

Running to God in Prayer (Part 1)

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[0 : 00] I want you to look on the screen with me at three events that the Bible records and think about what they have in common. God parted the waters of the Red Sea so the children of Israel, His people, could walk through on dry land.

After they were across, He closed the waters on the pursuing Egyptians and they drowned. Daniel was unjustly sentenced to death by being thrown into a den of lions.

But God sent an angel to close the mouths of the lions and they didn't touch Daniel. They didn't harm him at all.

Jesus fed over 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. They all ate until they were full. And there were 12 basketfuls of pieces left over. All four Gospels record that. I'm sure everyone has figured out that all of those incidents are miracles that are described as miracles in the Bible.

[1 : 20] The Bible records hundreds of miracles. The most important event in the Bible is the resurrection of Jesus and it is a miracle.

The person who refuses to believe that God can intervene in this world that He created, suspend the laws of nature that He put into place, and do supernatural things that we call miracles, that person cannot have a relationship with God.

The fact is that anyone who denies the reality of miracles must also deny the reality of the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now I am stressing the importance, the necessity of believing in miracles to prepare us for what we're going to look at this morning in the book of Jonah.

Turn with me if you would to Jonah chapter 1 verse 17 and we're going to read through the end of chapter 2. In the Hebrew Bible chapter 2 begins with the English Bibles verse 17 of chapter 1.

[2 : 39] It's all one story. The story of the great fish swallowing Jonah and Jonah living to tell about it is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible.

However, it is also one of the most unbelievable things you'll ever read and it is unbelievably by many people.

I'm going to guess that 98% of people in this room are familiar with the story. But there's some you've never read it.

Some you haven't read it in a long time. So before we go any further, let's read the story. A lot of times we refer to it as a children's Bible story of Jonah and the big fish.

Or as some people call it, Jonah and the big whale. 1.17 And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

[3 : 45] Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish 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. 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. Then I said, I am driven away from your sight. Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.

The waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me. Weeds were trapped or were wrapped around my head at 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. Oh Lord, my God.

[4 : 47] When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord. My prayer came to you and to your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord. And the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Now, did you notice that this story is not really a story about a great fish? The fish is an important part of the story because God used it to rescue Jonah.

God used the fish as an instrument of His grace to save Jonah. But the fish is really a minor character in this chapter and in this book.

Now, there are some commentators, if you do a study of this, there are some commentators who will go to the trouble of describing why we should take this as a factual story.

[6 : 08] For example, they describe the kind of fish or the kind of a whale that is big enough to have swallowed Jonah and would have had enough air inside to sustain his life.

You can read about that. There are some who will write about a few recorded stories of someone surviving inside a large fish for several days.

And when the fish was caught and cut open, they were alive. But I agree with what most commentators say about this. We don't need to prove this story really happened.

It is presented in the Word of God as a miraculous work of God that happened at some point in time in the life of this man named Jonah.

That's how it reads. Look again, verse 117. The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. Chapter 2, verse 10.

[7 : 23] The Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. Our God is a miracle-working God.

And because He is God, He doesn't explain how His miracles could have really happened. He is not concerned to try to make us skeptics in the 21st century believe that He did what He did, that He still does what He does.

This passage, this story of Jonah and the big fish, it is presented in the Bible as something that God did.

It happened. And if we understand the Bible to be God's Word, we need to understand whether we can explain it or not and accept this is a miracle of God.

But there's an even better reason, more powerful reason for us to believe what happened to Jonah really happened. Jesus believed it. And Jesus even used this story to teach about His own death and resurrection.

[8 : 47] It's recorded in Matthew 12 and other Gospels. But look at this one. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.

But He answered them, 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. You see, Jesus understood this to be a real story.

And He used it to teach the reality that He was going to die, be buried, be buried, and then rise again three days later.

The focal point of chapter 2 of Jonah is not a great fish who swallowed Jonah, but the gracious God who rescued Jonah.

[9 : 53] And He just chose to use a fish to do it. There's something else about chapter 2 that we need to observe, take note of.

And I hope if you're a regular reader of the Bible, you've already figured it out. Beginning in verse 2, chapter 2, verse 2 through verse 9, this reads like a psalm.

