

Jonah's Prayer:

Finding Redemption and Obedience in the Belly of the Beast

Take your Bibles and turn with me. Our theme this month has been prayer, and we will continue with that theme. Today, we're looking at chapter two of the book of Jonah.

Now, if you go back to chapter one, you'll see Jonah abandoned prayer. He would instead be thrown overboard than pray. He'd rather drown than obey. Jonah no doubt expected to die when the sailors tossed him into the sea, but when he woke up inside the fish—can you imagine?—he realized that God had graciously spared his life. In verse five, he says, "The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me." It was a tough place for a disobedient prophet, but in that suffocating atmosphere, something remarkable happened. Jonah finally began to pray.

During the storm, even the pagans were praying, but Jonah didn't want anything to do with prayer. I think he knew that if he prayed, he'd have to repent, and he didn't want to do it. He was trying to avoid God, outrun God, and ignore God. And if you've ever tried to do that, how did it work out for you? Probably about as well as it worked for Jonah. But inside the fish's belly, Jonah found something constructive to do with his time—he began to renew his relationship with God. He started to reconsider where he had been, what he had done, and what he had refused to do.

Jonah prayed two prayers in this book, which are as opposite as night and day. He prayed his best prayer in the worst place—the belly of the fish—and his worst prayer in the best place—in Nineveh, during a mighty move of God. His first prayer came from a broken heart, his second from an angry one. In the first prayer, he asked God to save him—a good prayer.

But in the second prayer, he asked God to take his life. He was bitter and upset with God. He'd rather die than not have his own way. No wonder the great fish eventually vomited him up. He was a spoiled prophet, throwing a pity party because he couldn't have his way. When we know God's will, the challenge isn't understanding it—it's doing it.

Have you ever prayed a bad prayer from an angry heart? It can happen. But today, we're going to focus on Jonah's good prayer.

Pray for God's Help

First, he prayed for God's help. We see this in verses one and two: "I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice." God can use affliction to capture our attention and help us see our great need for Him. Jonah uses the Hebrew word "Sheol," meaning the place of the dead or the grave. He felt as if he had been buried alive, as good as dead.

Jonah was now experiencing what the sailors did in chapter one. Have you ever gone through a storm? Storms have a way of simplifying our lives. In chapter one, the sailors looked at all the cargo and asked, "Do we really need this stuff?" They realized their lives depended on throwing things overboard to keep the ship afloat. Storms help you figure out what's truly important.

During the sinking of the Titanic, a wealthy woman ran to her cabin. On the dresser were her diamonds and two oranges. She grabbed the oranges. Who needs diamonds if you're going to drown? She knew that she'd need those oranges to survive if she made it to a lifeboat. Storms do that—they help us set our priorities. Storms can also redirect our lives. If you're getting slammed and pounded through a tough time, maybe the Lord is trying to get your attention and redirect you.

At this moment, Jonah began to feel what the sailors felt in chapter one. He felt like he was perishing and couldn't save himself. It was impossible. He came to that realization, and it would be good if we all did. How often do people try to save themselves, to bail themselves out, when only God can do that for them? Jonah realized he was desperate and cried out to God for help.

As the people of God, we need the Lord to periodically remind us of what it's like to be lost without hope, just drifting. It's easy for us to grow hardened toward sinners and lose our compassion for the lost. We must refocus and redirect our priorities to align with God's will. The greatest priority in our lives should be doing what God tells us to do and fulfilling His plan for us.

Jonah first prayed for God's help.

Accept God's Discipline

Secondly, he accepted God's discipline. In verse three, he says, "For You cast me into the deep; all Your billows and waves passed over me." Sometimes, we're tempted to blame the devil for our troubles, but maybe our difficulties are self-inflicted. Perhaps God has permitted these challenges to darken our days and humble us. The Bible says to humble yourself—it is better to do it yourself than have God do it for you because God does an excellent job of humbling us.

Has God ever had to take you down a few notches? Maybe you were getting cocky, puffed up, thinking more highly of yourself than you should. Remember, all we, like sheep, have gone astray. When I read the story of Jonah, I try not to be too judgmental because I'm not so sure we're always eager to jump on board with God's will. Sometimes, we look for an exit door, just like Jonah did.

If the Lord has ever disciplined you, be encouraged—it's a sign that God loves you and has received you as His child. A loving parent disciplines their children. Just like God disciplines us, guiding and nurturing us so we grow up respectful and mature. If God didn't love you, He'd just let you go your own way without placing obstacles in your path. Thank God for His correction, for it's a sign of His love. Discipline is to the believer what exercise and training are to the athlete.

God's love enables us to run the race with endurance and reach the goal He has set for us. Take Jonah as an example—God had a plan and purpose for his life. Despite Jonah's disobedience and attempts to avoid God, the Lord didn't give up on him.

God could have left Jonah to face the consequences of his actions, but instead, He sent a fish to save him. This fish was not just any ordinary creature but a testament to God's creative power. Some might view this story as poetic or symbolic, but I believe it truly happened. God can do things beyond our understanding, including creating a fish to fulfill His purpose.

When Jonah acknowledged that God's waves and billows passed over him, he recognized God's discipline. Jonah understood that God was correcting him and that he deserved it. It's refreshing to God when we come clean and admit our mistakes. Jonah admitted that he was in the mess he was in because of his own actions—because he had drifted far from what he knew was right.

God's discipline doesn't mean He rejects us. Just as a coach might bench a player for a time to correct and instruct them, God may pull us out of the game for a season to guide us. But His goal is always to put us back in the game, better than before, because He sees us as valuable players in His work.

