

Jonah | The Prodigal Prophet's Prayer

INTRO:

Last week we met Jonah — a real prophet with a real assignment he wanted nothing to do with. God told him to go to Nineveh, and instead he bought a ticket to Tarshish, boarded a boat headed the opposite direction, and fell asleep in the hull while God sent a storm he couldn't outrun. We saw that God doesn't just let his people go — he pursues them — and that sometimes grace looks like a fish: an uncomfortable, unexpected rescue that swallows you whole and gives you nowhere to go but back to God. That's exactly where we pick up today — Jonah is alive, in the dark, and he finally starts to pray.

SCRIPTURE:

Jonah 2 ESV

¹ 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 breakers and your waves 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 To 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. ⁷ 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.

1: ROCK BOTTOM LED JONAH TO PRAYER

A: FROM THE BELLY OF THE FISH (IN HIS DISTRESS) JONAH PRAYS

- **Jonah had tolerated quite a bit until he came to the end of the rope**
 - He endured/ignored the storm
 - He endured/ignored the crew's inquisition
 - He endured being thrown overboard
 - But the seaweed around his head... he started to remember
 - *It's amazing how much we will endure before we wake up and remember the Lord — humble ourselves and pray*
 - It took the prodigal son losing everything and longing for the pig food before he remembered his father's goodness
 - There's always an end of the rope—what's yours?
- **At the lowest moment, as his life is ebbing away... he remembers the Lord**
 - Its the beginning heart posture of prayer... 'God save me'

B: FROM THE BELLY OF SHEOL AND GOD LISTENED

- **There is no place that God cannot hear and answer your prayer**

Psalm 139:7–12 NIV

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? ⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. ⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, ¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. ¹¹ If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” ¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

- **You’re never too far gone to cry out to the Lord**
 - Not only can God hear you, but He will answer you!

C: GOD’S INITIAL RESPONSE

- **The immediate answer is a fish swallowing him whole and alive—what an answer to prayer!?**
 - What an uncomfortable and strange answer, but better than death?
 - Sometimes the answer to our “God save us” prayer is something we’d never look for or expect, but exactly what we need.
- **In the belly of the fish he ponders and continues his prayer.**
 - But it’s here in God’s grace — the belly of the fish — his heart would become softened, repentant, and worshipful
 - I also imagine when he finds himself alive, he understands at least in part the miraculous nature of his rescue and begins to really hope.

2: GOD’S DISCIPLINE WAS MEANT TO RESTORE JONAH

A: JONAH RECOGNIZES GOD’S DISCIPLINE FOR HIS ACTIONS

- **V3a: “You cast me into the deep”**
 - Jonah told the sailors to throw them overboard and they did!
 - He knew it was the only solution and he knew it was God’s discipline
- **V3b: “All YOUR breakers and YOUR waves passed over me”**
 - Its not simply the ocean or natural consequence, but God’s ocean, God’s waves, God’s discipline
- **V4a: “I am driven away from your sight”**
 - NIV: banished
 - NOTE: Jonah says “I am driven from your sight” — God hasn’t said this
 - Jonah had felt abandoned by God, even though God had not truly left him.
 - God has been stopping his flight from him and relentlessly pursuing him.
 - Perspective is a funny thing.
 - The word “banished” (Hebrew: garash) carries the idea of being cast out or rejected.
 - God *drives out* Adam and Eve
 - Abraham *drives out* Hagar and Ishmael

- Key theme: The word carries consistent weight throughout — it signals broken relationship, divine judgment, or covenant consequence, whether God is the one acting or humans are.
- Jonah interpreted God’s discipline as rejection, but his conclusion was wrong.
 - God was not abandoning Jonah — He was redirecting and correcting him.
 - Often times our initial interpretation of events are incorrect because our perspective is incomplete.
- **V4b: “Yet I shall again look (niv: toward) upon your holy temple”**
 - In the middle of despair, Jonah *still* turned to God in prayer.
 - Faith broke through even while Jonah was overwhelmed with guilt and fear.
 - Jonah’s prayer shows both despair and hope existing at the same time.
 - Feeling distant from God does not mean God is finished with you.
 - The discipline that had felt like abandonment was actually God’s mercy AND discipline at work. (yet not completed—it was a moment)
 - God’s discipline is meant to restore us, not destroy us.