If you're familiar with the psalms and you read this, in fact, if you just took out verse 2 through 9 of this chapter and just gave it to the average Bible reader, they'd think, well, this is one of the psalms. Well, it is a psalm. It's a psalm of Jonah. Now, I want you to look at the big picture of this passage. It is a prayer. The prayer of Jonah written in the form of a psalm. Jonah is actually, or it appears he's quoting from the psalms seven or eight times.

[11 : 03] If you've got a Bible that has cross-references, you will see that in the text, verses 2 through 9. Jonah wrote this sometime after it happened, and he's looking back describing his experience in the ocean when he thought he was going to drown and inside this fish when he prayed to God.

This is a long introduction, I know. And so what we're going to look at next is just the first point of chapter 2's study, and we'll come back next week and finish it up.

Let's look now at what we can learn from Jonah's experience of running to God in prayer. Point number one, God can put us in a position where all we can do is pray. We need to understand this. God can, and sometimes does, put us, his people we're talking about, in a position where all we can do is pray.

From the beginning of chapter 1, Jonah has been running from God. That's what the whole story has been up to this point. He is a prophet of God. He's a believer.

[12:28] He is one who knows God, has a relationship with God, but he's rebelling at this point in time, chapter 1. He's rebelling and running from what he knows God wants him to do.

He does his best to ignore God while he's on board this ship, even during a life-threatening storm. No one else on this ship believed in the one true God.

Everyone else on that ship, they were pagans who worshipped all kinds of false gods. But here's what we read in chapter 1.

Everyone prayed except Jonah. It appears that Jonah was so determined to not do God's will that he was willing to die rather than repent and do it.

That's the impression that he gives when he tells those sailors, if you want this storm to stop, throw me overboard. Knowing full well, you get thrown overboard in the Mediterranean Sea in the midst of the storm, you're going to die.

[13:42] You're going to drown. But God was determined to change Jonah's mind by putting him in a position where he would stop running from God and start running to God in prayer.

God did two things to bring this about. God used the sailors to throw Jonah overboard, sink to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, and come close to drowning.

But Jonah, I want you to look, he described all this as God's work. Verse 3, For you cast me into the deep. God just used the sailors.

But Jonah understood. He had been running from God and God was tired of it. And God stopped his running by throwing him into the sea using the hands of those sailors.

God sent a great fish to rescue Jonah, save his life, by swallowing him and keeping him alive, trapped inside its body for three days and nights.

[14:55] Jonah didn't say this just happened. He attributed it to the work of God. Look again at verse 17. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

I want you to imagine what it would have been like for Jonah to go through all this. Anytime we read the Bible, we need to understand this is describing real events that happened in history, in time to people just like us.

Whenever you read something in the Bible, think, this really happened. If I had been there, I could have seen it. Think about those people.

They're just human beings like us. And so we can get more out of some studies by just putting ourselves in situations and thinking about what it would have been like. Jonah was probably wedged inside the fish and unable to move during this time.

You've probably seen cartoons where Jonah is swallowed by a whale and he wakes up in the belly of the whale and it's just a large area like this or a cave or something.

[16:14] And he just sits around, you know, taking it easy, talking to God, whatever. Jonah was swallowed by a fish and most likely whatever position he was in, when he got in there, that's how he...

He was stuck. He was wedged. At best, he would have had just a little room to wiggle around. Inside that fish, he was in total darkness.

The air was thin. There was a constant, sickening stink and almost unbearable heat inside this big fish.

Now think about it. He would be in shock at first. Then he would have had a full-blown panic attack. He'd have taken a whole bottle of lorazepam if he'd have had it or something like that. He would have drifted in and out of consciousness. But at some point, over the course of those three days, he came to himself.

[17:39] He realized where he was and what his condition was. He didn't know if he'd live and die to start with, live or die to start with. At some point, he spiritually and emotionally ran to God in prayer.

and looking back, he describes it in the form of a psalm. R.T. Kendall describes Jonah's situation like this.

The belly of the fish is not a happy place to live, but it is a good place to learn and Jonah had a lot to learn. Now I want you to understand.

I am not implying in this message that God's going to do something like this to you. God rarely ever goes to such extreme measures to turn around his wayward people.

But God has many ways of putting us in positions where we are willing to stop running and start running to him in prayer.

[19 : 00] If we could just go around this room this morning and everybody explain a time when God got your attention, we would find a lot of common ways that God works in our life to get our attention.

