

Running to God in Prayer (Part 2)

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[0 : 00] One of the most unbelievable and unbelieved stories in the whole Bible is the story of Jonah. Jonah being swallowed by a big fish and living to tell about it.

A little girl discovered that her second grade teacher didn't believe this story. She found it out the day they were studying about whales in school.

The little girl asked her teacher if she had ever heard the story of Jonah being swallowed by a whale. The teacher didn't answer the question, but she did say it would be difficult.

She said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because the whale's throat was too small. Well, the girl responded matter-of-factly that Jonah was swallowed by a whale.

The teacher was obviously irritated at her keeping on and repeated her statement that a whale could not swallow a human. It was physically impossible.

[1 : 14] Well, the little girl was not going to be silent. So she said, when I get to heaven, I'll ask Jonah. The teacher came back, what if Jonah doesn't go to heaven?

What if Jonah went to hell? The little girl replied, well, then you can ask him. I pointed out last week that the book of Jonah makes no attempt to convince skeptics like that teacher.

It just simply tells the story about God's miraculous and gracious intervention to save Jonah. But we do have a very convincing reason to believe that what happened to Jonah really took place.

Jesus believed it. And Jesus even used this story to teach about his own death and resurrection. I pointed it out last week, but it's important for us to see. This is evidence for the reality of what we're reading in Jonah.

Look at it again. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you. But he, Jesus, 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.

[2 : 44] 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.

Jesus is telling us it happened. And it is an example, a type really, Jonah is, of what's going to happen to him.

Let's look at chapter 2 this morning and see what we can learn from Jonah's experience of running to God in prayer. Read it with me.

It actually begins in 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.

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, and from this point to the end of chapter, or verse 9, this is a psalm.

[3 : 44] It's written in the form of poetry. In all likelihood, it's very obvious in your Bible. It's laid out that way. Verse 2 is really sort of an introduction and summary of his prayer.

He says, 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.

Beginning in verse 3, Jonah sort of rehearses his crisis. He goes over what happened to him in his psalm in poetic form.

Look at it. For you cast me into the deep, to 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.

[4 : 46] The deep surrounded me. Weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.

Now he moves into God's rescue. Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you and to your holy temple.

The last part of the psalm is really a prayer of thanksgiving and commitment. Verse 8. 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 that's the end of the psalm.

The prose picks back up in verse 10. And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. We looked at the first major point of this message last week.

[5 : 58] And I want to look at it today. A little bit of what we saw last week, and we're going to add a little bit more. God can put us in a position where all we can do is pray. When you read Jonah 1 and 2, and you try to summarize what is happening in chapter 2, God can put us in a position where all we can do is pray.

From the beginning of chapter 1, Jonah has been running away from God. Running away from God's call to go to Nineveh and preach to a wicked people that Jonah didn't like, and he didn't want to be saved.

He did not want them to turn to God. So he wasn't going to go and preach. Several commentators point out how much the word down is used to describe Jonah's rebellious flight away from God and away from doing God's will.

Think about it. He went down to Joppa, down into a ship, down into the depths of the ship. But that's not the end of Jonah's descent, is it?

He went further down, what we've been reading now, into the depths of the ocean. Now what we're reading about Jonah is an extreme example.

[7 : 25] I mean, how many people do you know have disobeyed God and been swallowed by a fish? Not many, are there? So it's an extreme example, but it is a real example of what happens to anyone who rebels against God and just refuses to do God's will.

A writer by the name of O. Palmer Robertson, I think he does a good job of explaining this. Look at it. The sinner goes down. He begins the descent by his own acts of folly, foolishness.

He tries to run from the will of God and he trips on his own dangling shoelaces. It is just a fact.

Nothing can be in its right order when you are living in rebellion against the will of God.

The circumstances of life will bring you down. Your own inner spirit will bring you down. The hand of the Lord will bring you down.

I think he is profound in what he says here. Nothing can be right in your life when you're not right with God.

