

“THE RELUCTANT PROPHET”

“Then Jonah Prayed”

Scripture Reading – Jonah, 1:17b – 2:10

Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.

He said: “In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, “I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple”. The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in for ever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.

“When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD”.

And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

‘And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son”.’

Hebrews, 12:5-6, NIV

This series, ‘JONAH: THE RELUCTANT PROPHET’ is based on THE BOOK OF JONAH.

Daily newspaper headlines and overflowing prisons bear dramatic witness that sin runs rampant in society today. With child abuse, pornography, serial killings, terrorism, anarchy, and ruthless dictatorships, the world seems to be filled to overflowing with violence, hatred, and corruption. In the light of these tragedies, we begin to understand the necessity of God’s judgment. We may even find ourselves wishing for vengeance by any means upon the violent perpetrators. Surely they are beyond redemption.

How would you respond if God told you to take the Gospel to the worst offenders?

Jonah was given such a task. Assyria, a great but evil empire, was Israel’s most dreaded enemy. The Assyrians flaunted their power before God and the world through numerous acts of heartless cruelty. So when Jonah heard God tell him to go to Assyria and call the people to repentance, he ran in the opposite direction. Jonah hated the Assyrians, and he wanted

vengeance, not mercy, so he ran. Eventually, Jonah obeyed and preached in the streets of Nineveh, and the people repented and were delivered.

As you read Jonah, see God’s love and compassion and realise that no one is beyond redemption. The Gospel is for all who repent and believe. Learn from the story of this reluctant prophet and determine to obey God, doing whatever he asks and going wherever he leads...

“THEN JONAH PRAYED”

After rebellion and discipline, Jonah experiences repentance and dedication.

God graciously gives him a new beginning. Jonah no doubt expected to die in the waters of the sea, but when he woke up inside the fish, he realised that God had graciously spared him. As with ‘THE PRODIGAL SON’ (see **Luke, 15:11-24**), whom Jonah in his rebellion greatly resembles, it was the goodness of God that brought him to repentance.

Jonah unexpectedly found himself in the belly of a great fish.

He had thoroughly expected to die when he was thrown into the Mediterranean Sea by the frightened mariners. Last thing he expected was to be swallowed whole by a passing mammal. Of course, Jonah was completely unaware that the Lord had divinely appointed this great fish to be passing under Jonah just at the right time.

We look at Jonah and see what lessons we can learn from his harrowing experience...

FROM INSIDE THE FISH JONAH PRAYED TO THE LORD HIS GOD

KJV ‘JONAH WAS IN THE BELLY OF THE FISH THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS...
‘THEN JONAH PRAYED TO THE LORD HIS GOD FROM THE FISH’S BELLY.’

The phrase ‘THEN JONAH PRAYED’ suggests that it was probably at the end of the three days and three nights when Jonah finally turned to the Lord for help, but we probably should not press the word ‘THEN’ too far. The Hebrew text simply reads: ‘**AND JONAH PRAYED**’. Surely Jonah prayed as he went down into the depths of the sea, certain that he would drown? That would, after all, be the normal thing for any person to do!

Abraham Lincoln ‘I HAVE BEEN DRIVEN MANY TIMES TO MY KNEES BY THE OVERWHELMING
CONVICTION THAT I HAD NOWHERE ELSE TO GO.’

A popular saying during The Great War was ‘THERE ARE NO ATHEISTS IN THE TRENCHES’.

When faced with the prospect of fighting in the trenches of the harsh battlefields of war, many scared young men prayed and asked God to get them out of the war alive, some would have made vows as they prayed. Many soldiers did not make, but many more did, and of those who did, what happened after their deliverance? Did they make good their vow?

In 1968, an airliner bound for New York City began its descent when the pilot realised that the landing gear had not yet engaged. The pilot worked the controls back and forth, trying

again and again, to make the landing gear lock down in place, but he had no success. As the plane circled, airport personnel sprayed the runway with foam and fire engines and other emergency vehicles moved into position. Disaster was only minutes away.

The passengers, meanwhile, were told of the developments in the calm voice pilots use during times like this. Flight attendants glided about the cabin with an air of cool reserve telling the passengers to place their heads between their knees and grab their ankles just before impact. It was one of those 'I can't believe this is happening to me' experiences that led to many tears and even a few screams of despair in the cabin. The emergency landing was only seconds away when the pilot announced over the intercom: 'We are beginning our final descent. At this moment, in accordance with International Aviation Codes established in Geneva, it is my obligation to inform you that if you believe in God you should now commence praying'.