B: HE RECOGNIZES THAT GOD HAS RESCUED HIM FROM DEATH

- **V6: “But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit”**
 - Jonah’s prayer is so hopeful he must have understood his life within the fish was miraculous
 - Therefore, God is going to restore him/release him eventually from the fish and back to land
- **V9b: “What I have vowed I will pay”**
 - This part of his prayer expresses the belief that he will survive the belly of the fish most clearly
 - He’s going to live to fulfill his vows to the Lord
- **Note how quickly we can move from despair to hope.**
 - What moved him was prayer and answered prayer (even if just the beginning)
 - His situation had changed, but deliverance wasn’t complete
 - This breakthrough of hope (being moved from the watery depths to the innards of the fish, which brought renewed hope) led Jonah to a new perspective of God’s mercy.

3: JONAH BEGAN TO SEE GOD’S MERCY MORE CLEARLY

A: THOSE WHO CLING TO IDOLS TURN AWAY FROM GOD’S STEADFAST LOVE AND MERCY

- He recognizes that Yahweh is a God of steadfast love and mercy
- Those who cling to idols (empty vanities) only reject the love and mercy of God that could save them
- He had seen how the pagan gods didn’t answer the sailors
- He was experiencing the Lord’s steadfast love and mercy despite his sin
- And he sees with clarity—the truth—of God’s greatness and power

B: JONAH PRAISES FROM INSIDE THE GREAT FISH

- This revelation of God’s steadfast love and mercy leads him to praise and worship

- All true revelation is not for merely filling our heads with knowledge, but towards worship and love for God
- Notice, Jonah is still in the fish when he praises
 - Worship isn't contingent upon your location
 - Worship isn't contingent upon the promise being completely fulfilled
 - Worship IS praising God in the midst of it

C: HE UNDERSTANDS (AT LEAST PARTIALLY) THAT SALVATION COMES FROM (BELONGS TO) THE LORD

- His rescue from his sin and the consequences of sin were all God's grace and mercy
 - He was undeserving of his rescue
 - He deserved to drown in those waters
 - But God...
- Therefore all of salvation belongs to the Lord
 - The Lord saves whoever He wills
 - No one deserves it, none can earn it (not Israel, not Nineveh)
- Therefore, Jonah must go and preach to Nineveh when God releases him from the belly of the fish
 - Who is he to stand in other's way, when he was so undeserving?
 - Often the most religious people are the ones who forget what God has saved them from
 - And therefore, they put up hindrances to others, whom God would gladly receive as his own
- Note: I think this is why God answered Jonah's prayer by way of the fish
 - He could have just popped him up and out onto the land (that'd be miraculous)
 - The fish was miraculous too, but included a stage/season, where Jonah *had* to reflect, surrender, embrace some humility, and gain understanding of God's salvation

4: THE LORD COMPLETED JONAH'S DELIVERANCE

A: THE LORD COMMANDED THE FISH TO VOMIT JONAH ONTO DRY LAND

- Jonah is rescued:
 - From the belly of sheol—the depths of the sea—what should have been his watery grave
 - From the belly of the fish—the temporary means of God's partial deliverance
 - In due season — at just the right time

CLOSING RESPONSE:

Jonah discovered that even at the bottom of the sea, God had not stopped pursuing him. What felt like abandonment was actually mercy, discipline, and rescue unfolding in stages. And the same God who heard Jonah's prayer from the depths still hears the cries of people who turn to Him today. So wherever you are — running, weary, guilty, overwhelmed, or desperate — remember the Lord, cry out to Him, and trust that salvation belongs to the Lord.

RESPONSE:

1. God can hear and answer any prayer from any location, but you don't need to sink any further
2. Discipline is often misunderstood, but is often God's grace and mercy at work in our lives
3. God's answer to prayer is often in stages... from the belly of sheol → to the belly of the fish → to dry ground
4. Salvation belongs to God. You can't earn or deserve it. It's a gift to be received.