Some of us in here, we've been maybe spiritually asleep or indifferent or even rebellious, but a family crisis got our attention, woke us up, caused us to turn to God in prayer.

Some people, a health scare is what it took to bring you back to where you would talk to God. Some people, it's a financial problem.

You're going to lose something. Some people, it's something that goes on with your job, your school. For some people, it's relational outside of family.

God just has his ways. knowing us, knowing what will get our attention in the situations of life that we have, God has ways when he's ready to cause us to pay attention to him, listen to him, talk to him in prayer.

[20 : 29] I think Abraham Lincoln describes the way all of us have felt at times. He said, I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I have nowhere else to turn.

If you're in a situation like that now, or you know someone close to you who is, I want you to understand that God takes no pleasure in putting such pressure on his children.

You may need to assure somebody of that. But at the same time, God loves us enough to discipline us severely if necessary to put us in a position where we can and want to come back to him in confession, in repentance, and renewed commitment.

He is a great father. father. As we studied a few weeks ago, great parents discipline their children.

You don't just let anything go. And a loving, gracious parent will sometimes go to tremendous lengths to inflict pain for the ultimate outcome of turning a child's life around if possible.

[22 : 08] Well, God can and does that when necessary. But we learn from Jonah that we can never run too far for God to hear our prayer of desperation.

Look at verse two. I called out to the Lord out of my distress. He answered me.

Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. God, or Jonah called out to God from what he considered to be the place of death, Sheol.

You see it several times in the book of Psalms. The place of death. A place of no return. That's what Jonah felt like at first when he cried out to God.

But God heard his prayer. And God graciously answered it. If you are away from God right now, I want to encourage you as strongly as I can.

[23 : 17] Call out to God right now where you are just as you are. God you may have drifted from God years ago. You may think to yourself, if you'll stop and think, I've been sort of spiritually indifferent for quite some time.

You may be here right now in body, but this entire service, your mind and your heart, it's not been here. If that's true, you know it.

Because you haven't worshipped God and hadn't really wanted to. You haven't been listening to Him. Because truth be known, you're not interested in Him.

You come to church for various reasons, out of habit, out of to please someone, or maybe with a thought, God will love me more, He won't do something to me if I put in the time on Sundays.

Crazy thought, heretical thought, but a lot of people have those kinds of thoughts. It could be that you've rebelled against God, and you're living in willful sin right now.

[24 : 43] You've turned away from Him, but you've not been able to escape Him, His conviction, or the guilt that goes along with your sin, because as a child of God, you just know it's wrong, and you can't get that out of your mind.

It may be that what's going on in your life right now, somebody sitting next to you could elbow you because they know it. They know that you're living in rebellion right now. But it could be the people you're sitting with, that you live with, it could be they don't know, because what's going on in your life is mainly in your mind, in your heart, it's in your thoughts, it's in your desires, it's things you do in secret.

But nonetheless, you know it, and God knows it. And so the conviction is there, the guilt is there, but no one else in the world may know what you're going through.

If you're away from God for any reason, learn from Jonah's painful experience. Don't put God in position to so work in your life that he has to get you like Jonah where all you can do is pray.

God's God's God. This is the whole point of today's message because we as Christians, we disappoint God. We ignore God.

[26 : 17] We run from God. We rebel against God. We do. If you think and say, if I don't, you've got some deep problems. You don't understand yourself or you don't understand sin or you don't understand God.

if you don't think of yourself as having a sin problem, an obedience problem, a holiness problem, a love problem, talk to your spouse.

They can help you. Talk to your children. Talk to your parents. Talk to anyone who knows you well and will tell you the truth.

truth. We, you and me, we can be just like Jonah or worse as God's children at times.

Here's how I want us to end this with a thought today. Are you closer to God right now than you have ever been in your life? If you are, that's something to just be thankful for, to praise God for, that's a sign that God's working in your life and you need to just be thankful and ask God to help you just to stay close to Him.

[27 : 40] If you are not close to God right now, closer than you've ever been, why is that? I want you to try to identify why.

We as God's children shouldn't be content to not be as close as possible to Him. Is there something you have done or refused to do that is the source of your separation?

Is there something that the Bible clearly teaches but you're just not willing to obey it? and it may be something related to who you are as a member of a family.

