

“Running to God”

Jonah 2:1-10

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for

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Statistics say that 66% of Americans pray every day, while only 13% say they never pray at all.

According to the survey topics, the only things that Americans do more than pray is watch TV and tell others , “I love you.”

Prayer is a lifeline in our relationship with God. It is our opportunity for fellowship and intimacy with God. It is the means by which we seek His will; we seek His encouragement and direction. And yet it is mysterious, not completely understandable, and very difficult at times.

The great prayer warrior, Theresa of Avila, said this about prayer: In times when you are sad and troubled, do not give up the good work of prayer...for the devil will try to persuade you to abandon it, and unsettle you. Rather, pray more than before, and you will see how quickly the Lord will come to your aid.

When do you pray? Is it only in times of need, or is it a habit of your heart to seek God in prayer? You can learn a lot about someone by how they pray.

This morning we get a chance to learn a lot about Jonah and the God to whom He prays by looking at his prayer from the belly of a fish. While chapter 1 depicts a reluctant prophet running away from God, chapter 2 depicts a dejected prophet running to God in prayer.

Listen to his prayer in Jonah chapter 2.

According to verse 1, Jonah was praying from inside the fish. And according to verse 10, Jonah was returned to dry land at God’s command sometime after Jonah prayed. And so it is the verses in between – verses 2 to 9 – that give us a glimpse of the hearts of Jonah and God.

It’s not all that clear if Jonah knew he was inside the belly of a great fish. The text doesn’t say. In fact, Jonah’s prayer has more to do with being rescued from the depths of the dark ocean than it does about being inside a fish. Jonah’s prayer comes as a result of being captured by the fish – rescued from sure doom – from the bottom of the sea. His prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving to God.

I touched on this a little last week, but it comes into full view now. When Jonah set sail to go some 2500 miles West – away from where God had called him – Jonah took a great risk. He, like most Israelites, viewed the sea as dangerous and foreboding. They were not a seafaring people. Then when the great storm arose and Jonah realized he was the reason for it, his desire was to be sacrificed by being thrown into the sea. Don't miss that point.

Jonah's purpose in being thrown overboard was not primarily so the storm would stop – although, that is the motive he gave to the sailors. No, Jonah was not only willing to go to the edges of the world to escape from God's will, he was actually willing to go to the depths of the sea – to a certain death – to escape what God had intended for him. We don't know if he saw it as punishment for disobeying God, or if it was his own desire. Either way, he was willing.

As I read the text, I think it gives every indication that Jonah wanted it all to end by being thrown into the sea. Little did he know that God had a different plan. In so many ways, Jonah underestimates God. He underestimated God when God called him, and he underestimated God in believing that he could escape God even in the dark murkiness of the sea. What Jonah did not understand was this: when God calls you, He keeps you.

Remember, the sailors prayed that God would not hold them accountable for taking Jonah's life by throwing him overboard. And when they did throw him overboard, though they and Jonah believed he was going to meet his watery death, the Lord provided a fish to rescue him.

Beginning in verse 2, Jonah's prayer inside the fish refers to the time between being thrown overboard and the instant in which he was swallowed by the sea creature. He says In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. Jonah's goal from the bow of the ship may have been to die in the waves, but his prayer reveals a different response from Jonah when he was actually in the water.

In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. The answer, of course, was the great fish. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

Jonah wasn't experiencing a day at the beach. The waves were crashing over him – beating him back and forth, it would seem. It was turbulent, and no doubt scary for him as he sunk lower and lower, deeper and deeper into the pit of the sea. Jonah uses the term Sheol – which the translators have translated as grave in verse 2. Sheol was what ancient Near Eastern people believed was the place of the dead. As Jonah drifted closer to the bottom of the sea, according to his prayer inside the belly of the fish, he believed he was headed to join the place of the dead. But God rescued him, and so his praise rises from the depths of the sea – through the abdomen of a fish – to the ears of God – and God hears him. When God calls you, He keeps you. And there is no place you can be that He will not hear your cry for help.

