

## DEVOTIONALS: 12 - 18 MARCH 2023

Read: Jonah 2

### Jonah Chapter 2 - Lessons from the Belly of the Fish

*Lord, Jesus. today, this week, I want Your will to be done in my life. I ask for spiritual protection so that no matter what happens in my life, You will always protect me from all harm. So, whatever happens, hold my hand, and let's face it together. Amen.*

Jonah, a book from the Old Testament, is a story steeped in poetry, mystery, metaphor, comedy, and adventure. Jonah, the main character, is a prophet from Israel whom, despite his best efforts, God uses for salvation of many.

There are many angles that one could view the story of Jonah through. The original Hebrew has layers of beautiful literary motifs and imagery; for example, Jonah son of Amittai can mean Dove of Truth.

According to 1:1, 2, the word of the Lord came to Jonah saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it." To understand what this meant for Jonah, it may help to remember that about this time Amos was crying out against the sins of Israel and saying that God was going to raise up a nation against her, namely, Assyria (Amos 6:14). Nineveh was the chief city of Assyria. So just about the time Amos was prophesying the doom of the homeland at the hand of Assyria, God told Jonah to go preach to Assyria's chief city, Nineveh.

We saw from Jonah 1 that this prodigal prophet willfully sought to disobey the command of God to cry against the great city of Nineveh. Instead of traveling something over 500 miles to the Northeast to arrive at Nineveh, Jonah set out by ship from Joppa, heading Northwest, toward Tarshish. Jonah's disobedience brought about a storm, which threatened the ship and the sailors. Only through their persistent questioning did they learn the reason for the storm, and only after great efforts to save Jonah did they cast him overboard.

Chapter 2 picks up the story from the undersea perspective, describing the prayer and the plight of Jonah as poetically depicted.

Jonah said, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the storm will become calm for you" (1:12). It is a puzzle to me why Jonah should so readily offer to give his life for the sake of pagan (1:5) sailors, when a few weeks later he gets angry that God saves the life of 120,000 pagan Ninevites. Probably Jonah's willingness to die in the Mediterranean Sea was owing mainly to remorse and shame. He realizes what a fool he was to try to flee "from the presence of the Lord" (1:3). How can you flee from the Lord who made the sea and the dry land (1:9)? God has tracked him down and exposed his folly. His guilt is so obvious he simply surrenders himself to the sentence of death—or so it seems.

The crew threw him overboard, and the storm ceased. The sailors, unlike Jonah, responded obediently to the revelation they received, and they were left topside, praising God. Jonah sinks in the water. And what happens? The first thing that happens is not the appearance of a great fish to swallow Jonah. Before the fish comes the cry of distress. Even though Jonah knew that he was guilty; even though he knew he deserved death; even though he had surrendered his life to the justice of God, yet in the moment when death was imminent, Jonah remembered that the God whom he had served so imperfectly was still "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repenting of evil" (4:2). And he cried out to the Lord for mercy. And then the Lord appointed a great fish for Jonah's rescue. The Lord had mercy on his prophet and saved him miraculously in a fish's belly.



Chapter 2 is what Jonah prayed while still conscious in the fish. He recounts his cry of distress in the water and lifts a voice of thanks for deliverance.

in the New Testament Jesus treats Jonah's story as historical. He says in Matthew 12:40, "Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."

Those of us who respect the wisdom of Jesus will be very slow to call his judgment into question. He thought the story was historical. We should, too. If you ask how a man can survive in the belly of a fish three days, the answer is, he probably can't—any more than a person can stay three days in the grave and live again. That's why Jesus called it a "sign." In Matthew 12:39 he says, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah, the prophet." Jesus knew this was no ordinary event. It was a miraculous sign of God's gracious and powerful intervention. There is no point in trying to explain it scientifically any more than the miraculous signs of Jesus' ministry. Jonah cried for help, and God saved him miraculously with a fish.

At least briefly, Jonah was conscious in the fish—long enough to realize that God had saved him from drowning in the sea. And during that period (or perhaps periods) of consciousness, Jonah prays. Chapter 2 is what he said. So when you read this prayer, keep in mind that when Jonah refers to the distress of the past, he means the time he spent in the water, not the time he spent in the fish. The water is the threat of death. The fish is the refuge of salvation. The cry of distress is past tense (in the water!); the voice of confidence and thanks is present (in the fish).

Let's look at the prayer – read Jonah 2.

"Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 'I called to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me.'" There is the simple statement that sums up what happened when Jonah sank in the water: he cried out to God, and God answered him by sending the fish.