I would be very surprised if the Christians onboard the plane had not already been praying for their lives long before the pilot made his announcement. I would be equally surprised if there were not people on board the plane who had never prayed before in their lives who commenced praying at the pilot's request.

When Jonah was totally exhausted – he had gone for three days and three nights without food or water – physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and when he felt there was no where else to turn, then, and only then, did Jonah cry out for God's help...

JONAH WAS PHYSICALLY EXHAUSTED

He had gone for three days and three nights without food or water – he was tired and probably physically exhausted from his ordeal.

JONAH WAS EMOTIONALLY EXHAUSTED

He was so overwhelmed that he felt like he was praying from the very depths of the grave. He literally believed he was in 'SHEOL' – hell!

JONAH WAS SPIRITUALLY EXHAUSTED

He was certainly spiritually weak by this time. Up until his prayer in the belly of the great fish, we do not read of Jonah praying. If he did pray previously (perhaps with the terrified sailors on the ship) then his prayers were unanswered. He had lost the voice of God; he had lost his spiritual energy; he had lost his power in prayer; and he had lost the impact of his testimony.

What will it take for you to get down on your knees and pray to God?

JONAH SAID: 'IN MY DISTRESS I CALLED TO THE LORD, AND HE ANSWERED ME. FROM THE DEPTHS OF THE GRAVE I CALLED FOR HELP, AND YOU LISTENED TO MY CRY'

Jonah's prayer was born not out of affection, but out of affliction.

He cried out to God because he was in danger, not because he delighted in the Lord. But better that he should pray compelled by any motive than not to pray at all. It is doubtful whether any believer always prays with pure and holy motives, for our desires and God's directions sometimes conflict.

J Vernon McGee tells the story of a young man who, like Jonah, was running from the call of God. His parents had made him attend revival meetings at his home church for two nights in succession. The young man knew that if he went one more time, he would not only accept Christ as Saviour, but he would also give his life and enter the ministry. He was so scared at the prospect that that night, after everybody went to bed, he ran off to Mississippi, where he got a job in a sawmill.

He had worked there for about two weeks when one afternoon he got his finger caught in one of the logs. He felt himself being pulled along the carriage towards the big saw. He began to yell at the top of his voice, but by that time, the other end of the log had hit the saw and was already going through, so nobody could hear him. He was yelling at the top of his voice, very frightened as he found himself being pulled against his will right into that saw.

It would take only forty five seconds for him to get to the saw. So, in that short time, he prayed to the Lord. He accepted Christ as his Saviour, and promised the Lord that he would go into the ministry and do his will, and told him a lot of other things also! McGee said, 'My preacher friend used to say that he told the Lord more in that forty five seconds than he has ever told him in an hour of prayer since then'.

Jonah 'CRIED BY REASON OF MINE AFFLICTION'.

An affliction can be physical or mental distress. An affliction can be bodily pain and sickness. An affliction can be mental anguish or financial worries. An affliction can be emotional problems or family concerns. An affliction can be spiritual suffering – it can be likened to the experience of God hiding his face from us. An affliction is a burden, a difficulty, a hardship, a problem. An affliction causes misery, pain, suffering, or trouble – and sometimes it makes us pray!

'They cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.'

Psalms, 107:6, NIV

'YOU HURLED ME INTO THE DEEP, INTO THE VERY HEART OF THE SEAS, AND THE CURRENTS SWIRLED ABOUT ME; ALL YOUR WAVES AND BREAKERS SWEEP OVER ME'

It was not the sailors who cast Jonah into the stormy sea: it was God.

'YOU HURLED ME INTO THE DEEP... ALL YOUR WAVES AND BREAKERS SWEEP OVER ME'. When Jonah said those words, he was acknowledging that God was disciplining him and that he deserved it.

If you are a Christian, chastening is inevitable; it is painful, it is preparation...

'And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart

when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son”.

Hebrews, 12:5-6, NIV

God seems to employ three levels of chastening, with three different levels of intensity...

INTERNAL CHASTENING – When God speaks to us through his word.

‘When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”.’

Acts, 2:37, NIV

EXTERNAL CHASTENING – When God sends someone to speak to us.

‘The captain went to Jonah and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish”.’

