in those same verses. Listen to the prayer again but this time listen for the self-centered language:

"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.
3 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.
4 Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.'
5 The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
6 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.
8 Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

I'm sorry. Once you see it, you can't unsee it! Just about the time we begin to like Jonah, we find reason to suspect that he is still...Jonah.

Jonah has been saved by God's unmerited grace. Jonah is sincerely grateful. But Jonah is still Jonah! His interpretation of what happened still has a "Jonah" flavor to it. He still thinks that his piety as a Jewish man had a role to play in God hearing his prayer and in his consequent salvation.

¹ James Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary*, p 80.

Look again at vs. 7 when Jonah states: When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

At first blush, there's nothing overly alarming with that phrase, and we can be grateful that God hears our prayers even in the deepest darkness, right? But consider the fact that in most instances in the Old Testament, when people were in dire situations, their testimony is not they remembered the LORD, but that the LORD remembered them! For example, Genesis 30, when it appears that Rachel is barren and her annoying sister Leah has birthed six sons for their husband Jacob, we read in Genesis 30:22, "Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb."

In Exodus 2, when the Israelites are suffering unthinkable atrocities at the hands of the Egyptians, we read in vs. 24, "And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob."

In Judges 16:28, after Sampson had been blinded, chained, and humiliated, he cries out to God, "O LORD God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I might be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes." God apparently remembers Sampson because his supernatural strength returns, and Sampson takes out 3000 Philistines.

In 1 Samuel 1: 11, Hannah pleads with God to grant her a son, and she prays, "O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life..." We read a bit later in vss. 19-20, "And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son."

Think of how different we would think of Jonah's deliverance from the belly of Sheol if Jonah prayed, "When my life was fainting away, the LORD remembered me, and He brought up my life from the pit." Do you see how every aspect of God's saving act would be attributed to God and God alone? Instead, even though Jonah concludes his prayer with the declaration, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!", we can't help but wonder if Jonah somehow attributes a little of his good fortune to the fact that when his life was fainting away, *he* remembered the LORD, and *his* prayer came to God in His holy temple.

It's not only Jonah's self-centered language that is concerning here. Note also that Jonah never repents. He doesn't admit that his rebellion was wrong. That's awkward, right? Jonah clearly sinned against God in his unwillingness to obey the call to Nineveh and in his flight to Tarshish, but Jonah never concedes that he sinned, and he doesn't ask for forgiveness.

Now, like some OT scholars, we might assume that Jonah repented of his rebellion and his horrible attitude towards the Ninevites, but then we read vss. 8-9: Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.

Why, in the heart of this prayer of thanksgiving, does Jonah compare himself to idol worshippers? Who is Jonah referring to? The heathen sailors who were exemplary in their prayers, their intentions, their compassion, and their obedience to God? The same heathen who have already prayed, offered sacrifices and made vows to the LORD long before Jonah even considered offering his first prayer to God?

This part of Jonah's prayer reminds us of the parable Jesus tells of the Pharisee and the tax-collector in Luke 18. The Pharisee sounds a lot like Jonah when he prays in Luke 18:11, "God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector..."

Jonah can't help but stick it to the Gentiles one more time, even as he sits in the belly of a great fish due to his horrible attitude towards Gentiles! The irony is so thick you can cut it with a knife, and that irony becomes painfully obvious as we get into chapter four (sometime in the next year or two, I promise).

Church, don't miss this: Jonah has been thrust into the deep due to his disobedience and rebellion against God; he has been rescued from the pit of hell when he cried out to God in desperation; he is legitimately grateful for God's saving work even before he is spit out on dry land; but Jonah still has issues! And that's to be expected.

Bruckner astutely writes:

Jonah prays what he is capable of praying—and not more. God accepts the prayer for what it is: a stiff but true expression of thanks for not drowning. Plainly put, Jonah has looked toward God. It is enough for his deliverance. God will deal with his protest/running issues later. God answers those who call out in distress whether their issues of protest are resolved or not. He delivers those who call out in times of trouble. He accepts Jonah's thanks and his lack of repentance because he accepts Jonah's protest, not as sin but as a welcome dialogue.²

I think Bruckner has made a profound insight here. Jonah is simply being honest. And though his attitude is honestly self-centered, and his lack of compassion for the Gentiles remains an issue that will need to be dealt with later, the key here is that Jonah has turned back toward the LORD. Instead of fleeing the presence of God, he has sought the presence of God. By God's grace, the relationship between Jonah and His God has been restored...and for now, that is enough.

