

Praying From The Gut

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[0 : 00] Well, I have a little riddle for you today to start with, and I mean, I don't know that it's a riddle, but it may help you to figure out what I'm talking about if you lose your place during the course of the next few minutes.

And the thing that I want to say to you is that our great difficulty is that we're perfect people living in an imperfect world.

Now, I hope you don't immediately understand what that's about, because you're supposed to understand at the end, but I thought I'd tell it to you at the beginning so that you would understand. The great thing about today is that you have this, and this is a boat, and over the side goes Jonah, like that, and up from the bottom comes at the appointment of God.

And then they take a tour down through here, and these are the mountains of the deep, and you end up with this fellow down here like this.

[1 : 32] There you are, with a cute indigestion. There you are. And is that obvious to all of you what that is? I'm hoping you can see that.

This chapter begins by saying that then Jonah prayed. You will remember that this is the man to whom the captain of the ship, this is the ship up here, had gone.

The name of the ship is Technology. I hope you'll understand that significance of that in due course, but I'll just tell you what the name of the ship is.

Jonah was lying down here, and he was asleep and was asked to pray, and he didn't pray. So now, praise the Lord, he's come to the place where he can pray.

And here it is, right down here. He gets there, and then he suddenly discovers that prayer is rather a good thing to be able to resort to.

[2 : 46] Even though he had slept through the storm, he had enjoyed the quiet security of technology up here so that he didn't have to bother to pray.

But now he finds himself lacking any kind of previous experience of how you cope with a situation like this. And it's in this situation that he learns to pray.

So it goes on in verse 2 to say, I called to the Lord. Now, the place he calls from, if you look at the text, you'll see that it is the heart of the seas with the flood round about him, the waves going over him, the billows passing over him.

This is the place where he learns to pray. Down in the pit, the prime evil abyss. Down at the bottom of everything.

In Sheol, the place of the dead. The place of hopelessness. The place of complete despair. That's where the Lord takes him to run this brief school of prayer, which is chapter 2 of Jonah.

[4 : 04] Most people think schools of prayer should be on sunny hillsides among pine and fir trees, with the sparkling water in the distance and the wonderful panorama of creation in front of you.

But it's difficult to learn to pray in that setting. It's extremely easy to learn to pray in this setting. So that God was very wise in choosing this setting in order to teach Jonah how to pray.

And when I say that Jonah was praying from the gut, it was the gut of the fish that I was referring to, not necessarily yours, though I'm sure there was some sympathy between Jonah's gut and the gut of the fish.

Because most of the expressions which are used there, the abyss, the prime evil, you know, when you have that picture at the beginning of Genesis, and the spirit of God moved over the face of the deep, very deep.

Down there is the place where it would be hard to imagine that there was some profound sense, there was not some profound sense in which Jonah was extremely seasick.

[5 : 30] Not only physically seasick, but, you know, if you get properly seasick, that you intellectually despair, and you spiritually despair, and you emotionally despair.

The whole thing is wound up together. And so I think that Jonah may have had a strong stomach, but I'm sure in every other way he was completely seasick.

And it was again in this pit of despair, totally sick, that he suddenly, it says of him, he says, I'm cast out from the presence of the Lord.

If you look back in chapter 1, where was Jonah going? He was fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

What did Jonah tell the sailors? I am fleeing from the presence of the Lord. Why did Jonah submit to being thrown overboard?

[6 : 34] Because he was still running away from the presence of the Lord. But now wonderful things have happened. He's got to where he wanted to be, away from the presence of the Lord.

He's now arrived. And he finds it probably less congenial than he thought. And it's not, it's not, I mean, we see a lot of human bravery when people say, I don't need the church.

I don't need the God hypothesis. I don't need Christian morality. I can get along without any of those things. I'm totally prepared to abandon all those things.

Well, we are, in fact, humanly speaking, very brave when we abandon God and the morality of faith and all those restricting things that are part of that contemptible trap into which man falls of religion.

When we get free of that and abandon all that so that we have nothing more to do with God, we're free of the presence of the Lord. But then there's a sudden reversal when God abandons you.

[8 : 04] We say, that's not fair. You know, God, why would you allow this to happen? You know, that we spend the whole of our lives abandoning God and then find that God has abandoned us and we're full of indignation and wrath.

But that's what happened to Jonah, that he suddenly discovered that God had abandoned him. It's very strange, you see.

I mean, it's that God allows us to do that. He allows us to go to the place that we want to be.

You know, people are very indignant if you teach them about hell, even though they have worked most of their lives trying to get there.