Make no mistake about it, Jonah was experiencing his worst nightmare. Look at verse 4, I have been banished from your sight... Jonah recognized God's judgment. He was headed to a place of punishment, according to Jonah. A place of cursing. He is near to the point when death will swallow him up and he will be no more. He is in the depths of the sea – the end of his rope – near the end of his life AND that's exactly where God meets him. Jonah finally arrived at a place where he is teachable. Through his running experience, God had broken him. Finally, God could get through to Jonah.

Look at verse 5, The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. Then verse 6, To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God.

Up to this point, Jonah had been going down, down, down. Until he cried out to God.

Remember, when God called him, Jonah's response was to go down to Joppa. Aboard the ship, Jonah went down in the ship to sleep, and now having been thrown overboard, Jonah was going down to the deep, dark reaches of life without God.

Don't be surprised, as God pursues you, he often will let you sink as far as you desire to go – to the point of desperation – and then he rescues you. When we cry out from the depths of desperation, He brings us up.

Verse 7 are the last thoughts of a dying man, When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose up to you, to your holy temple. Know this: It is never too late to call out for God's help. It often takes the deepest desperation for us to cry out to God, and He is merciful and rich in grace and He reaches down and lifts us up.

Look at verses 8 & 9. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord. It is there in the guts of a stinking fish that Jonah gets a fresh start. Jonah recognizes the gift of God's grace, and for the first time, he grabs hold and says, Thank you. It's Jonah's second chance. In a song of thanksgiving, Jonah promises to make his vows good, and proclaims the very message God had called him to back in Nazareth, Salvation comes from the Lord.

Each of us could leave here today saying, "Good for Jonah. I'm glad it all worked out for him." And we can go back to living our lives in the same way we lived them before we learned about Jonah's triumph in the sea. But I don't want us to leave here the same. I want us to leave here changed. Transformed. Running to God, instead of away from Him.

How will your prayers be heard? Another prophet, Isaiah, says in chapter 59 of his book, But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. Let's be honest. We are no better than Jonah. Like him, we deserve to be abandoned in the sea – without God – without our prayers being heard. Think about it. Our sins make it so that God doesn't hear our prayers. How will your prayers be heard?

You need divine intervention. You need a fish to open his mouth and gobble you up. You need an act of godly mercy to change your situation and give you a second chance.

And this was accomplished by Jesus. In Mark 15:34, Jesus is found on the cross and he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" On the cross, God the Father withdrew his presence from Jesus. He turned his back on him. He forsook him for your sins and my sins. When we speak of hell as being separated from God, that's true. In a very real way, Jesus experienced hell. On the cross, He was completely separated from the Father. He was abandoned by Him. Not because of who Jesus was, but because Jesus had taken your sin and my sin to the cross. And sin always separates us from God.

When Jesus cried out in John 19:30, "It is finished," he meant that He had fully experienced abandonment by God and His wrath, and had fully accomplished redemption for us. In other words, He went to Sheol in our place. And since Jesus has gone there, you don't have to. Jesus went down so that you could be lifted up.

A dear friend of mine passed away last week, and I had the privilege of attending her funeral yesterday. She had been struggling for several months with a multitude of cancers that ravaged her body. Throughout her struggle, her loving husband kept family and friends updated – and his letters to us became a beautiful testimony to God's grace and mercy in the midst their own storm. One of

the greatest lessons I learned as an observer of their pain was the incredible intimacy and power they found through prayer. Maybe some of you know Bob & Linda Dick. This is an excerpt from Bob's latest letter that he entitled, "The Final Chapter."

Read Linda's letter.

So what have we learned today? First, when God calls you, He keeps you. Secondly, there is no place you can be that He will not hear your cry for help. And finally, it is never too late to call out for God. Let's pray.