

**"A FISHY TALE"**  
**2. Jonah's Prayer**  
***Jonah 2:1-10***

When I was much younger, I used to go along to the midweek prayer meeting and Bible study at the church where I was brought up. As so often in churches, there was an odd selection of people there and they all prayed in different ways. Some mumbled along and you could hardly hear what they were saying, while others spoke so loudly they clearly assumed God wouldn't hear them otherwise. One old chap used to bang the chair in front of him on the floor to make his points to God, whom he must have felt wasn't concentrating enough. The prayers were usually lengthy, encompassing all kinds of topics from the great missionary call to go and save the world to Gertie Kimber's blood pressure. And it was all in the "language of Zion" – indeed, some of it sounded very familiar because some prayers were pretty well totally made up of phrases from the Bible and recent sermons by the Pastor – and, of course, all in the old AV vocabulary: I well remember one lady who was always on about "*bowels of mercy*", as if addressing some divine proctologist.

Maybe, when you are listening to someone pray, you feel that what they're saying has a familiar ring to it. It is, to all intents and purposes, extemporary prayer, but it doesn't quite sound like it. And then – as I eventually did – you realise that it is, in fact, made up of strings of quotations from the Bible, hymns and other religious literature. It's a kind of prefabricated prayer! Now, there's absolutely nothing wrong with that – it is not meant to be a criticism (just so long as the person praying knows what he's actually saying, of course). In fact, it has good biblical precedent.

The prayer that we have just read from the little book of Jonah is a wonderful example of someone praying in other people's words. Jonah's prayer here is made up almost exclusively of phrases from the Psalms. If you've got one of those Bibles with references at the foot of the page or down a column in the middle, you'll be able to check where they come from. There's a lot here about being “in the depths”, about sinking down and being caught up in the storms of life. What is remarkable, though, is that the Psalms use the language figuratively - in a very poetic way - whereas Jonah is talking pretty literally, really. In fact, there aren't too many situations in which this prayer could be prayed with more direct application.

The chapter we've just read begins with the words, "*From inside the fish ...*", which is a rather startling phrase if you haven't read chapter 1, so let's quickly remind ourselves what the story is all about. We're currently spending a couple of weeks looking at this little Old Testament book and, as we saw last week, this Jonah is a prophet who has a direct call from God to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, the main city of Assyria. It's a long way away, the people are foreigners – pagan foreigners at that – and it's noted for its wickedness. In other words, this isn't really a plum job for a Jewish prophet. I suppose it's a bit like having a call to go and preach repentance to the people of Bangkok.

Anyway, Jonah decides that he's not really on for this particular commission and goes down to the nearest port to get away from it all. The story actually says that he "*ran away from the LORD*", as if such a thing were possible! He embarks on a ship heading for Tarshish, usually thought to be somewhere in southern Spain. (Jonah certainly isn't the first fugitive to make his way down there.) Whatever the answer to that, Tarshish is about as far west as the ancient Hebrews thought it was possible to go, and Nineveh is about as far east as their geography text books went. Jonah was

wanting to go to the other end of the world rather than actually do what God had told him to.

Once the ship gets out on to the Mediterranean, a storm blows up and the passengers and crew are in fear of their lives. Strangely, Jonah is asleep in the hold. The sailors feel that Jonah is the cause of this distress and approach him to see what he's up to. It becomes apparent that all this has happened because Jonah has disobeyed God. He hasn't stopped believing in him, he still has a clear idea about what's right and wrong, but he knows that he has done something rather disobedient and agrees to be thrown overboard in order to lift the jinx from the ship. The sailors – very probably Phoenician traders – see this as a sacrifice that will appease Jonah's god, just as they would have appeased their own gods. When it works, they decide to transfer their allegiance to the One True God – a kind of religious equivalent of “any port in a storm”. OK for the sailors, then: but poor old Jonah is now up to his neck in it. Well, it's further than his neck, actually.

From what we read in Jonah's prayer in chapter 2, it seems that he has called out to God in his distress and God provided a great fish to swallow him whole and save him from drowning. Once inside the fish – which must have been a weird experience for the prophet

– he begins this prayer of praise. Now, remember – Jonah is praying this from inside the fish. He may well be disorientated. After all, he was on the point of drowning and probably not very aware of what was going on around him. Suddenly, he is in the pitch black of the fish's belly, sloshing about in all kinds of semi-digested muck, it probably doesn't smell too sweet (the outside of a fish is bad enough, what on earth must the inside smell like?). He has no idea what time of day or night it is and precious little idea of where he is going. We would probably think that we'd come out of the frying pan into the fire if we'd been in that situation. Surely things cannot get worse?

But Jonah prays this prayer of praise and thanksgiving. He realises that God is actually looking after him and that somehow this dark and smelly situation is God's way of saving him from death by drowning. God had "*hurled him into the deep*" and he had been at the very point of death. Now God is looking after him – admittedly in a fairly bizarre fashion – and he can praise him. He can be thankful because ...

