

"A Fishy Prayer"
Jonah 1:17-2:10
Mercy Hill Church | May 15, 2022

¹⁷ And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

² Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying,

"I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,
 and he answered me;
 out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
 and you heard my voice."

³ For you cast me into the deep,
 into the heart of the seas,
 and the flood surrounded me;
 all your waves and your billows
 passed over me.

⁴ Then I said, 'I am driven away
 from your sight;
 yet I shall again look
 upon your holy temple.'

⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life;
 the deep surrounded me;
 weeds were wrapped about my head
⁶ at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land
 whose bars closed upon me forever;
 yet you brought up my life from the pit,
 O LORD my God.

⁷ When my life was fainting away,
 I remembered the LORD,
 and my prayer came to you,
 into your holy temple.

⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols
 forsake their hope of steadfast love.

⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving
 will sacrifice to you;
 what I have vowed I will pay.
 Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Recap of Jonah 1:1-17

- In vv.1-13 God calls and commission Jonah to go preach to the great (and evil) city of Nineveh that they might turn from their ways and follow God. Jonah, not wanting to see God show His mercy towards Nineveh, runs away on a ship headed to Tarshish...only to find himself, the crew of sailors and the ship caught in supernatural storm (vv.4-16). Through the storm, the stark contrast of Jonah's apathy towards God and the pagan sailor's sensitivity to God is revealed. Ironically, it is these sailors that pray to God, worship God and show mercy to Jonah while Jonah remains hard-hearted towards God and others. Having exhausted all other possibilities, the sailors throw Jonah overboard...only for Jonah to be rescued and swallowed up by a fish.

Background to Jonah's Prayer (1:17)

- “Fish” in Hebrew is ambiguous – could mean “fish” or “whale.” Most likely a sperm whale.
- Could this have actually happened?
 - Possible? Lobster diver Michael Packard was swallowed by a humpback whale and then spat back out off the coast of Provincetown, MA on June 11, 2021.
 - Definition of a miracle: “A divine act beyond human replication or explanation.” (Stuart)
 - God works through ordinary, natural means – as well as super-natural, miraculous means.

1. **The Heart of Jonah’s Prayer**

- **Desperation: Jonah Cries Out to God (vv.1-2, 7)**
 - Jonah doesn’t pray when God commands him to go to Nineveh, when fleeing to Joppa, when purchasing passage on a ship, when the ship is stuck in the massive storm...
 - ...but Jonah does finally pray – desperately – as he faces death (vv.3, 5-6a)
 - Jonah doesn’t cry out to any god but to the LORD (Yahweh) (v.7)
 - C.S. Lewis (Problem of Pain): “We can even ignore pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”
- **Awe: Jonah Recognizes God’s Sovereignty (vv.3, 6)**
 - Jonah acknowledges God’s hand over everything that has happened
 - God is the one behind the sailors throwing Jonah overboard (v.3)
 - God is the one who brought the fish to rescue Jonah (v.6, cf. 1:17, 2:10)
 - This clarity (or insight) seems to only come to Jonah as he prays to God. As we pray to God we see God’s hand (sovereignty) more clearly.
- **Grateful: Jonah Gives Thanks for God’s Mercy (vv.2, 6, 9)**
 - Ultimately at the heart of Jonah’s prayer is gratefulness and thanksgiving.
 - Structure and format of Jonah’s prayer is a psalm of thanksgiving (cf. Psalm 30, 118, 138)
 - Description of Past Difficulty (vv.2b-6a)
 - An Appeal for God’s Help (vv.2a, 7a)
 - How God Has Provided (v 6b)
 - Vow of Praise (vv.9)
 - As Jonah experiences this miraculous rescue from God (via the fish) and sees God’s answer to his prayer, Jonah responds with thanksgiving and worship of God

2. **The Hole in Jonah’s Prayer: What’s Missing?**

- As much as there is to learn and reflect on in what and how Jonah prays, we also need to consider what’s missing in Jonah’s prayer – and what it reveals about Jonah’s heart.
- **Missing Confession & Repentance**
 - As mentioned earlier, Jonah’s prayer can be categorized as a prayer (psalm) of thanksgiving. Yet as we consider all that has happened (re: Jonah’s blatant disobedience and rebellion towards God, his lack of compassion towards Nineveh, his apathy towards God and the sailors), what Jonah really needs – and what’s missing in his prayer – is contrition and remorse over his sin.
 - Consider the following verses in Psalms: 32:5, 38:18, 40:12, 41:4
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- **Missing Humility**
 - Considering the context (the entire book of Jonah) of vv.8-9, Jonah is possibly referring to either the pagan sailors (1:5) or the people of Nineveh.

- Even as Jonah prays and gives thanks to God, there is an aspect of (spiritual) pride and lack of humility as Jonah compares himself to others.
- Cf. Luke 18:9-14
- The fish vomiting Jonah (v.10) is a sign of God's judgment...
 - Cf. Leviticus 18:28, Job 20:15, Revelation 3:16

3. Yet God's Mercy & Mission Continues

-but also a reminder of God's mercy as Jonah is brought back to dry land
- Even though Jonah isn't fully repentant, God is still showing His mercy and grace to Jonah – just as He has with the sailors and with the city of Nineveh
- God is also committed in His mission for all peoples to know Him and be restored back to Him as Jonah is rescued for the purpose of going to Nineveh
- One commentator insightfully highlights and contrasts the ship (of sin) and the fish (of God's mercy and grace)
 - Jonah pays a hefty sum of money for the ship vs. the fish is free
 - Jonah sleeps on the ship vs. Jonah being awake and alert (has his senses back) in the fish
 - Jonah ignores God on the ship vs. prays to God in the fish
 - Fish as an instrument of God's salvation and symbol of His free grace
- At the heart of the Gospel is an acknowledgement, confession and repentance of sin and finding true and complete forgiveness in and through Jesus – through His atoning sacrifice on the cross which restores us back to God and each other. It is only through Christ that our guilt and shame can be washed away – and only having a full grasp of the Gospel are we able to compelled to open our mouths and our hearts to those that don't know Jesus.

Big Idea: What we pray – and how we pray – may not always be what we really need to pray about. Yet despite our sin, we continue to God's mercy extended towards us and His mission for the gospel to be proclaimed to all peoples."

Reflection Questions

- How have you seen God use difficult situations bring you closer to Him? Have you seen this happen in the lives of those around you?
- Looking back at the past several weeks, what things can you give thanks to God for? How have you seen God's mercy in your life and/or those around you?
- In what areas of your life have you seen pride prevent you from acknowledging your sins to God – and others?
- How have you neglected the Gospel message (of repentance & forgiveness through Jesus) in your understanding and living out of the Christian faith? In what ways do you need to be reminded of the Gospel message for yourself -- as well as for others?