

Then Jonah prayed

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage of scripture that we read. The book of Jonah, chapter 2, and reading again at verse 1 of the chapter.

Jonah, chapter 2, reading at verse 1. Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly.

Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God. In the first chapter of this small book, we are given some detail about the sad steps that are found in the life of this man, Jonah, who enjoyed enormous spiritual privileges under the hand of God.

And how this man, who was an emissary of the Most High, came to be a rebel, came to be disobedient to the message that was entrusted to him by the Lord God.

And it would appear that as he sought to put a distance between himself and God, or so he imagined, something that is impossible to do in the sense that God monitors us wherever we are, there is another sense in which we can distance ourselves from God in the sense that we give in to disobedience and rebellion and do not obey the demand and the command of the Most High.

[2 : 07] And this man, in his foolish attempt to get away from God, it would appear that everything was going his way.

Everything seemed to be at his disposal. Everything seemed to be in his favor. And there is a very salutary lesson there, that we should not assume that when our lives are going in accord without a narrow purpose, that we are in step with God.

We can be very much out of step with God when things are going our way. And that is what was true of this man.

As he endeavored to get away from the duties that were being laid upon him, he tried to flee from the presence of the Lord.

He went to Joppa. He found a ship going to Tarsus. He paid the fare. And everything seemed to fall into step. Might Jonah not conclude that everything was going according to plan, when he was out of step with the plan of God.

[3 : 29] And the fact that he was out of step with the plan of God ultimately was displayed. In the storm that arose and the resultant consequences, as told us in the first chapter.

So, we notice in this chapter how events planned out. And how the reluctant messenger was compelled to become the evangelist to the city of Nineveh.

To preach the gospel to a people whom he despised and whom he considered were unworthy of the offer of the gospel, because he thought he knew better than God.

Jonah had to learn that the grace of God is extended to him before he comes to extend the message of the gospel to undeserving sinners in the world.

And so the Lord prepares a great fish to swallow up Jonah. So many people are taken up with trying to ascertain what kind of fish this was.

[4 : 59] Personally, I don't think that's of any great importance. Because the emphasis does not fall on the great fish, but on the great God who prepared the great fish.

That is where the emphasis of the word of God falls. What kind of fish it was is totally irrelevant. It suited the purpose of God for that moment and it served the purpose of God for that period.

And although a miracle was performed in the sense that the life of the prophet was preserved, the scriptures draw our attention, not towards that, but to the deep work that took place, not in the belly of the fish, but in the heart of the prophet.

That is where God was at work. That is where God was altering and changing the thinking and the attitude of this recalcitrant servant of God.

So that it is not on something natural that the scriptures focus our attention, but on the spiritual working of the grace of God.

[6 : 33] And it draws our attention to the way in which God restored this man to fellowship and to worship of the living God.

And we are told that he came to pray. Then Jonah prayed. And I don't know about you, but the impression that is created in my mind is this.

Then Jonah prayed. Here is a man who had neglected prayer. Here is a man who had not been praying. And we are told at the very beginning of this chapter, Then he prayed.

As if our attention is drawn to this. It ought not to be a strange factor in the life of a man of God, but it was a strange factor in the sense that prayer had been neglected in the life of this man.

And he called out to the Lord. I cried, he says, by reason of mine affliction to the Lord.

[7 : 46] And he heard me. As it might be translated, I called out to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me.

And in the prayer of the prophet at that moment, you can hear echoes of the psalm that we sang together this evening.

Psalm 18. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised. And I am saved from my enemies. In my distress, I called upon the Lord.

To my God I cried for help. From his temple, he heard my voice. And my cry to him reached his ears.

So that there are similarities and parallels between the cry of the psalmist and the cry of the prophet in the depths of the ocean.

[8 : 48] There has to be restoration in the life of the prophet. And that restoration has to begin where deviation occurred, right in the heart of this man.

That is part of what is involved in repentance unto salvation. Where there is the spirit of true saving repentance, it means beginning to go back in the place where you have deviated from the path of God.