II. In His Presence

One of the most disturbing images in the story of Jonah is captured in the threefold repetition of Jonah's intent: to run away from the presence of the LORD (twice in vs. 3, again in vs. 10). Sin, in all its many expressions, leads us to turn away from God and to avoid His presence whenever and wherever possible. There's only one problem: there is nowhere that we can flee from God's presence!

² Ibid., p 81.

The 139th Psalm reads (vss. 7:12):

Where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

Jonah's testimony validates the 139th Psalm. God's presence is everywhere, all the time...even in the deep...even in the belly of Sheol. But even though God's presence is always with us, we are free to turn away from God's presence. We are free to go about our lives pretending that God is not there, insisting that God does not exist. We are free to create our own gods and to worship whatever idol we choose. We are free to rebel against God's call and run in the opposite direction. But here is what the story of Jonah tells us: God pursues us. God pursues us with His grace. God pursues us in the storms of our lives. God pursues us in our times of suffering. God pursues us even to the very gates of hell. God does not turn away from us, even when we have worked so very hard at turning away from Him.

And here's something else that we can learn from Jonah's story: should we turn back to the LORD and call upon His name, we will be saved. As Paul writes in Romans 10:13, "All who call upon the name of the LORD shall be saved."

Jonah doesn't have to have perfect theology. Jonah doesn't have to get his life squared away and adjust his attitude towards his enemies. Jonah doesn't have to pretend that he is somebody that he's not. God receives Jonah as he is, and God saves Jonah as he is. Jonah is still a mess, but God is content to work in and through Jonah because Jonah is now content to live his life in God's presence, not running away from His presence. Again, Bruckner says it well:

God does not expect that everyone who praises or thanks Him will have resolved every doubt or question concerning the nature of the world or existence. Jonah still disagrees with Yahweh concerning Nineveh. Yet this does not stop him from praising God...this does not stop Yahweh from receiving his thanksgiving. There is a rich and complex relationship. Jonah's piety is real, and so is his protest. Jonah can continue to protest, but he cannot continue to run.³

When I was in my early 20's, I disagreed with God about a great many things! I disagreed when it came to souls spending eternity in hell. I disagreed about any number of issues regarding sexuality. I had issues with various stories in the Bible, including Jonah! Many of us have issues with God...we are all, in some way, like Jonah.

Church, disagreeing with God has biblical precedent, and God allows protest and disagreement among those who belong to Him. Moses, Abraham, Paul, Peter, Jonah...there is a long list of people who doubted God and/or questioned God. However, running away from God's presence is a different matter. When we turn away from God, when we run away from God's presence, we stop learning. The dialogue breaks down, and we look to some other god or gods for answers, meaning, and purpose. Such is why it is so important for us to look closely at this story of Jonah.

³ Ibid., p 86.

God is content to be in a relationship with us, even when we are stubborn, self-centered, and wrong just as any loving parent is content to be in a relationship with their children when they are stubborn, self-centered, and wrong. I expect my children to have issues. Those issues don't surprise me, and I'm quite content to love my children and father my children through those issues as they mature into adulthood. That all breaks down, however, if my children flee from my presence. What is true in the natural points to what is true in the spiritual.

God has saved us through His only Son that we might enjoy a relationship in His presence. That relationship is rich; it is complex; it's not always easy or comfortable; but it's always good!

Sinclair Ferguson writes:

What is important is that we should be brought back to live in the presence of God, and to know both the shame and the exhilaration of the restoration of grace. Increasingly we need to be convinced that the most important thing in the world, in our personal lives, our evangelism, and our worship, is the presence of God. All other things are secondary and should serve this great end. This is the goal of our salvation ultimately, that we might be presented before the presence of the glory of God. God intends to make us conscious of His presence now as well as then, and He is prepared to go to any lengths to do so.⁴

Friends, God loves you more than you will ever know, and He is here, even now, eager to have a personal relationship with each one of us. The scriptures are redundant about God's desire to live in relationship with His imperfect creatures. What we cannot do is run from God. What we must do is turn back to God. Isaiah writes:

Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:6-7).

III. Humbled

Chapter 2 ends with vs. 10: And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. We have just a few things to notice here before we close.