There is a lot of encouragement for us. The general point I want to make is that God answers God's children when they cry to God in distress. The text gives us some specific pointers to how and why God answers us when we call in distress. First, God answers us in spite of our guilt. Second, God answers us in spite of God's judgment. Third, God answers us and delivers us from impossible circumstances. Fourth, God answers us in the nick of time. Fifth, God answers us in stages, not all of which are comfortable. Sixth, God answers us in order to win our undivided loyalty and thanks. Finally, God answers us in our guilty distress to help us become merciful like he is.

God answers our cry of distress, even when we are guilty. Jonah was not on his way to Nineveh when he fell overboard. He was running from God. He was guilty of disobedience. That's why he was in the water. Some of you are in trouble right now precisely because of your disobedience. And if you are wondering, "Is there hope? Will God have mercy on me and hear my cry of distress?" take heart from Jonah. His distress was the fruit of his guilt, but God answered him and gave him another chance.

God answers us in spite of his judgment. Even when God is displeased with us, he never brings us into affliction merely for the sake of punishment. His purposes always include redemption. Job 36:15 says, "God delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity." Adversity is redemptive, not merely punitive.

God answers us and delivers us from impossible circumstances. We need to remember Jonah's plight. It was impossible. But not with God (Mark 10:27)! When we cry to the Lord in our distress, he answers us and delivers us from impossible situations.

God answers us in the nick of time. "“As my life was slipping away, I remembered the Lord. My prayer came to you in your holy temple.” Jonah gives us courage to be unrelenting in our prayer, to keep on crying out to God even as we go unconscious, and to believe that God will answer in the nick of time.



God answers our cries of distress in stages, not all of which are comfortable. We must get out of our head the all or nothing notion of answered prayer. The belly of a fish hardly seems like salvation. But it was: Jonah is granted enough consciousness to realize he has been spared from drowning and that there is hope. He does not complain about his surroundings. He accepts God's first stage of salvation as a guarantee of dry land, and concludes his prayer in the fish's belly with the great affirmation, "Deliverance belongs to the Lord."

Don't disregard the partial works of God. If he chooses to save and to heal by stages, God has good purposes, and we ought to be grateful for any improvement in our condition. A fish's belly is better than weeds at the bottom of the sea. God answers us in stages, not all of which are comfortable.

God answers our cry of distress in order to win our undivided loyalty and thanksgiving. Verses 8 and 9 show how a prayer to God after deliverance should end: "Those who hold on to worthless idols abandon their loyalty to You. But I will sacrifice to you with songs of thanksgiving. I will keep my vow. Victory belongs to the Lord!"

The answer to Jonah's prayer has produced its proper effect. It has filled Jonah with wonder; God taught Jonah that if you leave the Lord, you leave mercy. And God has filled Jonah's mouth with thanksgiving. God answers prayers in order that thanksgiving will abound to God's glory.

God answers us in our guilty distress to help us become merciful like God is. The book of Jonah has a message that is loud and clear about God, namely, his mercy is not confined to Israel but extends to any people who will trust him and repent of their sin.

The book is really about Jonah—about you and me and the way we ought to be if we have a God with mercy like this. The main point of the book of Jonah is not, "God is merciful." The main point is, "You be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful." The ultimate lesson about prayer in the book of Jonah is that God answers us in mercy to make us merciful.

And if the book had recorded the rest of God's dealings with Jonah, I think it would have ended like this (and it's just as relevant for us): "Jonah, don't you see what I was trying to teach you when I answered your cry of distress and sent the fish to save you? I had mercy on you in spite of your guilt. I had mercy on you in spite of my own sentence of judgment. I saved you from impossible circumstances. I delivered you in the nick of time. I commanded a fish to save your life. You were filled with a song of thanksgiving for my mercy and vowed your loyalty to me. Jonah, Jonah, be merciful, even as I have been merciful to you!"

**Go Deeper — Where are you striking out on your own instead of following where God leads? Will you pray Jonah 2:7 and then be open to listen for God's response?**

**Is there any sense in which you are running from God today (either by commission --- doing something God does not want you to do or omission --- failing to do something God does want you to do?)**

Prayer: Father God, thank you for your gracious discipline of me. Help me see your purpose in hardship as I seek to become more like your son, Jesus, and an instrument of reconciliation on earth. Amen.

## **PRAYER & CONCERNS**

- **We still need YOU! We need leaders and volunteers to serve in various positions on committees and boards. You may not think you have the gift, talent, and/or time to serve, but all are called to work in the kingdom. We need you!**
- Our **church family members and friends** are experiencing all forms of challenges and concerns. "Lord, give me the courage to face the challenges and ills that come. Help me to persevere and not give up. Give me the strength to face these storms. Pour out your peace over me and keep me in your perfect peace. Amen."