And that is true in the New Testament also. Not just in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we see it in the return of the prodigal.

As he comes back to the father's house. A broken, a humbled person. One who acknowledges his sin in the sight of the father.

Jonah, too, had to return from the far country. And he returns to the presence of God.

[10 : 13] And so you find these words, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. Jonah is also like the psalmist when he prays out, Of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, Hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas. For mercy of you, O Lord, Should mark iniquity, O Lord, Who could stand? Now the psalmist doesn't tell us what depths he entered into.

We know some of the depths that were in the experience of the prophet Jonah. We don't know what depths the psalmist was in at that particular time, except that he was in depths.

And aren't you thankful that the depths aren't disclosed? Because when you are in depths, you can pray the same prayer. In the depths that you are in, whatever it is that submerges and over-wellens your soul and floods your soul, whatever kind of tribulation, whatever kind of anxieties, whatever kind of burdens, as it were, over-wellen your soul and flood your soul, you can cry upon the God who is able to deliver from the depths.

And even in the depths, faith grasps that this God is able to rescue, to deliver, to stretch down into the depths and to lift you up in your helplessness, in your weakness, lift you up out of the depths into which you are submerged, pouring out his heart in the presence of God.

[11 : 58] And that is, in essence, what Jonah is doing here when he is praying. He is pouring out his heart before God. It is a marvelous privilege when you are unable to pour out your heart before God, able to tell him all that is in your heart, things that you cannot tell, things that you cannot share, things that perhaps are so sensitive to yourself alone and so peculiar to yourself alone, and you pour them out in the ear of the Most High, in the knowledge that you are pouring out your heart before one who is able to do for you above and beyond what you can ask or think.

And so, he prays unto the Lord. He is not praying to a figment of his imagination. He is not praying to some kind of remote object that is conjured up in his mind and in his heart.

He is praying to the covenant keeping God. And he comes before and he sets before the affairs of his own heart and his own life.

Here is someone who had been disputing what God had commanded. Someone who was rebelling against God. Someone who was trying to put a huge distance between himself and the command of God.

and here in the depths that he descended into. Now, he is seeking to reach out from the depths to God.

[13 : 55] But it also tells us something else. It tells us about the marvel of divine grace. It tells us how far God is willing to go to return and restore us all to himself.

Now, the way the Lord took with this man is a very dramatic way. And it would be foolish to assume that the Lord uses such dramatic ways always to turn people to himself.

He has his own peculiar ways of restoring souls to himself. And it's not the way in which he does it that is important, but the fact that he does.

And that souls are restored to fellowship and communion with the Lord. That he restores even the backslider, brings them back into fellowship with himself.

backsliding and you remember how the prophet Jeremiah makes reference to this return your backsliding children, I will heal your backsliders.

[15 : 17] Behold, we come unto thee, is the acknowledgement then, of the backslider, for thou art the Lord our God.

Thou art the Lord our God. Just reminds me of, just crossed my mind at the moment, apparently the late Professor R.A.

Finlayson, used to be an eminent professor in the Free Church College, was preaching in this island many years ago.

Before my time, I only heard him preach once in the flesh, as I recollected a communion in Bernoulli, but this is before my time. And he was preaching on that very text, on the return of the backslider.

And I heard a man who had been in the audience, and he said, you know, he said, before he finished, I was so envious of the backslider, and of the privileges that were afforded to the backslider.

[16 : 29] So eloquently did the late Professor Finlayson preach on the text. And you know, there is something to be said about being envious of restoration, although no one wants to depart from God.

There is something very precious about restoration when it is effected, and when you are enveloped, as it were, in the warm, fatherly embrace of God and Christ, as one restored to fellowship with him.

You remember how the psalmist, in his own experience, where he experienced the feelings of broken bones because of his departure from God, because of his sin, and the way that sin was brought home to him so forcibly by the word of God.

He is pleading with the Lord, restore to me the joy of your salvation, so that that joy again might be experienced in the inner recesses of his soul, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Oh, well, it is indeed precious to have the presence of God. God. And when the presence of God is not being experienced, it ought to be a source of mourning in your life and in mine.

