


Learning how to
talk to God
from the great prayers of the Bible

Jonah's Prayer of Desperation

Jonah 2

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia
©Monty Watson, June 8, 2025

JONAH'S PRAYER OF DESPERATION

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The majestic creator of the universe has invited us to talk to Him. Prayer is the wonderful gift of experiencing a relationship with God and having a conversation with Him. This invitation to pray proves how much God loves us and cares about us. It's permission to cry out to Him for help anytime about anything. And it really makes a difference. Prayer makes a difference because He promises to listen and He promises to act. So this spring and summer, we are ***learning how to talk to God from the great prayers of the Bible. But the goal is not to learn more, but to pray more!***

So, why do we pray so little? Why don't we pray more? One reason is self-reliance. We think we can handle life without God. So we rely on self, on money, and how smart we are. Another reason we don't pray is a lack of faith. Perhaps we've tried and it didn't work, so we stop praying. Yet, when life falls apart, when we're desperate, we can't help crying out to God.

This morning, we're going to look at Jonah's prayer of desperation. From the belly of a whale, he said, "I called for help from the deep" (Jonah 2:2, NAS).¹ At some point, we all pray prayers of desperation. Not normal, everyday prayers, but desperate prayers. Brokenhearted prayers. Life-and-death prayers. Lay-awake-at-night prayers.

Last week, I asked you to jot down your most urgent prayer requests. When we collected the cards, there were 244 prayer requests, multiple requests on most cards. As promised, the Elders will be praying over these the next couple of weeks. You asked for prayer for ... health needs, some chronic and even life-threatening health needs. So many of you asked for prayer for family needs, marriages, relationships, estrangement, conflict. Prayer for the salvation of family and friends ... for spiritual needs, for personal growth ... for financial and job needs ... and for purpose in life. Going through all the cards in one sitting was heavy. I felt like I held the worries and burdens of the entire church in my hands.

Some of the requests began with "pray for my husband" or "pray for my wife," and "pray for my son" or "pray for my daughter," and the requests were detailed and brokenhearted. Other requests included ... "pray for reconciliation in my family, to resolve our issues" ... "pray for my family, there's just too much to write" ... "pray for the salvation of our adult children who don't know Jesus and for our grandchildren too" ... "pray for the salvation" of so many friends and family and neighbors ... "pray for guidance in a decision I need to make" ... "pray for me to walk closer to the Lord."

There were prayer requests for depression and emotional struggles. There were multiple cards with the words cancer, dementia, and pain. And the top three categories were health needs, family needs, and the salvation of family and friends. Again, the Elders are committed to praying over every one of these cards, and at the end of the service, we're going to pray over them as well.

Like Jonah, many of us are in the deep. When we're in the deep, overwhelmed and desperate for God to help, one of the most comforting passages of Scripture is Psalm 34. David believed it with all his heart. He believed it because he had experienced it. He had experienced

God's love and deliverance time and time again. With assurance, David said, "When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:17-18, ESV).

David believed that, and so can we. And when Jonah was in the belly of a whale, there was nothing else to do but believe it.

When we're in the deep, feeling distress and despair, overwhelmed and desperate for God to help, we can trust that He will hear our prayers.

JONAH'S STORY

In 760 BC, there was a man named Jonah. The Lord told Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh, a grossly wicked city.² The Lord told him to warn the people of His coming judgment unless they repented. And in that warning, was also the offer of God's grace.

But instead of obeying God, he booked passage on a ship headed in the opposite direction. The Bible says, "Jonah ran away from the Lord ... and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord" (Jonah 1:3, NIV). Then it says, "The Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god" (Jonah 1:4-5, NIV). The crew cast lots to determine who on board had angered their god and caused the storm threatening their lives. The lot fell to Jonah. Jonah admitted it was him, that he had angered God. So the crew threw him overboard and the storm stopped.³

But instead of drowning, "the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17, NAS).

It sounds like a myth, a dramatic fable to teach some moral lesson. And many believe that. So why do we believe it's true? Because Jesus confirmed it. Jesus mentioned Jonah in the New Testament, confirming he was a real person and confirming the story actually happened.⁴ So we trust the word of the one who rose from the dead proving to be the Son of God.

JONAH'S PRAYER

So what do you do when you're in the belly of a whale for three days? You pray!

"Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the stomach of the fish, and he said, 'I called out of my distress to the Lord, and He answered me. I called for help from the depth of Sheol, and You heard my voice'" (Jonah 2:1-2, NAS).

"I called out of my distress." Not stress, but "distress." "I called for help from the deep, from the depth of Sheol." Sheol refers to the place of the dead. Jonah cried out to God because he was about to drown to death!

