

## Sermon – 18/05/2008 pm

### Jonah's Prayer

Study Text: Jonah 2:1–10

Jonah was a prophet in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. Israel at that time enjoyed peace and prosperity but it was not characterised by faithfulness to God. Within 50 years Israel would be overrun by Assyria and taken into exile.

Jonah may have been a man of prayer earlier in his life but not when he was running away from the Lord. While everyone else on the ship was calling out to their gods during the terrible storm Jonah was below deck sleeping. The pagan captain had to come and wake him up and urge him to pray.

When running from God prayer is usually put to the side. Backsliding Christians will testify of how difficult it is to pray. It is not easy pray to the God with whom you are angry or the God whom you are disobeying. Sin separates us from God; although thankfully God does not separate himself from us. God was not far from Jonah.

Jonah's prayerlessness quickly changed when he found himself in the middle of the ocean and sinking. He was no longer concerned with living a life free of God's demands. He was no longer thinking about life in Tarshish. I wonder what he planned to do in this pagan city anyway! Maybe he had not thought that far ahead. Now he had other things to think about. The hand of the Lord was heavy upon him. He was thrashing about in the open sea and on his way down.

### Distressed and Drowning

After being thrown overboard Jonah would have struggled for a while before starting to sink. He may have passed out and then woken up in the belly of the fish. His prayer we are told was from the belly of the fish (2:1), but he probably starting crying to the Lord as he sank in the water (2:3, 5).

Some say that his prayer must have been after he was vomited up on dry land because only then could he speak of being delivered (2:6b) and only then could he give thanks (2:9). But a proleptic element is common in many Psalm prayers. It is an important element in such prayers, reflecting confidence in God and his promises. It brings assurance to the heart even in the midst of trouble and affliction.

Jonah cried to the Lord because of his distress and the Lord answered him (2:2). Jonah knew that God hears his people when they call to him. Moreover, who else was going to help him at this time? *Whom have I in heaven but you O Lord, and there is none on earth I desire besides you* (Psalm 73:25). This was the reasoning of Asaph when he was troubled and his soul fainted within him.

Jonah knew the true God, the God who made the sea and the dry land (1:9). He was a man of God. He was a prophet, although it did not appear so at the time. He was backsliding and had slid to rock bottom as it were. He was in great distress and cried to the Lord for mercy,

remembering the promises of God. 'I will never leave you or forsake you' the Lord said to Joshua (Joshua 1:5).

Psalm 139 is an interesting commentary on Jonah's life and prayer. *Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven you are there, If I make my bed in Sheol behold you are there. You have hedged me in behind and before and laid your hand upon me. When I awake I am still with you.* Such truths are applicable to Jonah.

In the belly of the fish Jonah came to his senses, just like the prodigal son came to his senses in the pigpen. He realized he could not run away from Almighty God. He realized that it was God who cast him into the deep (2:3). Of course it was the men on the ship who threw him overboard (1:15) but Jonah saw the hand of God in all that happened to him. As he sank below the surface of the sea, so he saw below the surface of events in this world and in his life.

Jonah knew that God made the sea and the land. He knew that God continues to rule over the creation. Jonah knew that God had sent the storm. He saw the storm stop when he was thrown overboard. God also rules in the heart of man. He hardened Pharaoh's heart. He believed in the providence of God. 'God's works of providence are his most holywise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions' (Shorter Catechism 11).

Jonah did not blame the men who threw him overboard for his plight. He knew and accepted the will of God. Few in the world today accept the bad with the good. We live in a society bent on blame and revenge. Someone must be found to blame for any and every mishap or failure. People lash out at those nearest to them. It is weird how financial problems are blamed for marriage breakdowns. Most are much worse off financially after a divorce having only half a house and half a car. Doctors are scared to give medical advice in case they get sued, teachers and parents are afraid to reprimand children lest they end up in court. Such is the way among people who do not know God and his word.

Jonah accepted his fate but was not fatalistic. He knew the will of God and that God's hand was upon him, but this did not stop him crying out for mercy. How different this is to the way Muslims resign themselves to the will of Allah. As Jonah later says 'they forfeit the grace that could be theirs' (2:8). Jonah saw his own sin but that was not the end of hope. He cried out to the mighty but also merciful God.

## Repentance

*Yet will I look again toward your holy temple (2:4).* What beautiful words of hope. This is the turning point in this prayer. This is Jonah repenting. He was looking away from the temple and getting as far away as possible. But now he is again looking towards the holy temple, the place of God's presence. Repentance is literally turning around.

Some scholars say that Jonah was thinking of the temple of the Lord in heaven. That may be the case but at that time God's presence was in the temple in Jerusalem, between the cherubim on the cover of the ark. Daniel prayed toward Jerusalem because that was where the holy temple was.

All who believe in Jesus have repented of their sin. Yet we continue to sin and must continue to repent of our sin. Confession of sin will sometimes be the main substance of our prayer.

Sometimes we are tempted to run away from the calling which God has given us. When I was first called to the mission field I did a runner. Becoming a missionary is never a common sense decision. The common sense thing to do is run like Jonah. After I applied to a mission agency I saw a great job advertised with the government and thought I would get it. I withdrew my application for mission work. All my colleagues and friends thought I was crazy for going into missions anyway. But the Lord had his hand upon me and a few years later I was in India with my wife and three young children.

## Deliverance

*You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God (2:6b).* Jonah sank to the depths – literally. He felt seaweed around his head and saw the base of the mountains. The Psalmist was using similar language to describe his sickness and fear of death (Psalm 69). To come out of the pit is to come out of Sheol the place of the departed. Jonah acknowledged the hand of the Lord upon him in casting him into the sea and also delivering him from the very depths of the sea. The Lord had work for Jonah to do and he was preparing Jonah's heart to do it.

In verse 7 Jonah goes back over his experience. This is not vain repetition but a heartfelt cry. He tells how his soul fainted within him. He almost gave up hope. But he remembered the Lord and cried out to the Lord in his holy temple. The Lord heard his cry and saved him.

## Thanksgiving

How often we neglect to thank the Lord when our prayers are answered. Jesus was not pleased with the nine lepers who failed to thank him for healing them. A heart of praise and thankfulness should be the mark of every Christian. *Rejoice in the Lord always.* Paul was in chains when he wrote these words. He said *in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made know to God (Philippians 4:6).*

Jonah was thanking the Lord for saving him even while he was in the belly of the fish. He concluded his prayer with praise and thanksgiving. He could thank the Lord even before he was vomited up on dry land. This does not make sense but it does show what faith is. *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the confidence in things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).*

Jonah was back praising the Lord like he used to. He was ready to offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in the house of the Lord. He was ready to fulfil his vows to the Lord. He was ready to go and tell those who worshipped idols that they were forsaking the grace that could be theirs. Like David when he was forgiven by the Lord he resolved to teach transgressors the ways of the Lord and see sinners converted (Psalm 51:13). This is what the Lord wants us to do today.

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