[17 : 58] And until we have it again, we ought not to be happy or content. Well, he prayed. That's a startling fact. But when did he pray?

And he prayed when he was in great distress or in affliction. And this second verse of chapter 2 seems to underline the circumstances and situation in which the prophet found himself.

I called out to the Lord out of my distress or by reason of mine affliction. And he answered me or he heard me.

Out of the belly of hell cried I and thou heardst my voice. And the word that is translated here in the authorized verse on affliction or distress in some of the other English versions means literally to restrict, to bind, to cramp.

death. And literally that was true. Here he was inside this fish. And we are used to hearing the phrase you're back to the wall.

[19 : 24] Everyone knows what the phrase means. When you're in a tight corner, when you feel you're hemmed in on every side, oppressively hemmed in, and your back is to the wall.

Literally, this was true of the life of this man at this particular moment. His back was to the wall of the stomach of the fish.

Here is a man who had tried to put a distance between himself and God. when he took the steps that he took, there is no indication that he prayed.

When you are going to follow a particular course, you entrust yourself to God. You ask the Lord for guidance. You ask him to direct you.

You ask him to preserve your way. You ask him to help you in the direction that you are going. And if you ask him to, if it is not appropriate to prevent you from taking that particular journey, you entrust yourself to the Lord, don't you?

[20 : 41] When you are faced with decisions, you entrust it to the Lord. Because ultimately, he is your guide. And all decisions, doesn't matter whether they're large or small, doesn't matter how small they might seem in our eyes, it's appropriate that we commit ourselves to the Lord.

The psalmist could say that he set the Lord always before him. You remember how he tells this? Before me still the Lord I set.

He set the Lord before him always. and it is appropriate that we do it. But here is a man, and he didn't say the Lord before him. When he was in the boat, there's no indication that he prayed. Even when others, when the seamen were calling out to their gods, he was fast asleep. When he was awoken by the captain of the ship, and when he asked him to call upon his God, there is no record that Jonah called upon his God.

And so, it seems to me, the emphasis at the beginning of the chapter, then he prayed unto the Lord his God. When did he pray unto the Lord his God?

[22 : 19] when he was in the prison, when he was in a tight court? Oh, you might have been saying, but I don't follow Jonah.

But do you not? How often are you praying to God when everything is going smoothly and you think it's going according to plan? Until you come to the place where you're standing, as one person once very graphically termed it, at which end corner?

Have you ever stood there? At which end corner? Lonely? Confused?

Without strength? Without power? Helpless? Without a friend? without comfort? Face to face?

With the penury of your emptiness? And the poverty of your penury? Oh, it can be a frightening place, which end cornered.

[23 : 43] It can be a very scary place to stand. It can be a very scary place place, where you are placed in a very narrow place, and there's no way to turn.

do you remember the famous king in the scriptures? And the Bible tells us that he turned his face to the wall when he was given the news, that death was imminent.

Turned his face to the wall. may be an indication of that he didn't want any more of his government ministers around him, that he didn't want any more of those who were assisting him govern the country to be with him.

But might it not mean that he was looking as it were, at the wall of death, looking as it were at something that gave him no hope whatsoever, as if he was in a windowless room, no doors, no window, no light, no place to get out.

And he prayed. And he prayed, and oh my how he prayed. It's a wonderful prayer, the prayer Hezekiah in the Old Testament.

[25 : 22] You can read it when you go home. You know, there may be times when you have the practice of prayer, but there is a world of a difference between the practice of prayer and true prayer.

You may have the words and the language of prayer, and be very empty of the spirit of prayer, but here in this prison, as it were, in this tomb, the prophet prays prayer.

His circumstances are awakening the spirit of prayer through the power of the Almighty.

And prayer is an avenue by which the soul in its penury reaches into the fullness of God.

And prayer is an avenue by which the blessings that are in the fullness of God are poured out on the soul. The ears of the Lord, the psalms learned, are toward that cry.

[26 : 56] Oh, is there not encouragement here for every person this evening who has been given the spirit of prayer. I called out to the Lord out of my distress and he answered me.