We've all prayed desperate prayers. None of us have ever been in the belly of a whale, but we know what it feels like to be in the deep. But wonder what it was like for Jonah? Slimy and

smelly and dark. The only sound the growling of a whale's stomach. And how did Jonah breathe underwater for three days? The Lord kept him alive. It's a miracle story, and because Jesus confirmed it, it's a true story.

Obviously, Jonah wrote this book long after his experience, and his description is both physical and emotional. "You threw me into the ocean depths." The sailors physically threw him overboard, but Jonah knew it was God's doing, because he was running from God. "You threw me into the ocean depths, and I sank down to the heart of the sea. The mighty waters engulfed me, and I was buried beneath your wild and stormy waves ... driven from your presence ... I sank beneath the waves, and the waters closed over me. Seaweed wrapped around my head. I sank down to the very roots of the mountains. I was imprisoned in the earth, whose gates lock shut ... My life was slipping away" (Jonah 2:3-7, NLT).

That's what desperation feels like. Maybe you've felt that way, not physically, but emotionally. Treading water, your head about to go under, life slipping away. Metaphorically, that's an accurate description of how we feel when we're in a difficult situation and desperate.

So what did Jonah do? The only thing he could do. "I called out of my distress to the Lord, and He answered me. I called for help from the depth of Sheol, and You heard my voice" (Jonah 1:2, NAS). In desperation, Jonah prayed, "O Lord, you have driven me from your presence. Yet I will look once more toward your holy temple ... But you, O Lord my God, snatched me from the jaws of death! As my life was slipping away, I remembered the Lord. And my earnest prayer went out to you in your holy temple" (Jonah 2:4, 6-7, NLT).

"I called for help from the deep" (Jonah 1:2, NAS). If you're in the deep, feeling distress or despair, I'm so sorry you're feeling that way. But there is help.

In Psalm 25, David shows us how to pour out our hearts to God and experience His comfort and His help. David cried out to God, "My eyes are continually toward the Lord ... Turn to me and be gracious to me" (Psalm 25:15-16, NAS). David looked to God, and begged God to look at him.

Why do we cry out to God? Because we believe He loves us and cares about us. We pray to God because He is our Father, and a father loves his children. James, the brother of Jesus, wrote one of the greatest promises in the Bible, which says, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8, NAS). When you're hurting, when you're desperate, look to God, turn to God, draw near to Him and He draw near to you.

David prayed, "The troubles of my heart are enlarged, bring me out of my distresses. Look upon my affliction and my trouble" (Psalm 25:17-18, NAS). When you're distressed and desperate, tell God how much you're hurting. That's what David did. "The troubles of my heart are enlarged." It was bad and getting worse. He used plural nouns, "troubles" and "distresses." David didn't have just one problem; he had a lot of problems. We know what that's like. You're dealing with one problem and something else happens, and you throw your hands up and wonder what else can go wrong this week.

We're not talking about a flat tire or some frustrating inconvenience. We are talking about "distresses." The Hebrew word means deep, internal anguish (NIV).⁵ Distress, despair, desperation. David is acknowledging that we can feel that way sometimes.

And in Psalm 25, David said, "For You I wait all the day" (Psalm 25:5, NAS). When we're hurting, we don't want to wait. When we're desperate, we don't want to wait. But the "wait" verses remind us that God is working, that He has not forgotten us, and that He will come through for us. The Bible says, "Wait for the Lord. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Yes, wait for the Lord" (Psalm 27:14, NAS).

From the belly of a whale, "I called out of my distress to the Lord ... I called for help from the deep" (Jonah 1:2, NAS).

Then the Bible says, "The Lord ordered the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach" (Jonah 2:10, NLT).⁶

HEAR ... HELP ... HURRY

When a crisis happens, we pray desperate prayers too. Your prayer cards are proof of that. When we receive that dreaded diagnosis, when a spouse says it's over, when someone in your family is in a tragic accident, like Jonah, we all pray desperate prayers. "I called out of my distress to the Lord ... I called for help from the deep" (Jonah 1:2, NAS).

This week, as I scanned prayers in the book of Psalms, three words stood out. Three words that teach us how to pray. Three words that are the essence of prayer. "**Hear! ... Help! ... Hurry!**" David prayed these three words time and time again.

"Hear!" When we ask God to "hear," we're asking Him to notice, to be aware, to see what we're going through. David cried out to God, "Hear my prayer, Lord, and listen to my cry for help" (Psalm 39:12, NAS). Nothing is more wonderful, and brings more peace and assurance and hope, than knowing that God hears our prayers. David was overjoyed when he said, "I cried to my God for help, and from his temple he heard my voice" (Psalm 18:6, NIV). And with great affection, David said, "I love the Lord because he hears my voice and my prayer" (Psalm 116:1, NLT).

