

Series: *A Moody Missionary Meets the Merciful Master*

Lesson: *Positioned to Pray*

Text: *Jonah 2:1 – 10 (L4)*

Date: *Sunday, September 25, 2011*

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

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Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

INTRODUCTION

In John Piper's 3-part poem about Jonah, he depicts Jonah as a wise, gray-bearded old man who spends his evenings speaking with young aspiring prophets. Jonah wears a large scar across his cheek—a "sweet sign of grace" from God, received when he was rescued by the great fish. In the middle of relating his tale to one young Hosea, Jonah says:

*You ask me how I got free from
The fish, and how I knew the sum
Of my three dark and senseless days,
And how I breathed, and did appraise
The length of that great beast. Well, there's
A story here. And many prayers
Did make it marvelous.¹*

Jonah 2 is one of those "many prayers"—it's two prayers, in fact. After a full chapter without any conversation between the prophet and His God, chapter 2 wonderfully begins, "Then Jonah prayed"! And what a dramatic shift in the story that phrase introduces.

Do you talk to God? The Bible certainly has much to say about prayer, most frequently compelling us to simply engage in the activity of prayer (Luke 18:1; Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer is simply talking to God, interacting in our relationship with Him as we would with any friend. With that foundational understanding that we are in a relationship with God, prayer (talking to Him) ought to be common and natural, but "the lack of prayer is the best kept secret in twentieth century Christianity."

Complicating our own self-dependence, pride, disobedience, and laziness—all of which may keep us from prayer—is the work of our great Enemy who feeds us with doubts: "Not here!" "Not now!" "Not you!" And, so, we don't pray.

Such internal and external forces were certainly at work to keep Jonah from surrendering to God in prayer. Chapter 2 records both the struggle that preceded Jonah's prayers and the prayers themselves. We're going to review the prayers of Jonah today and allow his story to teach us about prayer. Let us consider four observations concerning Jonah's prayers.

¹ By John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org

THE PLACE IN WHICH HE PRAYED (vv. 1-2).

As mentioned above, Chapter 2 actually refers to two prayers. Note the following timeline of Jonah's experiences:

- Jonah on the boat (1:3-14)
- Jonah overboard (1:15)
- Jonah sinking (2:2-7)
- *Jonah's first prayer* (2:7)
- Jonah swallowed (1:17)
- *Jonah's second prayer* (2:1)
- Jonah spat out (2:10)

Both locations from which Jonah prayed were very odd places. Men have prayed from caves, crosses, and stoning pits; Jonah was apparently the first to pray from the bottom of the ocean and the belly of a fish. Jonah's story encourages us that God hears the prayer of the humble, wherever it is uttered.

1. *A place of punishment (v. 2)*

Jonah's first prayer was prayed from the very depths of the ocean. In blatant, obstinate rebellion, Jonah had resisted God even when He was cornered. He acknowledged his wrongdoing, but would not submit to God. In fact, he'd rather take his chances in that killer sea—yes, he'd rather die—than surrender to God's will. And, God gave him exactly what he asked for. In the midst of that ocean, Jonah abruptly understood his stupidity. Facing the "billows" and "waves" of the very God he had offended, Jonah was experiencing the inescapable opposition of God toward his pride. At the last moment of life, just before the darkness of death became complete, Jonah prayed. And, God heard (1:17)! The most wayward of prophets arrested the attention of God, even in the midst of chastening. God hears humble prayer, even in the place of punishment.

2. *A place of mercy (v. 1)*

God rescued Jonah in a most unexpected, but really unavoidable way. In response to His prayer from place of punishment, God delivered Jonah by swallowing him with a fish. Now in the place of God's merciful goodness, Jonah again prays, and His God again hears and responds to His prayer, this time by spitting Jonah up on dry land (v. 10).

Application: Psalm 34:15 assures us that irrespective of where we may be, "The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry." If you will humble yourself and seek the Lord (James 4:6-8), you will experience His gracious reception of your requests. The bar, the slums, the beggar's corner, the prison—even though they may be indicative of God's punishment, they may become the very storehouses of grace if you'll humble yourself and pray there.

God will hear you! When poor decisions have reaped the consequences of a lost job, a shattered family, piling debt, and broken relationships, those pitiful places can become your personal prayer closet where you discover that you are always within a whisper of the ear of Omnipotence.