Jonah, 1:6, NIV

TERMINAL CHASTENING – When God simply takes you home.

A good example of this is the fate of Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts, 5:1-11**, or those who Paul referred to in his letters who had ‘FALLEN ASLEEP’ (see **I Corinthians, 11:30**).

How we respond to discipline determines how much benefit we receive from it.

According to **Hebrews, 12:5-11**, we have several options: (1) We can despise God’s discipline and fight (verse 5); (2) we can be discouraged and faint (verse 5); (3) We can resist discipline and invite stronger discipline, possibly even death (verse 9); or (4) We can submit to the Father and mature in faith and love (verse 7). Discipline is to the Believer what exercise and training are to the athlete (verse 11); it enables us to run the race with endurance and reach the assigned goal (verses 1-2).

The fact that God chastened his servant is proof that Jonah was truly a child of God.

God disciplines only his own children. ‘IF YOU ARE NOT DISCIPLINED (AND EVERYONE UNDERGOES DISCIPLINE), THEN YOU ARE ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN AND NOT TRUE SONS’ (see **Hebrews, 12:8**). The Father chastens us in love so that ‘LATER ON’ we might experience ‘A HARVEST OF RIGHTEOUSNESS AND PEACE’ (see **Hebrews, 12:11**).

*O let me hear thee speaking in accents clear and still,
Above the storms of passion, the murmurs of self-will.*

*O speak to reassure me, to chasten or control;
O speak to make me listen, thou Guardian of my soul.*

John Ernest Bode, SASB 862:3

‘I HAVE BEEN BANISHED FROM YOUR SIGHT; YET I WILL LOOK AGAIN TOWARDS YOUR HOLY TEMPLE’

‘I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple’. The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me;

seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in for ever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple”.

Jonah, 2:4-7, NIV

Jonah was going in one direction only – downwards.

Jonah’s downwards digression contains the hallmarks of backsliding. We read that he went DOWN to Joppa... where he went DOWN onto the quayside... where he went DOWN onto the ship and DOWN below decks. Jonah lay DOWN upon a cushion... and went DOWN into a deep sleep... Soon he found himself DOWN in the waters of the sea... before he was swallowed up by a great fish and went DOWN into its belly... Three days later, Jonah prayed to the Lord from the depths of the grave. When you turn your back on God, the only direction you can go is DOWN!

What saved Jonah? His faith in God’s promise. Which promise?

The promise that involves ‘LOOKING TOWARD GOD’S HOLY TEMPLE’.

When King Solomon dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem, he asked God for this special favour: *‘Whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart you know that they may fear you all the days that they live in the land which you gave to our fathers’* (see **I Kings, 8:38-40, NKJV**).

Jonah claimed that promise for himself in his present difficulty.

By faith, he looked towards God’s holy temple – after all the only way Jonah could look, was up! – and ask God to deliver him. God kept his promise to Solomon and answered Jonah’s cry. Jonah was fully aware of the covenant promises that God had made and he claimed them for himself. It is an interesting study to see the number of times Jonah makes reference to what God has already declared, particularly in the Psalms. When Jonah remembered the Lord, it is as though he was saying: ‘I ACTED ON THE BASIS OF HIS COVENANT TO ME’.

*All the rivers of thy grace I claim, over every promise write my name;
As I am I come, believing, as thou art thou dost, receiving,
Bid me rise a free and pardoned slave, master o’er my sin, the world, the grave,
Charging me to preach thy power to save to sinbound souls.*
Herbert Howard Booth, SASB 303:3

‘THOSE WHO CLING TO WORTHLESS IDOLS FORGET THE GRACE THAT COULD BE THEIRS’

Jonah admits there were idols in his life that robbed him of the blessing of God.

An idol is anything that takes away from God the affection and obedience that rightfully belong only to him. One such idol was Jonah’s intense patriotism. He was so concerned for the safety and prosperity of his own nation that he refused to be God’s messenger to their enemies, the

Assyrians. We learn later that Jonah was also protecting his own reputation, for if God spared Nineveh, then Jonah himself would be branded a false prophet whose words of warning were not fulfilled. For somebody who was famous for his prophecies (see **II Kings, 14:25**), this would be a devastating revelation.

Having idols are a sign of the exchanging of the Glory of God...

‘At Horeb they made a calf and worshipped an idol cast from metal. They exchanged their Glory for an image of a bull, which eats grass.’

