

"Our Greatest Help In Deep Distress"

Have you ever noticed how often we use watery words to describe hard times? *"I'm in deep water now, I'm drowning, I'm overwhelmed. I'm going under."* The terrorist group Hamas called their brutal attack on Israeli civilians *"The Aqsa Flood."* Anthony Blinken, the United States Secretary of State, said that when he saw pictures of civilian casualties, he was *overwhelmed*. These word pictures are familiar in most cultures. When Scripture uses these kinds of words, it's not only telling the story of something that happened but also evoking a feeling with which we can all identify. **Psalm 69:1-2** says: *Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck ²I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.* Jonah is actually quoting different Psalms in **Jonah 2** as he tells us what happened to him.

He breaks into poetry because the words need to touch our hearts. Notice the structure in **Jonah 2**. The outline of what happened is found in just two verses, the first and last verse. **2:1.** *Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish.* **2:10** *And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.* Then, in **verses 2-9**, you have a psalm or poem. This Psalm follows the form of a Psalm of thanksgiving, which means the opening line tells you what the whole Psalm is expressing thanks about. It's like someone getting up to share a testimony. They get up and say: *"I want to thank God for answering a prayer and saving my life."* Then, they tell you what the crisis was and then what God did for them. So, the opening statement tells us exactly what the heart of the Psalm is about. **Verse 2:** *"I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me.*

Now, everything else in this Psalm is designed to impress this truth on our hearts. Why? Because we need to know that, like Jonah,

**I. NO MATTER HOW DEEP OUR DISTRESS
WE CAN CALL ON THE LORD FOR HELP.**

In **verses 3-5**, He describes the crisis. He 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.* He sees that God is the one who is controlling the circumstances overwhelming him! **Verse 4**: *Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight, yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'* The Hebrew here is implying a wish or a question. "*Will I look again at your holy temple?*" In **Verse 5**, Jonah wants to make sure that we understand how bad it was: *The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head.* God wants us to identify with Jonah's distress because all of us have to face some deep water.

It's not always our fault, but sometimes...

A. Sometimes, we have to admit that the reason we are in deep water is because we have disobeyed God.

The Westminster Confession has a statement about the deep water that Christians can get into. After saying that all who belong to Christ can never ultimately be lost, it says *nevertheless... they can fall into grievous sins and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded, hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.*¹ This is what happened with Jonah. He hurt others. The sailors lost all their property and were afraid for their lives. He brought temporal, earthly judgments on Himself. If you find yourself in Jonah's situation, learn the lesson he learned. When he was sinking down, he looked up. He called out to God and found grace and help.

B. When you are in deep water, even if it is your own fault, don't think you cannot call on God.

Psalm 107:17-21 says: *Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities. 18 They loathed*

all food and drew near the gates of death. 19 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. 20 He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave. 21 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. When we're in trouble, and it's our own fault, and we get overwhelmed and desperate and call on God, does God say: "I'm sorry. If it wasn't your fault or if you had asked for help a little earlier, I could have helped, but it is too late now. You are so deep not even I can lift you up again"? No. Look at **Jonah 2:6** *at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.* He uses this poetic image of the roots of the mountains and the bars of the earth to say he was as deep as he could get, beyond escape. But notice the two little words that come next: *Yet you....* Those two words, *Yet you*, those two little words say so much. They point us to our greatest help in our deepest distress. They show the remarkable deliverance and the dramatic difference between the before and the after when we cry out to God.

I remembered a remarkable story of deliverance this week. The story of the 33 Chilean miners who were trapped 2,000 feet almost half a mile underground after a cave-in blocked the main shaft in their mine on August 5, 2010. There was no way out. They were in a large room but had no idea if anyone would or could reach or rescue them.

On the surface above, a rescue team started trying to drill exploratory holes to try to locate where the men were. Imagine drilling 2000 feet through rock and soil, just prospecting with tiny boreholes for where the men might be. Seventeen days later, on the 8th exploratory drilling, the bit returned to the surface with a note attached to it: "*We are well in the shelter the 33.*" For 69 days, the men were in survival mode. They ate two spoonfuls of tuna, a sip of milk, and a little morsel of peaches every other day. During that time, the rescuers called in help from NASA. They designed a capsule 21 inches in diameter and 13 feet tall, and they drilled a hole down to these men and sent the capsule down and brought every one of them out alive.