On the other hand, the blessings of life should always compel us to rejoice in thankful prayer to the Author of those gracious gifts (James 1:17). Places of provision, protection, abundance, joy, and peace should be transformed into houses of prayer. May we ever be mindful: "Lord, I need You, when the sea of life is calm. O Lord, I need You, when the winds are blowing strong." With Jonah, we can commit with the Psalmist: "Because He hath inclined His ear unto me, therefore will I call upon Him as long as I live" (Psalm 116:2).

Transition: When the Tempter whispers, "Not here!" may we remember that there's a never a place as good as "here" to pray. When Jonah laid hold of God, He did so from a unique place indeed, teaching us that we can pray *anywhere*. Secondly, when we consider Jonah's predicament, we are reminded that we can pray *anytime*.

THE PREDICAMENT IN WHICH HE PRAYED (vv. 2-7).

In his second prayer (from the fish's belly), Jonah rehearses his experiences in the angry sea that led to his first prayer. His situation wasn't one, perhaps, that seemed naturally conducive to prayer. He was, after all, according to His own admission, not really on speaking terms with God (1:10).

Notice, Jonah wasn't a tender-hearted young man who was wrestling with God about whether he should preach or not; he wasn't an honest man struggling to make ends meet, but quietly beseeching God for provision; nor was he humble father begging God for wisdom to disciple his hard-headed oldest son. Had Jonah been in one of those situations, he may have been more immediate in his prayer. No, Jonah is an insolent follower of Yahweh who is behaving worse than the outright pagans, and is paying point-by-point for his rebellion. Jonah isn't tender and humble, looking to God; neither is he struggling and wrestling, but still waiting upon God. He's flat out fighting God! His predicament is due to his own obstinance.

If ever there was a time not to pray, that's it, right? After all, doesn't the Bible say, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18)? Perhaps Jonah thought, "How can I possibly pray to God when I've been so awful?" It's often in the predicament of chastening, when conviction begins to settle within us, that we sometimes hesitate to pray, with the Serpent's counsel ringing in our mind: "Not now! How can you possibly talk to God right now?"

Let's consider Jonah's severe predicament in more detail, and observe that in spite of that, he still prayed.

1. *Physical drowning*

Jonah describes his plight with some vivid language and sharp metaphors. Verse 2 is a kind of summary statement, in which he describes his watery experience as “affliction” in the “belly of hell” (lit. “belly of Sheol,” the place of the dead). In other words, he knew that he was as good as dead.

Verse 2 describes his being “cast” overboard “into the deep [waters], in the [middle] of the seas.” Once in the water, “the floods [ocean currents] compassed [Jonah] about,” as God caused “all [His] billows and waves” to sweep over Jonah. What a terrifying experience as one massive wave after another crashed over his head!

In verse 5, Jonah relates that he began to sink. The waters seemed to penetrate all the way through him (“to the soul”), the deep waters fully encompassed him, and soon the sea weed was “wrapped about [his] head.”

In verse 6, we find him having sunk to the very “bottom” of the ocean, where he was imprisoned within the inescapable “bars” of the earth. He knew that he would never again see the dry land or breath life-giving oxygen.

Jonah is drowning, but even though his “life was ebbing away” (NET, v. 7), he “remembered the LORD” and prayed (v. 7). His predicament of physical drowning, as a consequence of his sin, did not keep him from prayer.

2. *Spiritual death*

In another parallel to Christ’s experience, Jonah describes a worse predicament than his intense physical suffering. The most agonizing picture of Calvary is not the merciless beating, the crown of thorns, or the inhumane crucifixion. It is the harrowing cry of separation from the Godhead for the first time in eternity: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Jonah senses a similar, albeit much less actual or significant, separation from God. In verse 4, he wonders if he had been “cast out of [God’s] sight” and concludes that he “would never again see [God’s] holy temple!”² Nonetheless, when he dared hope for grace and

² NOTE: “I thought I had been banished from your sight, that I would never again see your holy temple!” in the NET. This reading is preferred because (1) it is the more difficult vocalization, (2) synonymous parallelism better fits the pattern in this psalm, (3) Jonah expresses no confidence in or desire for salvation until at “rock bottom,” which occurs after he sinks beginning in verse 5, and (4) chapter 2 adopts the structure of a psalm of declarative praise, which usually saves the hope and deliverance for after the delineation of peril (cf. Psalm 32, 34).

prayed for deliverance, God “brought [him] up” from the “corruption” of death itself (lit. the “Pit”). The severe, self-inflicted predicament actually drove Jonah to prayer.