And that's exactly Jonah's experience, you see, that he wants to get away from the presence of the Lord. Now, hell is defined as being away from the presence of the Lord.

[9 : 16] But once people achieve that goal, then somehow their thinking all goes into reverse. It's, I was going to say, it's like marriage and a lot of people want to get out of marriage.

And, and, God seems to allow us to go away from his presence and, we seem to find a new freedom, a new sense of fulfillment, a new sense of joy.

And then, we find that having abandoned, we are now ourselves abandoned. And, and, this is, this is the point at which, at which Jonah comes to himself.

And it goes on to say that the waters closed over me, the deep was round about me, the weeds were wrapped about my head, I was at the root of the mountains, I went down, and down, and down, to the land whose bars closed upon me forever and ever.

You, you remember that water is the symbol of death in, in, in, in, in the Bible. And, watching the water take possession of somebody who, you know, who may be able to flap his arms and kick his feet for a few moments at the surface of it.

[11 : 08] But the inevitable draw of the water takes him down and down and down to death. And so, Jonah describes that this is what has happened to him.

He may have had a valiant swim for a few moments in the midst of that very turbulent water. But, there was a kind of living coffin came up out of the deep and opened its lid and took him into it and carried him down and down and down.

And so, you have this tremendous portrayal of the spiritual experience of death at work in our lives. how death works. If you want to know how death works, Jonah describes it for you. And it takes you to the place of death. This is a picture of death.

And Jonah finds himself at the roots of the mountains because the Hebrew people considered the kingdom of evil to be marked by mountains and that there were bars that closed.

[12 : 19] I had a parish in Kingston for eight years. I've told you about this. I went and took a Bible study there every afternoon for years.

Not every afternoon but once a week. And it was always a wonderfully sobering experience to ring the rather raucous bell at the front door of this prison and a fat little prison guard in a gray suit would come with a great ring and a key and open the door and you'd walk in and then you'd hear the steel close behind you and the great key turn in the lock.

And then he went to the man who was himself in a little cage behind steel bars and he handed in the key and then another key was handed out and he went and opened another big steel door and you go through that steel door and the key goes back and then you walk through the yard and you go into the guards hall and another key and another steel door closes behind you.

You walk through the guards hall and into the prison cells and another steel door opens and closes behind you. Well I just relate that story in detail to you so you will see the graphic effect of what Jonah means when he says the bars closed upon me forever.

The clang of death it's all over it's finished the door is locked there's no escape you're done. And that's where Jonah got to.

[14 : 01] When he gets to that place you will see that in the second half of the verse you did bring up my life from the pit O Lord my God.

You see that in that strange place where Jonah has now arrived he is still not beyond the grace of God.

That the grace of God can still reach him it's still available. That's why you know I think I've told you this but one of the great poets of this century says that the thing that makes hell hell is that you know that the door is still open.

You know that that you are there by your own choice according to your own will you are in the place where most deeply you want to be.

And so that's where Jonah is. He's in the place where he wanted to be. And yet as he cries out the Lord hears him and brings up his life from the pit.

[15 : 27] the text you know when you when you look at it there he goes on to say when my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord.

And you see what what happens here is that you you have the in a sense the conversion of Jonah back to the Lord. You know the the magnificent words to which we to which as a Christian you are committed is to hear the command of Christ that in the belly of the whale where you may be called upon to live you are to do this in remembrance of me.

So no matter what situation you are in no matter what extremity may have taken hold of you you are to do this in remembrance of me.

That's why you know it's it's seems to me a good thing that when when some believer comes to the point of death and death is a matter of days or hours away that it's predictably within sight and you go to them and say receive this in remembrance that Christ died for you so that you meet the extremity of the human situation with the reality of the grace of God and you know that's I mean I think philosophically that's why Christians have a lot of trouble with people terminally ill saying I want to end it all you know because there is implicit in that a denial of the ultimate reality of the grace of God that that is the thing that sustains me even through very difficult times very and I mean it's it's what happens to Jonah you see in the belly of the whale he says that I remembered the Lord and that that remembrance is is so important he goes on from there to say my prayers came to thee into thy holy temple that in a sense hope broke in light happened grace was perceived and he said from here I saw the temple of the Lord you know I didn't watch the innards of the whale and glory and the magnificence of God's creative ability you know

[19 : 00] I saw beyond this to the place where God himself is I saw the temple of the Lord the place where God himself abides and he said that to the he said that that when my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord and my prayers came to thee into thy holy temple and then he was suddenly contemptuous he was contemptuous of the apparatus of civilization the technology which is a very kind of frail ship to protect us from the raw power of life and death and God and redemption you know that and then he says all the vain idols that we cling to so desperately because these are the things on which we think our safety depends these are the things that we can hold on to and