- **Bro. Bob Krell**, after spending a couple of days in the hospital, has returned home. He is appreciative for your prayers and cards for renewing of strength and healing. Thank you, God, for hearing and answering my prayer. Please mail cards and notes of support and encouragement to: Bro. Bob and Mrs. Jean Krell, 804 Lenora Drive, West Bend, WI 53090.
- **Ms. Sandy Wamser** having been diagnosed with Epilepsy, is still working with her medical team to find the correct medications and doses to control the seizures. She is very grateful for your love, prayers and support. Special prayers for Mr. Pat as he cares for Ms. Sandy. Cards and notes can be sent to: Mr. Pat and Mrs. Sandy Wamser, 3742 Pleasant Valley Road, West Bend, WI 53095.
- Our Sweet, Sweet Gentleman, **Mr. Allan Kieckhafer** who passed away on January 25, 2023 was celebrated with a loving, honorable and joyous Celebration of Life Service on 30 January 2023. We have stood on the shoulders of this saintly giant and we give God praise and thanks for all that Mr. Allan taught us, the amazing legacy of service he has left us to live into and the vital a role he played in helping us grow into who we are now. “Almighty Father, you have built up your Church through the love and devotion of your saints: inspire us to follow the example of Mr. Allan whom we grieve his passing. May we, Fifth Ave. United Methodist Church, rejoice with him in the vision of your glory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.” We pray for Mr. Allan’s family and the community of West Bend. Amen.
- **Ms. Nancy Whitson** is still admitted at The Pavilion at Glacier Valley. She requests your prayers and support as she continues to journey with health concerns. Please send cards and notes of encouragement to: Mrs. Nancy Whitson, 922 Hickory Street, West Bend, WI 53095.
- Words cannot begin to express the heartfelt sadness and grief we are experiencing for the passing of our beloved **Ms. Beverly “Bev” June Vogel**. To Ms. Bev’s family: “Always be assured that you have our full support, prayers and love.” May God grant us grace, that in pain we may find comfort, in sorrow hope, in death resurrection. Amen.
- **Mr. Don Walters** is still experiencing several medical challenges. We’re keeping Ms. Joyce in our thoughts and prayers as well. Letters and notes of encouragement and love can be mailed to: Mr. Don and Mrs. Joyce Walters, 5368 Woodlawn Summit, West Bend, WI 53095.
- **Mr. Chuck Rogge** is still on a journey of healing. He is grateful for the cards and notes of support. Please continue to flood the mailbox with love and support to: Mr. Chuck and Mrs. Sue Rogge, 5011 Hwy. P, West Bend, WI 53095.
- **Mr. Dick Simmons**, diagnosed with acute leukemia. “Dear God, we place our worries in your hands. We place Mr. Dick’s sickness under your care and humbly ask for strength and comfort. Be near him in times of weakness and pain; sustain him by your grace, that Mr. Dick’s strength and courage may not fail; give him confidence in the power of your grace, that even when he is afraid, may he put his whole trust in you. We pray all of these things in Your name. Amen. Mr. Dick, Ms. Shirley and family, we are sending you love, hugs, support and prayers during this difficult time. Cards, notes filled with prayers and support can be mailed to: Mr. Dick and Mrs. Shirley Simmons, 2908 Valley Avenue, West Bend, WI 53095.
- **Mr. Len McGinnis, Jr.**, continues to quietly face medical challenges. Your cards and notes of support and well wishes for Mr. Len and Mrs. Shelia McGinnis can be mailed to: 1230 Vogt Drive, West Bend, WI 53095.
- **Mrs. Janice Liepert-Kempf**, appreciates your continued prayers for healing and strength as she continues to struggle with illness. You can send emails of prayers and support to: [alankempf33@gmail.com](mailto:alankempf33@gmail.com); or cards and notes to Mrs. Janice Liepert-Kempf, 414B. South Pleasantview Road, Plymouth, WI 53073; phone number: 920.838.1830.

Prayer: Dear God, you are so good, and Your mercies never fail. I am thankful for the wonderful works you have done for me. Thank you for your great love and care. Thank you for the sacrifice of Your Son so that we might have freedom and life. Forgive me for when I don’t thank you enough for who you are, for all you do, and for all you’ve given. I ask for Your assistance in renewing my spirit, filling me with peace and joy that only You can bring. I love You, and I need You, this day and every day. I give you praise and thanks, for You alone are worthy! In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

*Pastor Clarissa & Bro. Martín*