Application: In the severe predicament of chapter 2, Jonah “prayed” (v. 1, 7), “called” upon the Lord (first “cried,” v. 2), “cried” out for help (second “cried,” v. 2), and “remembered” the Lord (v. 7), and the Lord “answered” (first “heard,” v. 2), “heard” (second “heard,” v. 2), and accepted (“came,” v. 7) Jonah. No matter what our situation, we can pray to God anytime, silencing the lies of our enemy that God won’t hear us right now. Whether you are dealing with the physical consequences of poor decisions, arrogant attitudes, selfish pursuits, and angry outbursts, or experiencing the guilt and fear of a broken relationship with your God (cf. Psalm 31:22), claim the promises of another Psalmist: “In my distress I called upon the LORD and cried unto my God; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry came before Him, even into His ears.” (Psalm 18:6). Whenever you humbly pray, God hears! So, pray!

Friend, if you still refuse to pray, it’s only because you remain calloused in pride or because the trouble is not big enough yet. Take care, proud and prayer-less rebel, you might miss the fish and may be forever destroyed! O the joy to the one who gives in to God’s storms and casts Himself upon the grace of God, and experiences the already prepared vessel of salvation (vv. 7; 1:17).

Transition: Another reason that we may still not pray, even after considering Jonah’s example of prayer any place and any time, is that we may doubt God’s willingness and ability to respond. “Not you!” may be another doubt cast in our minds by our Enemy. Having considered the place and predicament from which Jonah prayed, we must ask ourselves, “What gave Jonah the confidence and hope that God would hear Him?” After all he had done (or not done), the devilish whispers of ‘Not here!’ and ‘Not now!’ seem justified, for God wouldn’t hear the prayers of this runaway, rebel...or would He? It was that very question of hope, that glimmer of grace that Jonah claimed when he prayed. And so, we consider thirdly...

THE PRINCIPLE UPON WHICH HE PRAYED (vv. 8-9).

In verses 8-9, we come to the heart of Jonah’s second prayer. He’s reminisced concerning his first prayer that led to his fishy rescue. Now, in that fish’s stomach, he takes a moment to meditate and worship. Jonah has learned two main principles about His God; these lessons were the bedrock upon which Jonah built his prayer.

1. *Doctrinal Principle – God is a saving God! (v. 9)*

In a climactic shout, Jonah exclaims, “Salvation is of the LORD” (v. 9)! Jonah already knew this fundamental reality of God, and He rebelled

against it, not wanting God to show salvation to the Ninevites (cf. 4:2). Our God is a saving God! As soon as the problem of sin was introduced into His creation, God initiated the Gospel of restoring fallen mankind to Himself (cf. Genesis 3:15—the *Protoevangelium*). In Jesus, God expressed His saving nature in a name, for He was called “Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Jesus’ mission was “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10; I Timothy 1:15), and He never wavered from that mission, so that “He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him” (Hebrews 7:25).

While God is concerned (I Peter 5:7) about your physical, financial, family, employment, and educational problems, God yearns for the salvation of your soul from sin and the restoration of a relationship with you. So, for you who “through fear of death...[are] subject to bondage” in sin under the dominion of “him that had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14-15), Jesus offers deliverance from the penalty of sin through His own sin-paying, wrath-satisfying death in your place! Jesus saves! For you who continues to struggle under the guerilla warfare of sin, the Gospel reminds you of an ever present Savior who will give you “grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus continues to save! To the one who is wrestling with the decay of life and the pains of a cursed creation, God offers Himself as our Savior to deliver us “from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). When burdens are great and sorrows overflow, the Holy Spirit saves us from despair and purposelessness, helping our prayers and accomplishing God’s Gospel-work of Christlikeness within us (Romans 8:26-30). When life is meaningless and the future is cloudy, our Savior blazes through the fog with the reassurance, “I am come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

Our God saves! His name is “our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13), His desire is for “all men to be saved” (I Timothy 2:4-5), and His message is called the Gospel—the Good News that “unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). This fundamental principle is “of first importance” (I Corinthians 15:1-4)! This was the promise that anchored Jonah. No matter how hard and fast and far he ran, he could never escape the saving desire and ability of God, for God “is not willing that any should perish” (II Peter 3:9).

