

Special Series

the Call of God – Jonah

Prayer

Glory be to You O Lord, for you see those situations which seem impossible to us, and You lead us through them. You give us what we need to keep us going; peace, power, strength, love, humility, and any other quality we may lack. May we always be open to the leading of Your Spirit, and may we yield to Your authority in all things, for the sake of Your Kingdom; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

On-going prayers

- *Pray about the world of sport*
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- *Give thanks to God for those whose work is to protect you*

Meditation

We must surely aim high, and not live for ourselves
but strive with every fibre of our being to have:

a heart that always seeks to empathise with others,
and ears that listen carefully to everything we hear.

a mind that searches eagerly for the whole truth,
and feelings that inform, not dominate the mind.

a physical frame that is well-maintained and reliable,
and a will to use all our strength to do what is right.

a sense of when to act and when to stand back,
and a memory that recalls things in true proportion.

a spirit that always delights to do the will of God,
and eyes that see details as well as the broad picture.

Is this all too much, like a dream that proves impossible?
Not at all! Yield to the Spirit, who does God's will in you.

Bible passage - Jonah 2:1-10

¹ Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from inside the belly of the fish,

² 'I called to the LORD in my distress,
and he answered me;
from the depths of the grave I cried out,
and you heard my voice.

³ You threw me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and breakers rolled over me.

- ⁴ Then I thought, 'I have been banished out of your sight;
will I ever be able to look on Your holy temple again?'
- ⁵ The waters closed in around me;
the deep surrounded me;
seaweeds were entangling around my head.
- ⁶ I sank down to the base of the mountains,
to the land whose bars were closing in on me forever:
but You brought my life up from the Pit,
O LORD my God.
- ⁷ As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came before You,
in Your holy temple.
- ⁸ Those who hold on to their worthless vanity
lose their covenant with the LORD.
- ⁹ But I will worship you with a voice of thanksgiving,
and I will repay the vows I have made.
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!'
- ¹⁰ Then the LORD commanded the fish to spew Jonah out onto the dry land.
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Bible Study

Review

Jonah had been thrown into the sea after admitting to the sailors of the boat on which he travelled that he was running away from the Lord. With a remarkable respect for human life, they had done their best to avoid doing this to the man who had brought near catastrophe on them, but in the end, they threw him overboard, as Jonah himself requested. Jonah was disturbed by his own rebellion and he asked for this knowing that he deserved punishment for running away from the Lord, the God who had called him to be a prophet had not yet given up on him. It sounds improbable to us, but the large fish that swallowed Jonah (1:17) turned out to be his means of salvation (2:10), and although three days inside a monster such as this was surely enough to kill a man, we learn that Jonah survived. What a tale he could tell!

Today's passage describes Jonah's time in the belly of the fish, but it does so by means of a classic Hebrew poem. Indeed, if you were to read Jonah 2:2-9 you would probably think you were reading a psalm about deliverance from drowning, straight from the book of Psalms. Some scholars have thought that this psalm is an addition to the story of Jonah, but there is no evidence that these verses ever existed as anything other than a part of this prophecy. It is unique, and fits Jonah's story perfectly, even though its words are similar to many psalms. It is remarkable that although Jonah was in the belly of the fish, the psalm describes his fate as drowning in the sea (2:5), almost as if Jonah was not aware of being held by the Lord in the belly of the fish. It is often true that when we are in real trouble, we do not notice what God uses to bring about our salvation!

The passage follows the traditional pattern of a thanksgiving psalm, of which there are many in the book of Psalms (e.g. 18, 30, 103, 108 etc.) and it begins and ends with thanks to God for deliverance (2:2, 2:9). Verse 3 begins the description of Jonah's drowning, and as the psalm moves from verse 3 to 4, Jonah's feelings break through the picture of drowning and death to ask a question of penetrating insight. Will those who die lose sight of God forever? The question itself is profound and unusual, for traditional Israelite belief was that once a person was dead, they were indeed separated from God in the underworld, or 'sheol'. Jonah questioned this, and his question was only answered fully by the death and resurrection of our Lord, many centuries later. Jonah was indeed, a prophet!

Much of the rest of the psalm describes Jonah's 'descent' towards death in the depths of the sea (or the belly of the fish!) until his prayer came before the Lord 'in His holy Temple' (2:7). I suggest that this prayer is found in verse 8, which you will find is translated differently in other Bible versions. In my own translation, it is clear that Jonah recognises he has sinned by self-centred vanity, and has therefore lost the protection of the Lord's 'covenant' love. This confession of sin, together with the promise of worship in verse 9 indicates a spiritual change in Jonah to the effect that the Lord was able to enact His plan of deliverance, and command the fish to 'spew' Jonah out onto dry land (2:10).

Our Lord refers to Jonah several times when speaking of his own death and resurrection (Matt 12:39; 16:4 etc., and it is easy to think that this is due to the 'three days and nights' of Jonah's time in the fish (1:17), and the same time spent by Jesus between His death and resurrection. However, Jonah 2 describes salvation through death, and repentance and worship. There is much more in the story of Jonah than the fish! It has a far more important place in our understanding of the history of God's salvation than most people assume! Read on next week!

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Read some of the psalms of thanksgiving mentioned in the Bible study to see how similar the psalm is to other Psalms
2. Go through each verse and identify some of the spiritual features in the psalm of significance for Jonah's deliverance.
3. In your group, discuss what the great declaration 'deliverance belongs to the Lord' (2:9) means.

Topics covered by this text

- *Death and resurrection*
- *Confession and salvation*
- *Deliverance belongs to the Lord*

Personal comments by author

I have always loved this psalm, and have sometimes used it in worship. People always assume it to be a psalm from the book of psalms! The reason it is useful and can bear being used for preaching, is because it tells a story of salvation. It therefore contains most of the elements needed for preaching about salvation and deliverance. It is certainly a reminder that salvation and deliverance are two words that mean roughly the same!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through this psalm and ask yourself whether it speaks to you of any experiences you have had. You may find connections you did not expect. As a consequence, let the Lord speak to you about the meaning of your own salvation.*
 - *If there are any people in your church who are struggling to find ways of coping with life at the moment, consider whether it would be helpful to send them a note of encouragement containing words from Jonah 2. Use discretion.*
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Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty. You enable us to keep going when everything seems impossible. You enable us to show love when we do not feel very generous, and you place hope within our hearts even when the future looks dim. Complete Your work in us we pray, for Your name's sake: AMEN
