

Jonah 2:2–4 “When Your Waves and Billows Passed Over Me”
Pastor Ezra Jin Mingri

This Sunday we had the privilege of hearing from Pastor Ezra Jin Mingri and his experience of imprisonment in China. At the time of his arrest, Pastor Mingri was leading a church of more than 15,000 people and believed he was faithfully carrying out God's calling to proclaim the gospel. Yet that faithfulness led somewhere he never expected: prison.

As he described it, prison became something like Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish. But there was an important difference. Jonah had run from God's calling. Pastor Mingri believed he had been pursuing his. So his prayer became something like, “Why? I am not Jonah!”

Yet in that dark and confusing place, the prayer of Jonah became his own. He learned to turn his eyes toward God and trust Him even when he could not understand what God was doing. After facing the possibility of as many as fifteen years in prison, Pastor Mingri was unexpectedly released this past July. In his words, it was as though the fish had suddenly spit him back onto dry ground.

Looking back, he spoke of repenting for underestimating God. His plans for ministry had seemed good and faithful, but God's purposes were larger than anything he could see. God was bigger than the Chinese government, bigger than the United States government, and bigger than Pastor Mingri's own plans for his life. His story gave us a powerful contemporary picture of the truth Jonah discovered from inside the fish: God alone is our Deliverer, and even when we cannot understand His purposes, we can entrust ourselves to Him.

Passage Summary

Jonah 2 finds the prophet in a place he never imagined he would be. God had called Jonah to go to Nineveh, but Jonah ran in the opposite direction. God sent a storm, Jonah was thrown into the sea, and he sank beneath the waves. Then, in an extraordinary act of both discipline and mercy, God appointed a great fish to swallow him. From inside the fish, Jonah prays. “I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me.”

Jonah recognizes something remarkable about his circumstances. He says, “You cast me into the deep,” and speaks of “your waves and your billows” passing over him.

Jonah knows that God has not lost control. The sailors may have physically thrown him overboard. The storm may have seemed chaotic. The sea may have seemed like it would become his grave. Yet Jonah recognizes the sovereign hand of God even there. That does not mean Jonah understands everything God is doing. But from the darkness he begins to look again toward the Lord: “Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.” That *yet* is an expression of faith. Everything Jonah can presently see tells him that his story is over. Yet faith looks beyond what can presently be seen and entrusts itself to the character of God.

Pastor Mingri's circumstances were obviously different from Jonah's. Jonah entered the fish after running from God's calling; Pastor Mingri entered prison while seeking to follow his calling. Yet his experience reminds us of an important truth within Jonah's prayer: **we can find ourselves in circumstances we never expected while remaining completely within the sovereign purposes of God.** Sometimes we assume that following God faithfully should produce a particular outcome. If we obey, perhaps the ministry should flourish. The relationship should improve. The illness should heal. The door should open. The plan should work. And when it does not, we ask, “God, why?”

Jonah 2 does not give us a formula for explaining every hardship. It gives us something better: **a God to whom we can cry out from the depths.** The God of Jonah is sovereign over the storm, the sea, the fish, and the dry ground. The God Pastor Mingri worshiped in prison was sovereign over governments, judges, prison sentences, release dates, and whatever would come next. And He is sovereign over our lives as well.

Our hope, however, goes even deeper than Jonah's deliverance from the fish. Jesus Himself points to Jonah's experience as a sign ultimately fulfilled in His own death and resurrection. Christ entered the depths for us. He went into death bearing our sin and judgment and emerged victorious so that sinners could be redeemed and reconciled to God. Therefore, when the waves and billows pass over us, we do not have to pretend they are small. We can cry out. We can lament. We can ask why. But we can also say with Jonah: “Yet I shall again look...” Because our confidence is not that we understand God's plan. Our confidence is that we know the God who holds it.

Reflection Questions

1. Pastor Mingri believed he was faithfully following God's calling when he found himself in prison.

- Have you ever experienced a season when you thought you were faithfully following God, yet your circumstances seemed to get worse rather than better?

- How did that affect your trust in Him?
2. We can subtly assume that obedience to God should result in outcomes that make sense to us.
 - Where have you made that assumption?
 - What happens to your faith when God does not follow the script you imagined?
 3. Jonah calls the waves “your waves and your billows.”
 - How does believing in God's sovereignty change the way you think about circumstances that feel chaotic or out of control?
 - What makes that truth comforting? What makes it difficult?
 4. From the belly of the fish Jonah says, “Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.”
 - What does it look like to keep your eyes on God when nothing about your immediate circumstances has changed?
 5. Pastor Mingri spoke about realizing that God was bigger than the Chinese government, the U.S. government, and his own plans.
 - What currently feels “big” enough in your life to make God seem small?
 - What would it mean to reverse that perspective?
 6. What plan for your life would be particularly difficult to surrender to God?
 - Your family?
 - Health?
 - Career?
 - Finances?
 - Children?
 - Retirement?
 - A relationship?
 - Your expectations for the future?
- Why is that particular area difficult to entrust to Him?
7. Jonah cries out honestly from his distress rather than pretending everything is fine.
 - How comfortable are you bringing disappointment, confusion, fear, or even questions of “Why?” before God?
 - What keeps you from praying that honestly?
 8. How does Jesus' death and resurrection give us a deeper reason for hope when we cannot see how our present circumstances will resolve?
 9. What is one circumstance in your life right now where you need to move from **understanding God's plan** to **trusting God's character**?

Prayer Points

1. Cry Out to God From the Depths

- Bring before God the circumstances you do not understand.
- Name the disappointments, fears, and questions you have been carrying.
- Ask for freedom to pray honestly rather than pretending everything is fine.

2. Trust God's Sovereignty

- Confess the ways you have assumed that God's plan should match your own.
- Bring the parts of your future that you most want to control before Him.
- Ask for faith to believe that no circumstance, government, person, diagnosis, or uncertainty is greater than God.

3. Keep Our Eyes on Christ

- Pray for the faith to say, like Jonah, **“Yet I shall again look...”**
- Ask the Spirit to turn your attention toward Christ when circumstances tempt you toward fear or despair.
- Pray that God's promises would become more defining than what you can presently see.

4. Remember Our Deliverer

- Thank Jesus for entering into suffering and death on our behalf.
- Praise Him that sin and death could not hold Him.
- Thank God that our ultimate hope rests not in escaping every hardship but in belonging forever to the risen Christ.

5. Pray for the Persecuted Church

- Pray for pastors and Christians throughout China and around the world who suffer because of their faith in Christ.
- Ask God to give them courage, endurance, protection, and an unwavering hope in the gospel.
- Pray that their faithful witness would lead many others to know Jesus.

6. Surrender Our Plans to God

- Ask God to expose the places where you have made your plans more important than His purposes.
- Pray for humility to trust Him when His path is different from the one you would choose.
- Ask for confidence that the God who has redeemed you in Christ will remain faithful through every part of your story.