It may be about attitudes. It may be the way you treat certain people or certain kinds of people. It may be your mouth, your tongue.

There's something about something that the Bible clearly teaches but you just won't obey it. Or is there an internal voice of the Holy Spirit that is leading you to do something but you're trying to ignore that?

[28 : 58] You're not obeying that. It could be something along the line of the Lord's prompting you to serve Him a certain way or He's prompting you to get involved in a certain person's life as a Christian witness or influence to meet a need.

Either way, if we're not being faithful to what we know the Bible says about something or we're not acting on what the Lord is leading us to do from His Spirit within us, our refusal is sinful disobedience.

And if that describes why you are separated from God right now, there's only one solution, that is you've got to confess it to Him and turn from it. Here's what I want you to understand.

It may be something that's going on for a long time, but God is never so far away that He can't hear our prayer of sincere confession and repentance.

There are no exceptions to God's promise in 1 John 1, 9. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

[30 : 12] Here's what I want you to hear. God will forgive you and restore you to fellowship with Him no matter what you've done, no matter how many times you've done it, no matter how long ago, if you will come to Him, the way the Scripture says.

But it could be this morning that you would say, I'm not as close to God as I once was, and I don't know why. You're just sort depressed, discouraged.

It's just sort of maybe empty. You're not conscious of any real willful sin. It's not that you're not willing to confess something.

It's not that you hate God or even are indifferent to Him. You just, there's just something wrong. Could it be that you're not spending any meaningful time with Him in His Word, in prayer?

I'm talking about just being still and quiet before the Lord, spending time with Him on a regular basis, talking to Him about what's going on in your life, listening to Him as He speaks from His Word, helping you to understand Him better, how to relate to Him better, helping you understand yourself better, you know, prayer and Bible reading or Bible study are the two most important means of grace that God has given us to cultivate a relationship with Him.

[31 : 46] We cannot, you can't, I can't, no one can spend, no one can develop a relationship with Jesus, with the Lord, apart from spending time with Him in real, honest prayer and open, receptive, Bible reading.

Spending time with the Lord is the best way to draw close to Him as James encourages us to do in his letter. Look at it. He says, draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

Are you not as close to God as you used to be, as you want to be? You don't know why? Well, here's a step. Draw close to God. Even if you don't feel like it, talk to Him.

Talk to Him about why you don't feel like it. Talk to Him and say, I don't know what's wrong. Help me to see. Help me to understand. Read His Word.

Read the Psalms. The Psalmist, the Psalmist has all kinds of problems, just like Jonah. The Psalmist has problems with people sometimes. Sometimes he just hates people.

[32 : 57] Sometimes he feels like God's far away. He's honest about this. God knows if you hate someone or can't stand someone.

God knows if you feel like you are a million miles from Him. It's no surprise. So just talk to Him about it. Be honest with Him about it. Ask Him to help you.

Ask Him to help you to change. Ask Him to help you have a better attitude. Ask Him to draw close to you as you are seeking to draw close to Him.

God graciously pursues His rebellious, disobedient children. As our loving Heavenly Father, He wants to forgive us.

He wants to restore us to fellowship with Him if we're away. And God really wants to do it the easy way. Through our willing, sincere, wholehearted repentance and commitment to Him.

[34 : 03] God doesn't want to wear us out. But He will if He has to. God would much rather us come to Him the easy way.

But like we see in Jonah, God loves us so much He'll do whatever it takes, no matter how painful it is to cause us to stop running from Him and start running to Him in desperate prayer.

Let's pray together. Dear God, help us to see ourselves in this story where applicable.

God help us all. But Father, help us all, whether it be for now or for some point in the future, help us all to see that You are able and You are willing to so work in our lives, if we're Your children, to stop our running and disobedience and put us in a position where all we can do and want to do is seek You in prayer.

Lord, show us how we should respond so that we might leave here today walking with You in real, loving fellowship and obedience.

[35 : 42] And Father, if there's anyone in this room who is not a Christian, help them to understand that the only way they can begin a relationship with You is to confess their sin, truly turn from it, and trust Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord.

Help that person to do it now. Let's just all stay in an attitude of prayer and listen to the Lord and respond to Him. That's what this time is for us to listen to and obey our Lord.

And if you would like me to pray for you during this time, I'd be happy to do that. Let's just listen to the Lord and obey Him.