

Salvation belongs to our God

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[0 : 00] Anyway, we're moving on to our second chapter in Jonah today. And let me begin by saying that some of you may be too young to remember this movie. But if you remember, or you were around at the time, you will remember that in the movie Titanic, 1997.

That's why I think some of you are too young. You remember, I mean, you all know about the Titanic. It's a sinking ship. But you remember that there are a few scenes during the movie where Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet.

Anyone remember the character names? Jack and Rose. That's right. Oh, some of you. Anyway, Jack and Rose were trapped below deck.

I think it was deck E as the waters were rising and closing in as the ship was sinking. To the point that at one stage, and that slide there just before that, there appeared that there would be no way of escape.

In fact, the next slide shows you Kate sort of getting to that last, you know, whatever, head length of water. And of course, if you remember, one of the guys came along and was rushing up deck.

[1 : 08] And then he said, oh, she told me the key. And they saw through the key, but the key fell into the water. So Jack had to go and grab the thing and finally did. So they did get, you know, I'm not spoiling the story, but they did get out in the end.

But there was, as you would know, all movies, you know, the hero always survives. Actually, this one doesn't. Anyway. But not to the very end, of course.

But there was a point in the movie, wasn't there, that if you're really into it, you thought that perhaps there was no way of escape. And of course, the genius of the storytelling is that it was meant to be symbolic of the life of Rose, who was suffocating in the birdcage that is upper class society.

And I wonder whether you've ever felt like that yourself. Perhaps not the upper class bit, although who knows, but more the existential threat.

Perhaps you've experienced a life-threatening illness, the loss of a job or running out of money or facing homelessness. Or maybe the sense of suffocation is more around broken relationships or broken dreams, where your world was once secure and stable, but now it's threatening to crash in around you because of some crisis.

[2 : 31] Well, if you've ever experienced or perhaps even are experiencing something like that, then Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 would resonate with you.

Last Sunday, we discovered how Jonah got here. He was running away from God, disobeying his call. He jumps in a boat, but God causes him to be hurled into a raging sea and provides a huge fish to swallow him.

And so we find in verse 1 of chapter 2, that's where Jonah prays to God from inside the fish. And Jonah's prayer is highly descriptive of his experience, what he's going through, of someone under great distress.

He describes almost quite vividly his inner world. So let's look at that again. And he starts by saying, Now much of this we can take literally.

After all, he was in the belly of the fish. It would feel like the realm of the dead. Perhaps the fish would have swallowed some seaweed. So it wouldn't be surprising if he found some wrapped around his head.

[4 : 16] And every time the fish took a breath or a big gulp of water, you would almost sense the waters rushing and engulfing and threatening him.

But of course, much of this can be taken figuratively as well. Verse 6, for instance, doesn't quite match the real experience of being in the fish of the belly.

The idea of the earth beneath, barring him forever, sinking down to the roots of the mountain. So I think we're meant to take the whole prayer as largely figurative as well.

An expression of how he was feeling in life in general. And you have to say that whatever Jonah's plans were, it was certainly not to end up in the belly of the fish.

Certainly it wasn't to go to Nineveh to preach, to disregard God's call, and therefore to then be sent into the fish.

[5 : 16] He would probably have been having quite a good life. Thank you very much. But when he's in this distress, what he describes for us are, I think, two common things that we too would probably experience when we go through life in distress.

So the first is we will feel disorientation in the world. Verse 3, the whole idea of being hurled into a deep sea and then having waves swirl around him.

All that gives us a sense of disorientation. I feel that same way whenever I take a swim in the ocean, which is not very often because I don't like it.

But whenever I do, I never want to venture beyond where my feet can touch the sand. Because if that was the case and the next wave hits, I would be totally disoriented.

I would lose track of how far I was from the beach, how far along I was, thinking that, oh, that's where my belongings are. And I would even lose sense of which direction the beach was, and start swimming toward the beach only to find out I'm swimming further.

[6 : 30] It doesn't help because I'm short-sighted, but even if I weren't, I think I would still be disoriented. And that's a bit of how life is too, isn't it?

All our plans and the relationships we have, even our past experiences are anchor points in our life, aren't they? There are reference points that give us a sense of stability, of knowing where we are and what direction we're going.