## 1. GOD HEARS

In 2:2, Jonah acknowledges that God heard his cry. In his distress he called out to him and expressed his despair and his pain. It must have been a pretty desperate prayer. As we read through the prayer of praise we see that he was alone in the deep, with waves and currents breaking over him, throwing him up and sucking him down. He was caught up in the seaweed (that would have been enough to get me going – I hate the stuff!) and really thought that his time was up – *"From the depths of the grave ... the earth beneath me barred me in for ever ... my life was ebbing away."* It's interesting to notice that Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights (how he knew that we don't know), which for the peoples of the Ancient Near East was the time it took to get to the underworld – Sheol, *"the grave"*, *"the pit"*. The prayer is saying that Jonah has "been to hell and back" in this experience.

But Jonah has prayed, nonetheless, because he still trusts in God. Even though he has tried to run away from God, even though he has been disobedient, he calls out to God because God hears. He believes that it is worth it! From the very pits, from the worst possible situation, God can hear his cry. He is still there, still

listening. You are never out of God's earshot. Did you know that? Whatever you have done, whatever circumstances, whatever the difficulties you are facing – God can hear you. He is listening out for you. I find that so comforting. At the very extremities of human experience you can call out to God and know that he's there.

## **2. GOD ANSWERS**

But it's not simply the fact that God hears that gives Jonah cause for praise. You can often call out and people hear you, but that's not a lot of use unless they answer, is it? God may well have heard Jonah's terrified cries from the crashing breakers and thought, "Well, that's his own silly fault, isn't it? Why should I do anything? After all, he's trying to get away from me." Fortunately, God is not like us. His reserves of grace and mercy are infinitely greater than ours are. So Jonah is able to begin his prayer, *"In my distress I called to the LORD and he answered me."*

It can be a great source of comfort for us to know that God is there, that he hears our prayer. But it's a much greater encouragement to know that he will answer, too. Jonah's cry was about as desperate as it can get. He was about to die, but he knew that God would hear and answer him. There was no point calling out

otherwise. You may not be in the same position as Jonah this morning (if you are, there's a pretty huge rip in the fabric of reality!), but things still seem desperate for you. There is a point in calling out to God because he will answer you.

The sailors, we read in *1:5*, "*each cried out to his own god*" – and it didn't do a whole lot of good. In his prayer, Jonah acknowledges that "*those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.*" We all have our idols that we call out to in times of difficulty. We think that money might be able to solve the problems, some kind of therapy, some curious philosophy, some attempt to deny the problem, a greater effort on our own part to sort the problem out. If those are all that we cling to then we forfeit the grace that can be ours through believing that God answers our prayers when we call to him.

### **3. GOD SAVES**

And God answered Jonah's prayer by saving him. "*You brought my life up from the pit,*" says Jonah. And a few lines later, he affirms, "*Salvation comes from the LORD.*" Now Jonah wasn't in any position to think rationally while he was fighting for his life among the seaweed and the surf, but I bet if someone had said to

him that he would be saved by being swallowed by a large fish he would not have believed them. The way he was saved was a means of confirming that God had done it. This was such a miraculous escape that it could only have been God's doing. The narrative around this prayer emphasises this. *1:17* says "*The LORD provided a great fish ...*" and *2:10* says, "*The LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah on to dry land.*" (That would have been a pretty good opportunity for witness to any people who happened to be on the beach. Imagine this for a beach mission visual aid – everyone sitting round enjoying the sun and suddenly a huge fish arrives, belches and swims away, leaving a rather smelly but nonetheless relieved evangelist on the shore saying, "I've come with some good news for you.")

But God specialises in the very special, in the unique and the unexpected. Men and women are really messing up their world and their own lives. They seem literally hell-bent on their own destruction, and that has implications for the whole of eternity. So what does God do? He sends his own Son, the Prince of Heaven, to live like one of them and allows him to be executed. What good's that? God's now reduced himself to the level of a fragile and mortal human being. But then Jesus bursts from the grave (after his three

day journey to hell and back – even Jesus saw the parallels when he spoke as he did in *Matthew 12:40*) and says “Salvation comes from the LORD – and here am I to prove it to you beyond any shadow of a doubt.”

In fact, God proves it over and over again as he rescues his people, as he reaches into our situations and pulls us out of them, as he promises and promises – and keeps his promises. Let me ask you again this morning, are you feeling so low you don't think you could go any lower? Do you feel that you're right at the end of your tether? Are you in the pits? God knows and he wants to answer. God can save you. Even if you believe it's your own silly fault that you're in this state, God hasn't let you go. He doesn't bear grudges or try to get revenge.

In fact, God has a plan for your life, something that only you can do, something that's uniquely suited to you and your gifts and temperament – like the job he had for Jonah. And he wants you to be fulfilled in that, to sense the satisfaction of being involved with God's business, to be who you were really meant to be. So he longs to rescue you from the problems you're in. Call out to him. Ask him to help you. Believe that he can do it – I bet he's helped you plenty of times before, so you can have confidence in

him. God hears. God answers. God saves. Go on – trust him.  
Don't cling to your worthless idols and forfeit his grace.

## JONAH'S PRAYER Jonah 2:1-10

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## Questions for discussion

1. Is it true to say that you can always know God is there? If it seems that he has abandoned us, how can we be sure that he is still caring for us?
2. What other *"worthless idols"* do people cling to in times of difficulty? They seem to work sometimes, don't they?
3. How would you try to help a friend who was in the very depths of despair? Would you do things differently depending on whether they were a believer? Why/why not?
4. Is there anything particular that you have learned from the story of Jonah that you would like to share with the group?