First, we should note that the LORD "spoke" to the fish. Now, I'm not going to lie...this biblical witness that God speaks to fish has truly inspired my prayer life! In fact, my dad and I will be praying later today for God to speak to the fish on our behalf!

It is remarkable to think that God can, at any time, communicate with His creation. The story of Jonah actually reveals God's activity in nature on several occasions including His sending of the great wind in 1:4, the calming of the storm in 1:16, the appointing of the great fish in vs. 1:17, God speaking to the fish in 2:10, God appointing the leafy plant to grow overnight in 4:6, God's provision of a worm to kill the plant in 4:7, and God's provision of a scorching east wind in 4:8. The presence of God, including God's creative power and majesty, are always evident in the natural world. That singular observation should cause us to fear God, but human beings are remarkably capable of ignoring God's presence. Paul writes in Romans 1:18-20:
18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it

⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *Man Overboard: The Story of Jonah*, p 33.

to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

If we are humble enough to admit it, God's power in creation and the witness of His presence is inescapable and altogether remarkable.

Due to all the rain this Spring, I finally planted my garden this past week. Right now, there are dozens of seeds lying buried in dirt in my yard. Those seeds don't need me to tell them what to do, nor do I have any power to manipulate them. And yet, in each one of those seeds, is the code and content to yield plants that bear hundreds of seeds when married with soil, water, and sunlight, each according to its kind. So, which came first, the plant or the seed? That question alone should lead you to worship God! Watch the industrious labor of honeybees, upon which the world is hopelessly dependent for a massive percentage of our fruits and vegetables, and there you will see the handiwork of God! The beauty of the lily, the vastness of our galaxy, the power of the ocean, the thunder's roll and the setting sun all bear witness to God's presence. We are without excuse. We know that God is there, and that should humble us every minute of the day.

Finally, we must acknowledge that Jonah re-entered the world by means of vomit. There is nothing glorious about the word VOMIT! That is true in the Hebrew language just as it is in English and every language throughout the world. OT scholar Kevin Youngblood writes: YHWH's choice to have the fish 'vomit' Jonah onto dry ground was likely intended to humble the prophet who, though grateful for God's salvation, retained a dangerous pride. In the Old Testament the image of vomit is consistently negative. It can signify divine judgment, but most relevant for the present context is the use of the image as a symbol of humiliation. We can imagine Jonah in this humiliating situation when he hit the ground, covered in fish vomit. God's chosen means of salvation appears to take aim at this prophet's misplaced pride.⁵

Church, our time in the deep, and God's infinite mercy upon sinful souls, should always lead us to be humbled. There is no place for arrogance or pride in the Kingdom of God and the Body of Christ. The story of Jonah reveals a God who pursues us, and a God who is quite capable of addressing our pride and arrogance. Like the prodigal son who ends up eating pig food, we often need a good dose of humility before we are willing to come to our senses and return to the Father. Let us consider it a gift of grace when have been humbled, even if that means walking in the vomit of our own humiliation. Better to be humbled in the vomit of God's deliverance than to be proud in the belly of Sheol, amen?

At this point in the story, we cannot help but think that Jonah has been humbled. He has been tossed off a ship by heathen sailors due the storm of his disobedience. He has been delivered from the pit of hell, swallowed by a great fish, and he now finds himself alive but covered in fish vomit. You would think that would humble just about anybody. You would think...!

At any rate, we'll pick up the story here in a few weeks. For now, I want to close with an appeal to each person within the sound of my voice, and here it is: stop running from God. God is not

⁵ Kevin Youngblood, *Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament*, p 118.

your Enemy. You have an Enemy, and he is a Liar who always tells you what you want to hear, and his lies have led you to the storm you are currently experiencing. Turn back to God...do it now. Call upon the name that saves. Call upon the name of Jesus, the only One who suffered Hell on your behalf so that you might have a restored relationship with your Father in heaven. Call upon the name of the Lord, and you will be saved! This is the good news of the Gospel, and it is TRUE!

If you are already saved and have a personal relationship with the LORD, then commit to walk humbly with your God. Set aside any pride, arrogance, or prejudice. God is looking for those who know they have been saved by grace and are humble of heart to share the good news of God's grace and God's loving presence with a hurting world. God has called us to Nineveh...and that call is not optional. Let us pray.