And when one or more of these things are pulled out or pulled away from us, then we become disorientated. And we can, I guess, respond with fear, anxiety, even anger.

And in our panic, we might reach out and just grasp for anything that we can hang on to for certainty. And then when nothing works, we then sink, don't we, into despair and perhaps even depression, which are things I think Jonah expresses in his prayer.

Because he doesn't just talk about disorientation in the world, he also talks about disconnection with life itself, and ultimately with God. This sinking into the depths is a description of almost being removed from life.

[7 : 48] The earth beneath barring us is like being entombed. It always reminds me of those victims that you see on shows like CSI. You know, they're trapped in that coffin alive, and the murderer is shoveling sort of soil over them, and they're screaming and no one can hear them.

It reminds me of that. I don't know if it reminds me of that, but it reminds me of that. It's horrifying, isn't it? It's terrifying. But Jonah also speaks of disconnection from God, because in verse 4 he laments of being banished from God's sight.

Perhaps he feels like he's being punished for his disobedience, even though the reality is God has not forsaken him. But again, when we're in distress, we often feel like that, don't we?

We become disconnected with life and God. The things that we used to love doing, you know, enjoying food and entertainment and socializing, those have no appeal to us, do they?

Instead, all we want to do is hide in our room all day and just lie in bed. And all the while we're feeling like God has abandoned us. So that would be, I don't think, an uncommon experience for many of us.

[9 : 03] But as we look at the prayer, I think Jonah's response is actually quite instructive, quite helpful, because even though he's really not in the best of places, to put it mildly, look how he responds in verse 2.

He calls upon the Lord. From the realm of death, he called for help. And so sure is he that the Lord will answer and listen, that actually he speaks of it in the past tense, as though it's already occurred. Now Jonah could have turned away from the Lord. After all, he knows, he recognizes in verse 3, doesn't he? That it's God who hurls him into the sea. It is God's waves and breakers that sweep over him.

In other words, he knows that it is God that's doing all this to him. And yet, he knows that it is also God, who is the only one that can deliver him.

That actually he has to turn to God to be rescued. Now he goes further in verse 4, and says that even though he knows he's been banished from God's sight, yet he looks again towards his holy temple.

[10:13] The temple being the place that God dwells and meets with his people. The temple being the place where we, his people, go to worship and offer sacrifices to him. That is, we, as in God's people at the time.

And again in verse 7, Jonah repeats that. He says, It's never too late, is it, to respond and turn to the Lord, even when you're stuck in the depth of the belly of a fish.

And yet, there are times when even at those times, we still refuse to do that, do we? We're more inclined to rely on ourselves or rely on everything else, but look to God, to humble ourselves and really throw ourselves upon God in dependence.

In other words, our tendency is to live by sight and not by faith, to have visible and tangible assurances. How often do we say, God, show me this and I will trust.

But before you do, I'm not. It's a bargain that we often make with God. And if you look at the rest of the Bible, there are lots of examples of humans doing just that, isn't it?

[11:32] Go all the way back to the start with Eve. Eve's response was that she saw, didn't she, the forbidden fruit and desired it, instead of obeying God's word by faith.

It's the same problem with Israel. When they were coming out of Egypt, they saw or remembered the abundance that they had in Egypt and grumbled when they had to live by faith in the desert.

And even when they got to the promised land, instead of living by faith, according to God's promises, they looked to the idols that were around them. And so when we get to the New Testament and in our reading today from John, remember what Jesus said to Thomas regarding his resurrection.

It's on the slide. Because you have seen me, you have believed. Well done, Thomas. But blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. And elsewhere in 2 Corinthians, Paul says this, that we are to live by faith and not by sight.

So God's word to us is to live by faith, just as Jonah was now doing in the fish. Now it doesn't mean that we believe blindly.

[12:44] What we are to put our faith in are the promises of God in his word, to trust what he says and allow that to guide our decisions and directions. And chief among these promises is the one that says that faith in Jesus assures us that we are safe.

that his work on the cross, not our work, not trying to do better, nothing but the cross and what Jesus has done is sufficient to save us.

Now it doesn't mean that having given us his word, God is not going to give us anything else in life.

No, as we look around us, we have tangible proof that he loves and cares for us, doesn't he?