[8 : 46] When you are deliberately disobeying something that he's made clear to you, nothing will be right.

Your world will not be right. And sooner or later, especially if you are a child of God, and you're rebelling against him, sooner or later he's going to have enough.

And God, as Robertson said, the hand of the Lord will bring you down. I want to say it again. What God did to Jonah was unique.

But God does have many ways of getting our attention and putting us in a position where we are willing to turn to him and start obeying him.

He can do things like, he can get our attention and work this way in a family crisis, a health scare, financial difficulties.

[9 : 54] After I preached this this morning, one of our members, Mike Rushton, reminded me, God can break your back to get your attention and call you to himself.

Mike gave his testimony here, what, three, four, five years ago, about how he didn't have any use for God. He didn't have any use for people who wanted to talk to him about God.

At that time in his life, he was a logger. And one day, he cut a tree and it fell wrong, and it fell on him, and it broke his back, and he wound up in the hospital. And he told me, after the service this morning, and feel free to share it, God has ways of saying enough.

God can put us in a position where all we can do is look up, he said, from a hospital bed. And God used that, worked through that to save him and change his life.

God knows the best way to get each one of our attentions and turn our hearts toward him. See, God knows you. God knows me.

[11:15] He knows the kinds of things that we care about, we're interested in, things that bother us. And so, if necessary, he will intervene in our lives, where we live, to do whatever it takes to call us to himself, to put us on a path where we are willing to obey him about whatever it is he is working on us and calling us to do.

If you're in a situation like that right now, I want you to understand that God does not take pleasure in putting such pressure on his children. I do not think that God was sitting in heaven looking down at Jonah and laughed as they picked him up and threw him overboard.

God didn't think it was funny as Jonah struggled for a minute or two or three and then started sinking to the bottom of the ocean. Not at all. Jonah was God's man.

God loved Jonah. But God loved him enough to discipline him just like God loves us enough to discipline us severely if necessary to put us in a position where we are willing and ready to stop disobeying him and come back to him in confession, in repentance, in renewed commitment.

That's what God did to Jonah. He brought Jonah to the point where he was willing, wanted to pray and God was ready to respond to Jonah's prayer to Jonah in grace, in mercy, not giving him what he deserved.

[13:07] What we see in chapter 2 is that we can never run too far for God to hear our prayer of desperation. Look again at verse 2. He says, I called out to the Lord out of my distress and he answered me.

Out of the belly of Sheol, the place of the dead, I cried and you heard my voice. What I want us to do now is I want us to look at Jonah's prayer of desperation, the big picture approach.

Next week we'll look at it in more detail and finish it up. But let's look now at point number 2. God is ready and able to forgive and restore his rebellious people who turn to him in desperate prayer.

Now if you read this, we've just read it, some of you are familiar with it, this is an example of a prayer of someone who is very desperate.

And it does show us that God is ready and able to forgive us, forgive you and me. Whenever we have rebelled, whenever we have just said no to him, I'll not do it.

[14:26] That's what Jonah was doing. But we've got to be serious about coming back to God. Let's look. A desperate prayer is a prayer of a desperate person.

Throughout chapter 1, Jonah is intentionally disobeying God. I want you to think. Jonah told those sailors to throw him overboard in order to stop the storm.

Jonah was running from God. He got on a ship. God sent a storm. He was not going to allow Jonah to get away. Jonah knew the storm is because of me, my rebellion, my disobedience.

Jonah knew if I'll just give it up, if I'll just admit my sin, my rebellion, repent now. The storm will stop. I can go back to Joppa. They'll be glad to take me back if the storm stops and I explain all this to them. But Jonah wasn't willing to do that. Jonah was willing to die rather than repent.

[15:45] And so that's why he told the sailors to throw him overboard. Jonah thought he would rather die than obey God until he was knocking on death's door.