No one had ever been trapped underground that long and lived to tell about it. All the men gave thanks to the rescue team that had worked around the clock. But they also gave thanks to God. When the full story came out, they told how one of the miners named Jose Henriquez was known to be a strong Christian. On day one, he had whispered to a friend *God is the only way out of this*. The friend stood up in front of all the other miners and said, *Don Jose we know you're a Christian man and we need you to lead us in prayer will you?*

From that moment, Jose became known as, *"the pastor"* to his fellow miners. He dropped to his knees and told them that they should also do so because when you pray, you have to humble yourself. He began his prayer: *"No somos los mejores hombres." We aren't the best men, but Lord, have pity on us. Jesus Christ, our Lord, let us enter the sacred throne of your grace, We are sinners, and we need you.*" Just about everyone was on his knees. *"We want you to make us stronger and help us in this hour of need, there's nothing we can humanly do without your help.... Please, Lord. Take charge of this."* For the rest of the time, he led them in daily Bible studies and in prayer. God often works through human instruments, but in the darkest and most desperate distress, ultimately, it is only God who can deliver us. And it's his Amazing Grace that he does this over and over throughout our lives, and ultimately, spiritually, he promises this for all of eternity.

Jonah says: *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.* The word *"yet"* reminds us God delivers us in spite of our circumstances and in spite of our sins. Maybe you've heard that the Lord will not hear you if you have sinned. Well, **Psalm 66:18** says, *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the LORD would not have heard me.* But that's not a call for despair. That's a call to repentance. That's not saying past sins exclude you from God's help. That's saying that you cannot be asking for God to bless you while *at the same time cherishing sins against him*. But we have to know that God hears our prayers not because we deserve to be heard but because he is a God of steadfast love. You don't have to wait till you're sinking to start praying. If you're a child of

God, prayer should be the very breath of your life and your first recourse for handling every challenge.

II. WHEN WE CALL ON GOD FOR HELP, HIS STEADFAST LOVE WILL LIFT US UP.

Look at **verses 7-8**: *"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.*

Jonah says: "I had sinned. *I hardened my heart and went my own way. Because of your judgment, I was as far away from you as is humanly possible. My life was leaving me. But at that deepest point of sin and lostness, I remembered you, LORD, and released a prayer.*" That prayer, like the last bubble slipping out of the lips of a drowning man, rose up all the way up to the heart of the God of steadfast love.

Do you know what God gives you when he gives you grace?

A. When God gives you grace, He gives you a loyalty and a love that you do not deserve.

That's what it means. The Hebrew word translated *steadfast love* is *hesed*. This is the same word Jonah uses at the end of the book when he says, in **Jonah 4:2**, He knew God was a God *abounding in steadfast love*. Actually, there are three key Biblical and theological terms that are used to describe the LORD in the climactic statement found in **Jonah 4:2**. Jonah says, 1.) *I knew that you are a gracious God*. That means he shows us favor we do not deserve. 2.) *And merciful*. He treats us with tender compassion. 3) *abounding in steadfast love* that is a tenacious, faithful, lasting love that will not let us go. This is what Jonah cried out for. It's what we need over and over again. And – here's the thing: we have this in the LORD!

1. Sometimes, we fail to grasp the beauty of God's steadfast love because we've lost sight of how deep our need is. We slip into thinking that it's not a big deal to say "no" to God and go our own way.

Apparently, this is how Jonah felt. We are not God. We are not as good as God. We are called to love God and obey him. When we refuse to do that, we are being sinful and foolish. We run from God's authority, rationalizing, our plans instead of submitting to God's will - that is sin. The descriptive words Jonah uses in **Jonah 2**, "*distress,*" "*the depths of the grave,*" which is literally *sheol*, the place of the dead. And then the phrase, "*I am driven from your sight,*" those are familiar biblical phrases for the judgments that sin deserves. If you want to know how serious your sins really are, look at what the Bible says they deserve.