Friends and family, the church, which is visible, the body of Christ, and even material things like having a roof over our heads, a job, income, good health.

All of these things are signs of good, God's goodness to us, visible signs of God's goodness to us.

But the thing is that when some of these things are removed from us, the things that we hope for, whether it's a job or life partner or good health, if they are long in coming or not forthcoming at all, then God's word is for us to live by faith.

[14:02] That means to continue to trust in God even when some of these things are not there or even when we don't know what God has in mind for our future. And so when Jonah looks to the Lord's temple and he does so from within the fish, that's not an act of sight, is it?

He can't see beyond the walls of the fish. It's an act of faith. In fact, the act of praying to the Lord is an act of faith, isn't it? Because he's saying that he's looking to God and no other to rescue him.

The alternative, Jonah says, is to look to idols in verse 8 which are worthless. So he says, those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.

Now, nowadays we don't literally have physical wooden or silver idols but we're driven by the same impulses, aren't we? To look to things to fulfill our longings and desires.

To look to the gifts that God has given us even rather than to God himself. So we look to other people or we look to means other than God. And I think some of the two biggest temptations are with work.

[15:16] We look to our work to give us that or we look to romance or marriage to do that. These are things that we look to as idols to find fulfillment in life.

But Jonah says that if we cling to them as idols then they're actually worthless. But more than that, it turns us away from God's love. We can't have idols and God.

If we turn to idols then we invariably turn our backs on God's love. Now Jonah, however, is resolved to look to the Lord's temple even in the depth of the dead.

And so now he vows in verse 9. He's almost looking forward, isn't it, to the time when having trusted in God and being rescued, he will be able to return to the temple physically to worship God in word and deed.

And so he says, but I with shouts of grateful praise will sacrifice to you what I vowed in the belly of the fish I will make good at the time. I will say salvation comes from the Lord.

[16:21] And he's saying that not just to himself but when he gets to the temple he's saying it to others around him as well, isn't it? It's a declarative statement. But all these things that he's about to do and is doing points to one fact, isn't it?

That salvation comes from the Lord. And I think that's the key verse in the whole prayer and perhaps even in the whole prophecy. You see, in times of distress and depression and I just watched a TV show yesterday, they recommend that you do certain good things, practical things, isn't it?

That even though you're feeling really low, it's always good to just get out of bed, brush your teeth, make your bed, that kind of stuff, get out for some fresh air, have a simple to-do list and just get through it.

And these are all good things, isn't it, to help us to physically be productive even when we don't feel like it. But for us as Christians, we ought to do one more thing, shouldn't we?

And that is to look to God. We may not feel like it, but we are asked to look to God in prayer, in trust.

[17:36] Unlike Jonah, we don't need to look to God's temple, we need to only look to Jesus, who is the ultimate sacrifice. But we are to do it whether we feel like it or not.

We are to do it whether our circumstances have changed or not, and whether we know how God is going to save us or not. Doing it is an act of faith that helps us to acknowledge that salvation comes from the Lord.

Now, we have come to the end of the chapter. It is not a very long one, but I wanted to offer two more observations, and it is more to do with the fact that what is the place of this chapter in the whole prophecy?

I don't know whether you have noticed, this chapter is quite different to the others, isn't it? The rest are all narratives, stories about things happening, whereas this isn't. No events occur here except the fish vomiting.

Time almost stands still, doesn't it? It is a prayer of reflection on Jonah's part, but I think as he does that, what he does is offer us a perspective on the whole prophecy itself, on what is going on.

[18:46] And so the two things I want to just draw out, both of them are related to the title that salvation comes from the Lord. And the first is to just say that we need to realize that God's salvation often has many facets.

If I were to ask you, what is the saving event here in chapter 2, you might think, or even in the prophecy, you might think, oh, it's the bit where the fish vomits. That's when Jonah is saved. Or you might say, it's the place when the Ninevites repent and God relents and doesn't punish them. Those are the natural things we go to when we think, oh, what is God doing to save people? But actually, if you think about it, God saving Acts has been happening in both chapter 1 and chapter 2, hasn't it? God was saving Jonah when he provided the fish.

But more than that, God was also saving Jonah when he caused the storm to come to the boat. Because the thing that Jonah really needed saving from wasn't the sea or the fish, it was actually, his rebellion, wasn't it?