When did he pray? When he was in deep distress. When he was in great need. When he was bound around by the darkness of a stone.

When no man could give him any comfort. When no man could come to his aid. When there was only the almighty who could deliver him from the precincts in which he was bound.

But then he prayed in a strange place. Do you not think in the belly of the fish?

You know there are many places where prayer has been offered. But I don't know that anyone before or since has ever heard of prayer being offered from the belly of a fish.

[28 : 27] It reminds me of an incident from the career I was engaged in before I was persuaded to become a minister.

And in my work we went round the island in the mobile bank unit. In the winter time we used to stop in a fairly isolated place to have a bowl of soup.

And this day we had just poured out the soup myself and the driver who was also a Christian. And this very gracious man came in who was also a Christian and he wanted to do some business.

And he excused himself for interrupting just at our lunch time and I said to him well since you've come in you might as well say the grace. There was no refusal he took off his bonnet and he said grace and he could say grace.

But when he finished there was a smile on his face and I asked him why are you smiling? Well he said I have offered grace and prayed in many strange places and he was a second world war survivor and he was in very dire circumstances in the second world war as a seaman but he said I don't think I've ever prayed in a bank office well there are strange places if only he knew how many prayers were offered in that very unit only God alone knows but Jonah was praying in a strange place out he says of the belly of hell cried I and you heard my voice it was a dark cold place a place where there would be a very strong smell you would imagine and the fact that he uses the language out of the belly of hell or out of the belly of shell out of the place of the dead in other words implying that he's in a place where he sees himself as in the very grave gives us an indication and an impression of the kind of situation in which he finds himself in the place of the dead no he doesn't mean that he has died but he gives us an indication of the kind of experience that he's passing through as if he were in the place of the dead so close to death oh could he not ask the question is your steadfast love declared in the grave or your faithfulness are your wonders known in the darkness or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness and in the spiritual sense were you not here too in the place of the dead oh you were never literally in the belly of a fish at least in the way [32 : 03] Jonah was but you were in a dark gloomy place and your back was to the wall and yes there was a strong smell because you savored of death clad in the grave clothes decay and what was the stench of decay it was aroused because of your fallen nature and the sin in your life and this morning we were seeing how the psalmist looked upon sin as something deeply mysterious in his own life he's asking the question how is he going to deal with it well one of the great ministers in the denomination Dr McDonald of Ferintosh he wrote to Gaelic bardock if you get it it's well worth perusing it there's an English translation that was done I think if my memory serves me right by principal John McCloud who was principal of our college at one stage and minister in the Free North in Bernese and principal McCloud I don't think the English quite catches the nuance of the Gaelic but it comes close to it and he puts it something like this because in one of the verses that Dr.

McDonald composed tis a mystery from the highest seen in every child of grace while his person hath found favor sin hath in his soul a place think of that now while his person has found favor sin hath in his soul a place and though tis with shame he owns it oftentimes it is a sphere that instead of growing weaker sin seems stronger year by year it is not your own impression that sin is gaining the upper hand year by year but it is proof beyond denial of the victory of grace when the principle of evil groweth burdensome apace now that seems kind of paradoxical doesn't it the fact that your impression of sin going stronger is proof beyond denial of the victory of grace well there is no place that is not appropriate to offer prayer

Daniel prayed in his house Peter prayed on the rooftop Lydia prayed beside the river Paul prayed in prison Christ prayed on the top of the mountain Jonah prayed from the belly of the fish prayer is relevant and appropriate for the life of the believer man not always to pray ah well friend do you have a place where you meet with God a place known to yourself where you wrestle with the almighty where you come in your distinct lack of power and your felt helplessness and powerlessness to cast yourself upon the power of divinity in order to aid you to get through each day he prayed when did he pray and he prayed in a strange place but notice something else about this and it's most important he prayed to the