Trust God's Promise

Third, Jonah trusted God's promise even in his lowest moments. When his soul fainted within him, he remembered the Lord and prayed. Jonah's life had been on a downward trajectory since the moment he disobeyed God's will. He went down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the sea, and finally down into the belly of the fish. When we turn our backs on God, the only direction we can go is down. But Jonah clung to God's promise, remembering the prayer Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple: that when God's people pray, even in their distress, God would hear from heaven and respond.

Jonah knew that he had taken himself down, but he also knew that only God could lift him up. In the darkest moments of life, the only way to look is up. When we hit rock bottom, we must remember that God is still committed to us and keeping His promises. It's not about our commitment to Him but His commitment to us. When nothing else can help, God's love can lift us up.

Jonah also realized he had allowed idols to come between him and God. Anything that deters our loyalty and obedience to God can become an idol. Jonah had to confront these idols and return to God, recognizing that his intense patriotism had clouded his judgment. He couldn't see himself going as God's messenger to a people he considered enemies. Yet, God wanted to use him to bring change and salvation to those people.

As Jonah closed his prayer, he made vows to the Lord, committing to sacrifice and declaring God's Word if given another chance. God, in His mercy, gave Jonah that chance because He knows what it takes to turn our "I won't" into "I will." God's will is unstoppable, and He will work in us until we align with His purposes. In accomplishing God's will, we find the true growth, blessing, and joy God wants to pour out upon you. Salvation is of the Lord. Jonah was quoting Psalm 3:8 when he said that. How wise—how wise to memorize Scripture!

God's Word gives light in the darkness. I doubt any lanterns or light switches were inside that fish's belly. It was probably a pretty dark place, seemingly

hopeless. Yet Jonah held on to a verse of Scripture. 'Your Word is a lamp unto my feet.' His Word can light up your darkest night.

True repentance comes with excellent results. 'I'm going to repent. I'm going to admit my guilt. I know what God is doing to me. I know His hand of discipline is on me. I deserve it.' God doesn't paddle us, but He does deal with us to turn us around. So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry ground. What a picture!

Imagine being a little Jewish family at the beach on a sunny day. Suddenly, a monstrous ship rises from the water—no, it's a fish! With a giant burp, the fish opens its mouth and launches the spoiled prophet onto the shore. Jonah, covered in weeds and gooey stuff, has just been inside this fish, which no doubt had been eating other things along the way. There he is! And do you know what my question is at a moment like this? How do you spell relief? Who was more relieved—Jonah to get out of the fish or the fish to get him out? Jonah must have been doing a little hallelujah dance on that beach, covered in weeds, just having a wonderful time praising the Lord.

But you know, we shouldn't judge people's worship and praise too much because we don't know where they've been. This guy just came out of a fish. God delivered him—let him have his moment! What a sight Jonah must have been when he washed up on the beach. But let me ask you a question: Have you ever felt all washed up in your service to God? Have you ever been burning hot for God, in hot pursuit of Him, and then something happened that put out the fire and passion of your commitment? You might feel like God is done with you because you've failed and disobeyed to the point that He couldn't use you anymore.

I've met many people who feel that way, even those in ministry. But that is not true. The enemy told you that you've blown it so bad that there's no hope for recovery or restoration, that God doesn't even want to talk to you. Please understand—the God of the Bible is the God of the second chance. My favorite verse in the Bible is Micah 7:8: 'Do not rejoice over me, my enemy. When I fall, I will arise. When I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.' No matter how dark the night, God is still the light you need.

Jonah would rise again because God would speak again. The Word of the Lord came a second time. God knew the prophet would reject, refuse, or run away, so

He set a series of events in motion that would bring Jonah back to Him. Jonah's rejection of God's plan didn't disqualify or excuse him from fulfilling the commission to go. God didn't say, 'Well, okay, you don't want to do it, I'll just get somebody else.' No, God said, 'You're going to do it because I'm God, and deep down inside, I know you love Me, Jonah. I know you desire to please Me. So you will do this thing, and I'm not giving up on you.'

God's call upon Jonah's life hadn't changed, nor had God's message. Jonah had put his country, Israel, above his calling, but nothing can come above your calling in the Lord. God has a work for you—isn't that exciting? He has a plan for you, and He's not finished with you yet. You may have given up on yourself, but God hasn't. He never will.

If you've failed the Lord or been running from His call, know He forgives and will give you another chance. Get up, get the seaweed out of your hair, and shower—you smell terrible! Now you're heading down to Nineveh. Yeah, Nineveh or bust! What's remarkable about this story is that everything in the book of Jonah obeys God—except the prophet of God. And at the end, when this mighty revival breaks out in the city, Jonah is not rejoicing—he's angry. He lists God's attributes: gracious, merciful, long-suffering, and forgiving. Jonah says, 'I knew you would do this. I knew you would save those people.' And he's mad!

Jonah and Nahum are the only books in the Bible that end with a question. God asks Jonah, 'Do you have a reason to be mad at Me?' And that's how the book closes—we never get an answer. God had brought Jonah out of the fish's belly, but Jonah had a problem with God using him to bring anyone else to repentance.

This book is more about the messenger than the message. It challenges our attitude about sharing the Word of God, especially with people we may not like. But God had a plan for Jonah, and here's the plan: first, Jonah prayed and asked God for help. Second, he accepted the discipline of the Lord and allowed God to humble him. Humility is the highway to holiness. Third, he trusted in God's promise and was encouraged by His Word.

Yield to God's Will

Finally, he yielded to God's will and said 'yes' instead of 'no.'

A 'yes' will get you off the bench and back in the game. If you think you've forfeited God's plan for your life, that's a lie. If God's called you, He doesn't take away the calling. Whatever you may have attempted for God and failed at, get back to it in the name of the Lord. Aren't you glad for the forgiveness of God? The prayer of Jonah is a great prayer—classic, really. So, if you don't want to turn out to be fish food, be faithful.