Psalms, 106:19-20, NIV

‘Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.’

Romans, 1:22-23, NIV

One of the lessons Jonah learned in the belly of the fish was: ‘IT WAS NOT WORTH IT’.

The great fish was not a great place to live, but it was a great place to learn. Jonah learned that all he had done had not honoured the mercy of God. His actions dishonoured the grace God had freely bestowed upon him. The fact that Jonah knew about God’s grace did not give him license to live as though there is no God in the world. It is an important lesson for us!

‘What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?’

Romans, 6:1-2, NIV

**‘BUT I, WITH A SONG OF THANKSGIVING, WILL SACRIFICE TO YOU.
WHAT I HAVE VOWED I WILL MAKE GOOD. SALVATION COMES FROM THE LORD.’**

Jonah closes his prayer by uttering some solemn vows to the Lord.

They were vows that he really intended to keep. Like the psalmist, he said: ‘**I WILL GO INTO YOUR HOUSE WITH BURNT OFFERINGS; I WILL PAY YOU MY VOWS, WHICH MY LIPS HAVE UTTERED AND MY MOUTH HAS SPOKEN WHEN I WAS IN TROUBLE**’ (see **Psalms, 66:13-14, NKJV**). Jonah promised to worship God in the Temple with sacrifices and songs of thanksgiving. He does not tell us what other promises he made to the Lord, but one of them surely was: ‘**I WILL GO TO NINEVEH AND DECLARE YOUR MESSAGE IF YOU GIVE ME ANOTHER CHANCE TO OBEY YOUR CALL**’.

‘When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.’

Numbers, 30:2, NIV

‘When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfil it.’

Ecclesiastes, 5:4-5, NIV

Jonah concludes his prayer with the proclamation: ‘SALVATION COMES FROM THE LORD’.

Jonah could not save himself, and nobody on earth could save him, but the Lord could do it. This is a quotation from **Psalms, 3:8** and **Psalms, 37:39** and it is the central declaration in the story. It is also the central theme of the Bible. How wise of Jonah to memorise the Word of God; because being able to quote the Scriptures, especially THE BOOK OF PSALMS, gave him light in the darkness and genuine hope in his seemingly hopeless situation.

How did Jonah know that Salvation was out of his hands?

He knew only a loving God would take him back after doing what he did.

He knew he had nothing to do with the wind and the fish.

He did not know whether God would end his life in the fish or eject him.

‘SALVATION COMES FROM THE LORD’ means ‘MY DELIVERANCE IS COMPLETELY OUT OF MY HANDS’.

AND THE LORD COMMANDED THE FISH, AND IT VOMITED JONAH ONTO DRY LAND

Jonah paid a high price for his wilful acts of disobedience.

No matter how far you get away from God there is always a way back, but the way back may not be through a beautiful emotional experience. Jonah left God on a ship bound for Tarshish but he did not return in the same way. Instead, he spent three days and three nights in the digestive system of a great fish, only to be vomited up on the seashore. We must never delude ourselves into thinking that we can walk away from God without a cost. There is hope in knowing that no matter how we mess up, no matter how far away we get from the Lord, there is always a way back, but I believe that Jonah was a changed man after his experience in the deep. His disobedience cost him dearly.

There is a story of a woman who was attending a wedding when she sneezed and her false teeth came out of her mouth and shattered on the ground. She was very embarrassed and said a quick prayer. A man who she did not know was sitting next to her and told her not to worry. He went out to his car and came back in with a briefcase. He took the woman to one side and revealed its contents to be many pairs of false teeth. Soon they found a set that fitted her and resumed their seats at the table. The woman turned to the man and said, “I am glad the Lord allowed me to sit next to a dentist”. “My dear”, the man replied, “I am not a dentist, I am an undertaker”.

Sometimes the Lord does not answer our prayers in the way we expect him to.

When the Israelites were in the desert, they were being plagued by snakes which bit them and they suffered greatly from the poison. Many Israelites died and so Moses led a prayer meeting. Of course, God could have gotten rid of the snakes, but instead he instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent that was raised up on high. When an Israelite was bitten, they looked for the sign and they were instantly healed.

What a terrible sight Jonah must have been when he was vomited onto dry land.

Did anyone see him? Was he embarrassed by the experience? Did he smell terrible? He did not really mind, because more than anything else, Jonah was alive, and well, and free!

The big question was: Did God still want Jonah to go to Nineveh...?