Jonah was ready to be thrown overboard, but somewhere along the line, maybe when the sailors jerked him up and he knew this was going to happen, maybe when he hit the water or maybe when he started to sink, but somewhere along the line, Jonah changed his mind and thought, I don't want to die.

I would rather obey God than drown in this ocean. Leslie Allen, the commentator, describes what God was doing to Jonah during this time.

Look at it. Jonah's self-willed flight from God's presence in chapter one had been ratified by God's so be it in banishment from life.

The alternative to saying to God, thy will be done, is to hear him say eventually, your will be done. The awful significance of being rejected by God had dawned on him.

[17:07] You see, the whole story of Jonah up to this point in chapter two, he knows what God wants him to do. And he's just not willing to do it. He knows what God's will is, but it's like Jonah saying throughout chapter one, I'm not going to do God's will.

I'm going to do my will. Well, in chapter two, God says to Jonah, do it. You want things your way instead of my way? You've got it.

And so he was going to die. He was going to drown in the ocean because he was not willing to submit to God's will. You know, until he was thrown into the ocean and thought he was going to drown, all he was concerned about was getting away from the presence of the Lord.

He didn't want to have anything to do with God. Look back in chapter one, verse three. But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. Verse ten, for the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord because he had told them.

When Jonah is thrown overboard and sinks to the bottom of the ocean, God is giving Jonah what he asked for. Jonah began to experience the consequences of running from the presence of the Lord.

[18 : 29] But it didn't take him long to realize how foolish he was. And that's when he became desperate for God. That's when he became so desperate they started crying out to God in prayer.

How would you describe yourself right now, spiritually speaking? Are you running from the presence of the Lord because you don't want to do his will about something he has made clear to you, maybe in his word, maybe his spirit?

And we're not talking about big things. I've tried to help you think. Look, everything matters to God. Everything doesn't matter to us.

But everything matters to God. Our attitudes, our motivations, what we do and don't do. Most of you in this room, you've been in church a long time.

You've been exposed to the general teaching of God's word. Most of you know how God wants you to live in your home. Men, are you being the man that God's called you to be and loving your wife like Christ loves the church?

[19 : 54] Young people living at home with your parents, are you truly honoring them, respecting them, obeying them with the right attitude?

Are you running from something the Lord's calling you to do in terms of ethics in your work?

Are you stealing? Maybe not taking something, but you're stealing time. You're stealing, you're taking from what is not yours.

others. Are you doing what you know you're supposed to be doing in your school work with your friends, things you do away from home and away from church?

Are you running from God or are you ignoring the presence of the Lord because you're more concerned about other things, other people in your life?

[21 : 00] could it be that you would think I'm not really disobeying God, I'm just not thinking about God. He's just not on the radar right now.

I'm thinking about some people, some situations. That's what I'm most focused on. Now one way we can evaluate our attitude toward being in the presence of the Lord is to examine our prayer lives.

I'm talking about all of us. How would you describe the quality of your prayer life right now? How would you describe the meaningfulness of it?

The value that you place on it? Are you spending time with God in meaningful prayer? For example, like Jesus taught us to pray.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. As you think about your prayer life, do you focus on God really and praise him, worship him personally?

[22 : 15] Do you thank him for all the many ways he blesses you? Do you confess your sins quickly when you're aware of them?

Are you seeking God's will about the details of your life? You know, as a general rule, if we don't pray, we don't obey God.

If we don't pray, we live selfishly. We do foolish things. Think, if we really don't pray, aren't we more like atheists than Christians?

If we don't pray, God's just left out of our lives. Sometimes the best thing that can happen to us is for God to truly let us have our way like he did Jonah.

And you think, well, why would you say something like that? Well, the first time we see Jonah acknowledging God's presence is when he was thrown into the ocean. The first time we see Jonah pray in this book, he's a prophet of God, is when he was in the belly of the fish.

