

"Dear God, thank you for the baby brother. But I prayed for a puppy."

"Lord, give me patience only. If you give me strength, I just might punch someone."

"Dear Lord, I'm running fast, please don't let me be late to class!" "Dear Lord, I just fell. So please don't let me be late... but don't shove me either."

"Dear Lord, as your humble servant, let me prove to you that winning the lottery won't spoil me."

Prayers come in all shapes and sizes. Prayers are offered in many places. And in week two of our Jonah sermon series, Fish Tales, we will look at a prayer that Jonah offers to God when he realizes he can run but he can't hide.

Last week we were left with a cliff hanger. Yes, Jonah survived being tossed into the sea during one of those knock-down, drag-out Mediterranean storms. His rescue vessel was 60 feet in length with a very large tail. It had rubbery, armor-like skin. Tiny toothlike scales called dermal denticles were anchored into that skin. (that was just fun to say) The mouth of this vessel was at least 5 feet wide, with 300 rows of tiny teeth and 20 filter pads to filter the krill that powered this vessel. Jonah's rescue vessel bears the same description as a whale or basking shark. If anything would get me down on my knees in prayer, a whale rescue would definitely do it.

And that's what Jonah does, offers a prayer right there in the belly of his rescue vessel. I think we can safely say that this is one of the strangest prayer rooms ever.

Jonah is a prophet of God. So a temple, a quiet hillside, or a synagogue would be more familiar to him. But today Jonah is praying from the depths, he is praying in confinement, he's praying from the consequences of his own disobedience. AND...God hears him.

We've all been there, some of us may even be there now. In the depths of take your pick. Not all depths are the result of disobedience. Some are caused by suffering we did not choose. Some by grief, disappointment, loss, or pressure. But I can tell you that there were times when, like Jonah, I found myself in deep water because I resisted the voice of God. The comfort in Jonah 2

is this: there is no place is too dark for prayer; no failure is too final for mercy, and no depth beyond the reach of God's saving grace.

These prayerful words aren't just a demonstration of how Jonah can pray, they also show the mercy of God. That gives me hope. And I can guarantee you that when my disobedience landed me in the depths, my shout out to the Lord was met with response. Out of those depths God saved, restored, and sent me forward by grace.

Jonah's prayer begins after he runs from the Lord. After God calls him to go to Nineveh, and after Jonah goes in the opposite direction. As we discussed last week, Jonah was trying to escape this assignment. Literally, he thought he could escape the presence of God. From the storm, to the sailors, to the casting of lots, and finally to the raging sea a mighty truth is exposed: We cannot outrun God. (repeat)

In Chapter 2 we find a Jonah who is brought low. He is confined. He is helpless. He is forced to face what his running has produced. He's also experiencing God's mercy through his rescue vessel. This giant fish is not just a prison, its keeping him from drowning.

God is not beyond using discomfort to get our attention. God is willing to allow His grace to feel like an interruption. Wake up calls can appear in the form of storms, losses, closed doors, hard conversations, and even painful consequences. This is God loving us enough to not allow us to keep running in the wrong direction.

Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 shows how not to waste the place of consequence. So, when God brings something to light in your life, don't try to hide. Don't defend disobedience. Ask God to show you where you need to surrender. Embrace your classroom of grace and see it as an invitation to turn your heart back to God.

In his prayer, Jonah describes his experience with the language of drowning. Waters surrounding him, waves passing over him, and the deep closing around him. In this classroom

there is no time for a polished or detached prayer. This is a prayer that is honest and desperate. It is a prayer that does not pretend like everything is fine. Jonah tells the truth about where he is.

After all of this Jonah arrives at a turning point, “I remembered the Lord.” This line is important. This line matters. His circumstances haven’t changed yet. He is still in the fish. He is still in the dark. He is still waiting for deliverance. But his focus changes. He stops looking only at the waves and begins looking to the God who rules the waves.

So often, the road to repentance begins with a small awakened memory, as it did with the Prodigal Son. We begin to remember who God is. We begin to remember God’s holiness and mercy. We remember the discipline along with the compassion. We remember as David did in Psalm 51, that God is near to the brokenhearted and mighty to save. Memory transforms into worship when our hearts turn back to the Lord.