Jonah says all those things are empty they can't do it and in the hour of extremity my deepest need is not met by them there is no technology to which I can turn and I remember visiting a man who was dying of cancer who had invested heavily in a cure for cancer the people the company that he invested with kept assuring him that they were going to send him the medicine not next week but

probably the week after just hang in and we'll get it to you you'll be the first person to get it and he lived with that promise for six or eight months until he died but technology never came through for him and if it had it wouldn't have healed him at the level that he needed healing it doesn't heal us at the deepest level of our need it's not what we need most and so

Jonah is almost contemptuous when he says those who pay regard to vain idols they forsake their true loyalty and their loyalty you see is not to things but their loyalty is to the Lord God who alone is to meet them who alone is the source of love and of mercy which ultimately they require if you know that you are under the mercy of God if you know that that is an expression of the love of God then you know that that that's the one to whom you must be loyal the one who can meet you in the belly of the whale when the bars have closed and death is there who meets you there and a lot of people think that it's undoubtedly existentially the loneliest experience that it's possible for a human being to undergo but it was there that

Jonah discovered grace it was there that Jonah saw the temple of the Lord it was there that Jonah understood the vanity of the idols in which he put his trust it was there that we have the story of Jonah to tell us how life works and he goes on but in verse nine I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to thee what I have vowed I will pay deliverance belongs to the Lord so he suddenly moved in to giving thanks to God to making plans to offer sacrifices to God making vows to God about his future all these things Jonah does but where is he he is still in the belly of the whale he is still in the midst of his predicament and

I think that's one of the most powerful things about this chapter is that Jonah's victory so to speak Jonah's conversion is in the midst of the problem nothing has changed and it's only then you see that Jonah having spiritually made the breakthrough and spiritually is the way we go you can't deal with this problem and this problem and this problem and this problem before you get victory you need the victory right now these problems will all wait for time and opportunity to deal with but the knowledge that the victory which belongs to us in Christ is there is the thing that we have to get hold of right now and live by faith in that and then the chapter ends up with the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited out

[24 : 42] Jonah on the dry land which I think is a glorious verse because because you know the whole story is the Lord spake to Jonah and he said no but the Lord spoke to the fish and he did what he was told and you think I mean that's one of the contrast well I started off by telling you about the perfect people that live in an imperfect world and the reason I use those two terms is because Jacques Elul who's you know all my wisdom on this comes from Jacques Elul I'm not this smart I but Jacques Elul's commentary on Jonah is a powerful one and one of the things that he points out which I find extremely helpful he says if you look at the tenses of the verbs and you'll see what they are all the tenses that have to do with death and descent into the abyss the waters closed over me the bars closed over me all those are in the perfect tense they are completed actions they are finished they are but everything that refers to

God and God's activity and Jonah's relationship to God is in the imperfect tense and there are only two tenses in Hebrew and it's perfect and imperfect and that's why what it's saying I mean it's apparently in Hebrew if you want to say Jesus was Jesus is and Jesus will be you only need one verb and that verb is the imperfect you see because it's ongoing and you see what death has to do is limited to the perfect tense having done it that's all it can do its power is exhausted it is not a renewable resource it's finished and that's the reality of death but the reality of the activity of God is imperfect because he's not finished with us yet when everything else is under the power of death which says that's the end it's not the end as far as

God is concerned because God works strictly in the imperfect tense he still has lots more to do and that's why when we submit ourselves to death when we are perfect people we are in a sense saying that's all there is there isn't any more and our world is an imperfect world because God isn't finished with it and God has a great deal to do and obstinate stubborn perfectionists who have their life all ordered in terms of being finished they know where all their deadlines are and they meet them but we're not meant to have dead lines we're meant to be aware that God isn't finished yet and we make it our business so often to go around saying well that's finished that's finished that's finished there's no hope there's nothing more but that's not the way faith talks and that's not the way God acts let me say a prayer father we thank you for this amazing psalm which was born out of Jonah's experience of death and redemption and how perfectly it patterns the central agony and glory of our own lives and thank you that Jesus Christ meets us as it were in the belly of the whale

in the place of our extremity and give us grace that whatever we are consumed by at the moment we may nevertheless give thanks make our vows offer our sacrifices and seek to be obedient to your imperfect work in the knowledge that you're not finished with us yet we ask this in Christ's name amen