[23 : 35] Some people have to be humbled, broken, and put in a desperate situation before they realize how much they really and truly need God and are willing to call out to him in prayer.

Is that true for you? Are you just living your life basically as if God doesn't exist? You don't talk to him, you don't really think about him, you're not concerned about knowing his will, much less doing it.

Some people, they've got to be brought down low in order for God to get their attention. Sometimes we have to experience the consequences of our sin and our selfishness, our self-centeredness to wake up and realize how desperately we really and truly do need a relationship with God.

Is that going to be what it takes for you to reap what you sow? To experience the consequences of living with no relationship with God?

[24 : 59] That's what it took for Jonah, and Jonah really knew better. He was a prophet. That's what it took for Jonah to learn this important lesson about prayer.

Look at next. Desperate prayer is God focused. Jonah becomes very God focused in the belly of that fish. He recognizes that God is sovereign over all creation.

Look at it. He says that it was God who threw him overboard. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas. God worked through the sailors, but it was God who did it. He even said that the waves of the ocean belong to God.

Look at it. All your waves and your billows passed over me. The real focus of Jonah's prayer is God. I want you to think. What is the real focus of your prayers? For some people, the real focus is just themselves.

[26 : 07] They pray just very selfish, all about me, mine, mine prayers. Is the focus of your prayer yourself, other people, your stuff?

Or is God the focus of your prayers? You know, this is really a prayer of thanksgiving, not of complaint.

Jonah's not whining here about what God has done to him. He's not accusing God of mistreating him. Jonah understands that everything that happens to him in the ocean and in the fish, it was God intervening and graciously rescuing him.

Look at verse six again, the last part. Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God. You know, one way we can evaluate our attitude toward God right now is to evaluate our attitude toward the suffering that we basically bring upon ourselves.

Johnny Erickson Tata is someone uniquely qualified to comment on this. She has spent the last 40 to 50 years as a paraplegic in a wheelchair, came about as a young woman in a diving accident.

[27 : 36] Look at what she says. When God brings suffering into your life as a Christian, be it mild or drastic, he is forcing you to decide on issues you have been avoiding.

That's exactly what God's doing through Jonah's suffering. That may be what God is doing through your suffering right now.

All suffering is not God's discipline. But if you're suffering right now, if you are suffering right now as a result of your sin, your stubbornness, your rebellion, your lack of love, if that's why you're suffering spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally, whatever it may be, God is forcing you to come face to face with the issue you're trying to avoid.

We're going to come back this next week and conclude the study of Jonah's prayer, but for now, I want us to end this by looking at the turning point in Jonah's life was not the miracle of being swallowed by the fish.

Understand that. That was not the key event. The turning point was when Jonah stopped running from God in disobedience and started running to God in desperate, heartfelt prayer.

[29 : 15] Could that be what you need to do this morning? Are you running from God about something? Stop it.

Turn around. Run to God in prayer. Are you ignoring God? I mean, you're living the, you're living a great life.

You're living the American dream. You've got a nice family, a good job. You're nice to everybody. But God is really not a part of your life.

The turning point for you very well may be when you turn to God.

When you start running to God in real, heartfelt, desperate prayer. I want to encourage you right now.

[30 : 18] Try it. Try it now. And see what God does. Let's pray together. Father, Father, you know our needs.

You know where we need to be broken, where we need to be healed, where we need to be humbled, where we need to be encouraged.

Father, help us to not have to learn the kind of lessons Jonah learned, the way he learned them. Help us to learn from his foolishness, sinfulness.

Help us, Father, to come to you right now. In confession and repentance of our sins, our sins of omission as well as commission.

Help us, Father, to come close to you right now. And let's just all be prayerful, listen to the Lord, and respond to him.

[31 : 38] I would be happy to pray with you during this time. If there's something you want to pray about here at the front, this moment, you come during this time. But the important thing is that we hear God, we recognize our need, and out of desperation, go to God in prayer about it.

Let's pray and you respond.