Do you feel surrounded? Are you drowning in anxiety and regret. Do you feel surrounded by bills, hard decisions, medical news, family strain, or spiritual weariness. Like Jonah we can pray from that very place. Don’t wait until you feel strong enough to call on God. You can trust God to respond when you call from the depths.

You’re going to find that Jonah is a man of few words. So, the fact that the climax to his prayer is short and simple shouldn’t be a surprise. “Salvation belongs to the Lord!” Short, simple, and Powerful! Jonah admits that he cannot save himself from the sea or from the fish. Also, he cannot save himself from his rebellious heart. If salvation, if deliverance is to come, it must come from God.

This confession, Salvation belongs to the Lord, stands at the center of the gospel message. Salvation doesn’t come our way through works. Doesn’t come through things like effort, achievement, moral improvement (which isn’t a bad thing), or religious performance. When we come with a repentant heart, God meets us with mercy. In Jesus Christ, God entered the depths for us.

Jesus will speak of Jonah as a sign, one pointing to His own death, burial, and resurrection. Jonah went down because of his own disobedience, Jesus went down because of ours. Jonah was delivered from the fish, Jesus rose victorious from the grave, delivering us from death.

The sacrifice of Jesus turns our prayers into hope. It leads us to accept that it's not in our own strength but in the strength of the Lord that we hope. It's the confidence that if we run away, God waits for us to turn around. When we turn around, God runs towards us. God gives us our own rescue vessel and God saves us, the penitent sinner. Because, salvation belongs to the Lord. Who does salvation belong to?

Here's the invitation in today's prayer. Stop trusting in this idea that you can save yourself. When you feel buried in a sea of guilt, here's your promise. God's mercy can and will reach lower than your lowest place. (Repeat) Failures, sins, resistance, and drifting require one thing. Return to the Lord. Let God do what God does best...extend mercy, grace, and salvation.

We now arrive at the next well-known part of this story. After Jonah finishes his prayer, the Lord speaks to the fish, and Jonah is spewed up onto dry land. Spew is a funny way to describe this. What a vivid and undignified picture we get of this grump of a prophet being forcefully ejected from a giant fish's stomach onto the beach. If Jonah has acted ridiculous up to this point, so he might as well look the part.

Funny or not, this is good news. Because God is not finished with Jonah. His failure did not cancel God's call. His disobedience did not exhaust God's mercy. Jonah returns to dry land, and to a 2nd chance to hear God's call. God is a God of 2nd chances! (Psst, and 3rd and 4th and 5th)

God will do the same for any person who runs, resists, delays, doubts, or disobeys. God's mercy is not merely to rescue us from trouble; it is restoration to obedience. The God who hears us in the depths also calls us to walk with Him on dry ground.

Grace does not leave Jonah in the fish, and grace will not leave us where we are either. This is a grace that forgives, lifts, restores, and sends. The question is not only, “Will God rescue me?” But also, “When God brings me back to dry ground, will I obey?”

So, what should you take from this today? First, pray honestly from where you are, not from where you wish you were. Jonah did not wait until he was cleaned up, settled down, and spiritually impressive. He cried out from the belly of the fish. Second, let consequences become a call to return, not a reason to despair. If God is correcting you, do not mistake correction for rejection. Third, remember the Lord when circumstances feel overwhelming. Let the truth of who God is become louder than the storm around you. Fourth, rest in Jonah’s confession: salvation belongs to the Lord. And finally, receive mercy not as an ending, but as a new beginning of obedience.

Jonah’s prayer teaches us that God hears prayers from the lowest places. The belly of a fish can be a sanctuary because the Lord is there. The depths can be a place of hope because the Lord saves. A rescued sinner can be a witness because, just ask the Apostle Paul, the Lord will send.

When you find yourself in the depths, cry out to God. When you remember your failure, remember that Divine mercy more. When you feel surrounded, remember the Lord. When you come to the end of your own strength, confess the truth that has carried God’s people through every generation: salvation belongs to the Lord. As Jonah prayed, let us also pray:

Lord, we thank You that there is no depth beyond Your reach. We confess that we have often run from Your voice, resisted Your will, and trusted our own way. But we praise You that salvation belongs to You. Hear us when we cry out. Turn our hearts back to You. Restore us by Your mercy, strengthen us by Your grace, and send us forward in obedience. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.