[19:53] That's why he can say in the prayer that God hurled me his breakers and his waves. All these things that God was doing to him was to actually draw him, Jonah, back to God rather than to run away from God.

And that in itself is a saving act, isn't it? And we often think, don't we, that it's only the good bits, the last bits, that is God's hand of salvation. And then we get angry when God puts trials in our lives because we don't think that those are God's merciful acts of salvation.

But no, they are, aren't they? Because trials test us and strengthen our faith in order that our faith might persevere. And so I want to encourage us to see the manifested nature of God's salvation,

not just the good bits, but all of what God is doing in our lives.

God's God's God's God's God's message. And this is for many of us who are serving the Lord and sharing God's message. And I think the second chapter here today reminds us that God's messengers need God's message as well.

The phrase salvation comes from the Lord is not just a message for the Ninevites, but as Jonah has prayed, it is a message for him as well. And again, we are sometimes so preoccupied in serving the Lord or sharing the gospel that we forget to hear the gospel ourselves.

[21 : 22] But Jonah's prayer demonstrates that he realizes that he needs God's salvation as much as the Ninevites. And I think when we realize that and really take it to heart, that changes the way we minister to others, doesn't it?

We do it graciously rather than in condemnation of others. And that reflects the true heart of God. that is to reconcile people to himself rather than to be condemning them.

And that's often a hard message to preach. So if we are proud, it comes across really harsh, calling people to repentance and to humble themselves. But when we do it graciously, that's when people hear God's voice and God's heart.

I'll leave Dave and Jeff to unpack it in the next two weeks as I go and leave. But strangely, Jonah still has not quite learned the whole lesson, hasn't he? Even though he can praise salvation comes from the Lord.

But I'll leave that for the next couple of weeks to unpack. But the warning is that we mustn't fall into the same mindset. And when it does, it shows up in a lot of ways, doesn't it?

[22 : 30] When we think other people's sins are worse than ours, yeah, I need salvation too, but at least I'm not as bad as them. Or we become outraged when people can't see their faults and we shake their heads when they don't understand the Bible, even after we've explained it to them.

All these things are actually exposing our own pride, aren't they? Because we have the same mindset that somehow we don't need that message as much as they do.

But when it comes to the gospel, it's what that saying goes, we're simply beggars showing other beggars where to find bread. God is the only one that has bread and we have not done anything to earn it nor have we paid for it.

We're simply receiving like beggars and showing others how they can do the same. I think the prophecy of Jonah is actually quite unique in the Old Testament.

With all of the other prophets, you'll notice that the focus is a lot on the message. Yes, there's some time, a little attention that is given to for example Isaiah or Jeremiah. But in the main, the emphasis is on what the prophets are to say to the people.

[23 : 43] But the emphasis here in Jonah is actually reversed, isn't it? Because apart from chapter 3, nothing much is said about the Ninevites, is it? The message that they are to be given, God only gives in the first verse of chapter 1 and the first verse of chapter 3.

prophecy. But apart from that, the rest of the prophecy is actually about the prophet and the way the prophet grapples with God's call and God's message to him.

So I think when we come to study Jonah, we are encouraged to look at ourselves as God's ministers. We're right to spend a lot of time learning what God's will is as far as other people is concerned.

what is it that God wants me to say? What should the mission of the church be? How should we be doing it and going about doing it? But we also need to look at ourselves.

For when God commissions us for ministry, he doesn't only want to use us to change the world, he also wants to change us as well. He wants the messenger to reflect his message.

[24 : 53] He wants the minister to realize he or she needs to be ministered as well. That all of us need salvation from the Lord. So let me encourage those of you who are serving to have that discipline of continually searching your hearts against God's word.

To understand not just what God wants you to do, but what he's doing in your life as well. The work of saving and transforming you into Christ likeness. Let's pray.

Father, thank you that salvation has come to us through the Lord Jesus. Please help us all to see our need for salvation, that we're not sufficient in ourselves, even though we've been Christians for a while.

As we grow in maturity, help us to keep seeing and knowing your grace in our lives, to keep looking to your son Jesus in total dependence all the days of our lives.

In his name we pray. Amen.