And look at the sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus Christ went down into the depths of human suffering and the experience of God's judgment to pay for our sins. Hundreds of years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah foretold his suffering. **Isaiah 53:4-6** *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds, we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* It's hard to face your sins, honestly -- what Isaiah calls our *iniquities, transgressions, and straying* from God and his ways. But you've got to face your sins honestly and admit them humbly to yourself and to God, or you'll never fully appreciate the wonder of his faithful love in spite of them

2. Some people see their sins clearly but they feel God's grace is big enough, strong enough, and free enough to deal with the mess they've made and the mess they've become. But it doesn't matter how deep your sin and guilt sinks us. God's steadfast can find you there and lift you up and out, again and again.

3. What we need is to see at the same time both the depths of our need and the incomprehensible greatness of the love of God.

Jonah says something very interesting in **verse 7** He says: *When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to*

you, into your holy temple. In the Days of Jonah, the temple was one place where you saw at the same time both the depth of your need for grace and the greatness of God's grace that was offered to you. The temple was a symbol that you could not go into God's presence and worship him without bringing a sacrifice, a blameless lamb, to symbolically die the death that you deserved. Some people today say that's terrible. That's primitive. No. God was giving humanity an important lesson in how serious our sins are and how they separate us from him. But at the same time, those sacrifices were a symbol of how great God's grace is because the temple was a visible expression of God's desire to live in a relationship with us. The sacrifices were a promise that one day God would provide, in the gift of His Son, the one true sacrifice that could pay for all our sins so that he could lift us up out of the depths and into his love forever. Do you understand that, like Jonah sinking into the sea because of his own sins, you have no claim on God at all *except for his graciousness, mercy, and steadfast love?* Do you also understand just as clearly and deeply that because of Jesus Christ, God is able to continually, freely, and completely give you, not what you deserve or have earned but his matchless steadfast love? This is powerful and it is a foundational truth for all of life.

B. God wants us to know His steadfast love, and He wants us, because of his steadfast love, to trust in him.

Look at **verses 8-9**. *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!*” Jonah isn't condemning the pagans here. He is saying: When we run from God, we turn our own desires into idols, and as long as we cling to those idols that compete with God for our trust, we forfeit the grace that could be ours. That's why God works in our lives, like he worked in Jonah's life, to teach us to not cling to false gods.

Steve Brown puts it like this:

God lets us get into bad places to bring us to a deeper repentance. You say, "That's horrible." No, it's not. It's good. Because a life of repentance, agreeing with God, and agreeing that His love is real and His way is best. That's the place where you receive the reality of his love and receive the restoration only he can give.

In the end, all Jonah has to offer God is a repentant faith. He has no good works to offer. He simply turns back to God and trusts in the saving grace. You're offered that same grace in Jesus, who bore our sins on the cross. Trust him as your Savior, and then keep trusting the steadfast love of the Lord.

After the Chilean miners had all been rescued, they helped design a tee shirt, which they all wore. On the front, it said thank you, Lord! On the back, there was a reference to **Psalm 95:4**; *in his hands are the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains are his also*. Jonah could have nodded along in agreement and added **verse 5**, *the sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land*.

God is able to answer prayer in powerful and surprising ways.

God has never promised to answer all our prayers according to our expectations of what his answers ought to look like. He is full of surprises and his wisdom transcends our expectations. But in the words of the prophet **Jeremiah 33:3** he says, *Call on me and I will answer you and show you great and hidden things you could not have known*. **Romans 10:13**, *For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* No matter how deep you've sunk, He can lift you up. Your prayers of faith will reach him.

If you are close to him today, be so very thankful and stay close to him. Live in his grace, and because of His grace, do the things he calls you to do lest you hurt yourself and others. If you are in distress, call on him and cling to him. He is your greatest help.

Amen

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Salvation belongs to you LORD! I confess my faith in your son, Jesus, my Savior and Lord. He was plunged into the depths of suffering on the cross to pay for my sins. Everything your holy justice and perfect righteousness demanded he provided in love for me. The undeserved but freely offered grace you give me in Christ is my only hope and my sure salvation. By grace alone through faith alone I belong to you my creator and Redeemer. Thank you, in Jesus name, Amen

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

O LORD, you are my powerful creator and gracious Savior. Help me in my distress to learn that I can call out to you and you will answer me. In the flood, in the times I feel overwhelmed, even when the trouble is brought by the choices I myself have made, you invite me to call on your name. You offer what I deeply need and can find nowhere else. Forgive me when I struggle alone without prayerful dependence. Forgive me when I doubt that your love is as steadfast as you tell me it is. Teach me to trust.

¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter XVII*