"Help!" When we call to Him for "help," we're asking Him to do something, to do something we can't do. As he prayed, David said, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1, NIV). He said, "Surely God is my help, the Lord is the one who sustains me" (Psalm 54:4, NIV). There are over 60 prayers in the book of Psalms of someone crying, "Help!" When we're desperate and cry out to God, we can trust that He will hear us and help us and sustain us.

"Hurry!" When we cry out "hurry," we're saying we can't hold on much longer. Again, David prayed, "God, hurry to save me! Lord, hurry to help me! ... Do not delay" (Psalm 70:1, 5, NAS). "I am in distress, answer me quickly" (Psalm 69:17, NAS). In another psalm, David cried out in desperation, "Answer me quickly, Lord, my spirit fails" (Psalm 143:7, NAS). He was saying, "I can't hold on much longer."

“Hear! ... Help! ... Hurry!” David prayed those three words time and time again. And we can pray them too. Cries of desperation. Also cries of faith. Cries to the only one who can help. We cry out to God, because we believe He is good, we believe He cares about us, and we believe He will help.

CONCLUSION

The Bible is filled with prayers of desperation. It is also filled with promises of God’s help.

With assurance, in Psalm 34 David said, “When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:17-18, ESV). David believed that with all his heart. He believed it because he had experienced it. “When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears” and “the Lord is near to the brokenhearted.” David believed it, and so can we.

Philippians 4:6-7 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7, NAS). Such a familiar verse, but look at it carefully. God promises peace when we pray. A peace that “surpasses all comprehension.” A peace that “will guard your hearts and your minds.” Meaning, a peace that calms our emotions and calms our anxious thoughts. When we’re desperate, when we call on the Lord from the deep, from a place of distress and despair, He promises peace.

Another prayer of David is so comforting, when he said, “I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord” (2 Samuel 24:14, NIV). When we think about it, what else can we do? When we’re desperate, feeling distress and despair, what more can we do than fall into the hands of the Lord?! And oh, what a safe place to be.

When we’re in the deep, feeling distress and despair, overwhelmed and desperate for God to help, we can trust that He will hear our prayers.

NOTES

¹ See Psalm 18:6.

² See Jonah 1:2

³ “The men greatly feared the Lord, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him” (Jonah 1:16, NIV).

⁴ See Matthew 12:39-41, when Jesus said, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matthew 12:39-41, ESV). See also Luke 11:29:32.

⁵ The Hebrew word is *mātsuwqah*. See *The Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*, TWOT 1895.

⁶ After Nineveh repented, Jonah sat under a tree and fumed with anger because the Lord showed grace to Nineveh. “So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant” (Jonah 4:6, NAS). Jonah was happy when God graciously provided shade. Then the Lord “appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, ‘Death is better to me than life’” (Jonah 4:7-8, NAS). Jonah was angry and wanted to die when God took away the plant and exposed him to the scorching sun. Then the Lord confronted Jonah with a great lesson His grace. Then God said to Jonah, “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?” And he said, “I have good reason to be angry, even to death.” Then the Lord said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. “Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand (children), as well as many animals?” (Jonah 4:9-11, NAS).

Reviewing the entire book, we see several times when the Lord “appointed” something to happen. In 1:4, “the Lord hurled a great wind ... and great storm.” In 1:17, “the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah.” In 2:10, “the Lord commanded the fish to vomit Jonah.” In 4:6, “the Lord appointed a plant” to provide shade for Jonah. In 4:7, “the Lord appointed a worm” to attach the plant. In 4:8, “the Lord appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head.” The Lord used each of these supernatural phenomena to teach Jonah a lesson.

The main point of Jonah’s story is that God offers grace to the most wicked cities and people. And God calls us to warn and to preach. Unlike Jonah, we must not run from the call of God or run from His assignment for you. The ministry lesson from Jonah is what Paul talked about in 2 Corinthians 5. “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us, we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20, NAS). After three days in the belly of a whale, Jonah obeyed. He went to Nineveh and warned the people for 40 days. Nineveh was a great city. It took three days to walk around the entire city, some 60 miles in circumference. Chapter 4 mentions 120,000 children living in Nineveh, which calculates to an estimated population of 600,000. In response to his preaching, “the people of Nineveh believed in God” (Jonah 3:5, NAS). They repented and so did the king, who ordered the entire city to “call on God” (Jonah 3:8, NAS). Afterward, the Bible says Jonah was angry. He did not want the Lord to show grace to one of Israel’s enemies. That’s why he ran from God’s call in the first place. Jonah sat under a tree and asked the Lord to take his life!