Lord his God he prayed to the Lord his God oh how how weighty this little word his is his God who was the Lord his God the God of covenant faithfulness the God of infinite mercy the God of great love the God of power the omnipotent God the omniscient God he prayed to the Lord his God here

is one who had demonstrated visibly his steps of disobedience but faith via search itself in the life of the back slid in prophet and it makes its presence felt by the fact that it clings to the God of the covenant he prays to the Lord his God oh he had gone far astray very far astray so far astray and yet he still clung to this that the God of the covenant was his portion that he belonged to the covenant God and that the covenant God belonged to him for although Jonah forsook God God did not forsake Jonah oh how thankful we ought to be that we who are like Jonah are not forsaken by

[38 : 52] God he is still the God of Jonah and because of that Jonah demonstrates the contrite spirit the broken spirit as he seeks the presence of the almighty here is someone who has spurned and rejected the word of the living God and he now turns to the same God whom he had rejected he demonstrates that he hopes in the Lord and that he is waiting for him oh is this not a mark of sonship in the life of this man as one who needed to be aware of the grace of God to have it renewed as it were outpoured in his heart and in his soul in order to make him to equip him for the work that

God had for him in going to Nineveh God is teaching this prophet here is someone who had felt as it were cut off from the face of God someone who mourned the loss of his presence someone who was aware of his penury and his emptiness comes empty handed to the almighty to the one who has gracious fullness is able to meet with the emptiness of the soul who cries out in their poverty to him oh you know he had to learn solitary lessons about himself difficult lessons about himself and the

Lord wasn't finished even in this instance Peter had to learn lessons about himself too people were asking Peter at one stage do you know the Lord but then the question of questions was this do you love the Lord do you love the Lord and so the Lord is restoring this man to himself he stimulates the grace of prayer in the soul of this man I think it was John Bunyan that made the comment that prayer will make a man cease from sin or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer or thinking about that prayer will make a man cease from sin or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer and that is true in the life of this man sin had enticed him to cease from prayer until in the circumstances of his providence he's as it were coerced and compelled to seek the

Lord or perhaps you're saying well I'll pray too when I feel like praying oh friend if you only prayed when you felt like praying how many times do you think you would pray be honest now how many times do you think you know you have to pray so that you feel like praying in order to pray and when you do are you not often staggered staggered at the way in which God responds yes yes to the petitions the bankrupted petitions of an impoverished sinner in the presence of

God I called out to the Lord of my distress and he answered me now you know people say well the Lord never answers my prayers he doesn't answer my prayers well he may not be answering the prayer in the way that you would wish or that you dictate sometimes he gives grants us a request sometimes he refuses a request and you have to accept that Moses wanted to see the good land beyond Jordan and the Lord didn't allow him to go into the promised land Paul wanted to be rid of the thorn in the flesh but the

[44 : 48] Lord never took it away sometimes the refusers of the Lord they're for our good just as well as when he accedes to our requests the refusers can be painful they can be hurtful they can lead you to question whether you really are a child of God or not but they ought not to sometimes he delays his answer sometimes he answers in ways that you don't expect and not only did God hear the prayer of this man but he responded he responded God answered his prayer how do we know the Lord spoke unto the fish it vomited out Jonah on the dry land here is a man who was in the depths to the world as far as they were concerned he was no more and often that is how you feel when you are in the depths as if you are like a dead man out of mind and out of sight oh but there's an eye on you the eye of the omnipotent

God the eye of the prayer here in God is following your course and following your steps you may feel dead and buried you may feel out of sight and out of mind but you're not beyond the sight or out of the mind of a prayer hearing God the prophet here felt I'm cast out of your sight he felt that he went down into the jets of the ocean and he felt that he was cast away driven out of your sight oh in these circumstances he remembered the Lord and my prayer he says came to thee oh how often do you too pray and me with you cast me not from your sight cast me not from your sight do not banish me why oh because you know there can only be darkness and despair out of the sight of the one who is the light of your life and the light of the world

God heard his prayer oh friend perhaps you're here tonight and you feel forgotten feel that the Lord has buried you carry on cry you're crying to a great God you're crying to a prayer answering God keep not silent but continue to call upon Jonah cried unto the Lord is God you do the same let us pray