What was the principle that compelled Jonah to pray, even when the Devil and his own conscience bid him halt? It was the reality that His saving God was greater than his sin and punishment (I John 3:20).

2. **Practical Principle – I must seek His salvation! (v. 8)**

The truth of God’s saving nature should change us—it should change our pursuits, our desires, our perspective, our approach to life. It did now for Jonah, although he would continue to struggle living this out as chapter 4 will demonstrate. Nonetheless, having claimed the God of salvation and experiencing God’s saving grace, Jonah now suggests a simple principle of application—I must seek God’s salvation!

Verse 8 describes the old Jonah—the Jonah who failed to seek out the God of salvation. Jonah summarizes that kind of person as one who “observes lying vanities.” *Observe* means “to pay regard to”; what someone “observes” is that which means a lot to him and influences his decisions. A *lying vanity* is simply that which is empty, meaningless, and worthless; it often refers to idols. Understand the tragedy of this individual—that which means a lot to him and which regulates his choices is that which is empty, meaningless, and worthless. What sad self-deceit and folly! Jonah says that this individual, rather than gaining anything beneficial from this pursuit, is actually disadvantaged because he “forsakes his own mercy,” that is, the mercy that God wants to bestow upon him. The options, then, are shown to be only two, and they are mutual opposites—either seek the God of salvation who will satisfy you with mercy, or pursue anything else and it will prove to be meaningless and empty.

Opposite this old Jonah is the newly transformed Jonah of verse 9. The relentless love of God has captured him, arrested his attention, and enflamed his love for and loyalty to God. He worships God, both with formal sacrifice and with a recommitment to faithful service. The proper response to the saving character of God is never static. Rather, it’s public, verbal, grateful, obedient, sacrificial, and life-dominating!

Application: Jonah was compelled to pray not because he felt worthy or because it was his ritual. Jonah prayed because He claimed the saving nature of God, toward enemies and runaways alike, and because He had learned the emptiness of all other alternatives. Friend, when you feel that God will not hear your prayer, look to the cross and remember the heart of the Savior who prayed with His dying breath, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Only the Gospel—the history of the God-man Jesus Christ procuring and offering salvation for all who will come to Him by faith—only that Great Principle will give you the courage to pray when the Enemy whispers, “Not you!” Great is the commitment of the Savior to His own: “The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart, and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivereth him out of them all...The LORD redeemeth the soul of his servants, and none of them that trust in Him shall be desolate” (Psalm 34:18-22).

Transition: What happened when from the place of predicament, Jonah claimed the principle of God's saving heart and prayed? The answer is in verse 10. So, in conclusion, let us lastly consider from this passage...

THE PROVISION AFTER HE PRAYED (v. 1:17; 2:10; 3:1-2).

This has already been referenced, so we'll briefly summarize it. God answered Jonah's prayers!

1. God rescued Him (v. 10; cf. 1:17).

In response to Jonah's first prayer of surrender, God rescued him with the fish (1:17). After Jonah's second prayer of worship, God spat up Jonah on dry land, completing that deliverance. Jeremiah 33:3 encourages, "Call unto Me, and I will answer thee and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not."

2. God re-sent Him (3:1-2).

Our chapter ends with Jonah back on dry land. Shortly after his salvation, we read in 3:1-2, "And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.'" Once again, God commissions Jonah to preach the Great Principle of His saving nature to the Ninevites. He even graciously promises to supply the sermon notes ("the preaching that I bid thee"); He just still wants Jonah to go.

Application: Psalm 34:6 exclaims, "This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles." Such is the provision of God when we pray! His power is great, His resources unlimited, and His grace abundant.

CONCLUSION

We have a relationship with this God...why would we not talk to Him? If it's pride, self-sufficiency, or disobedience, I trust we'll learn the lessons the easy way today, and allow Jonah to convince us of the blessings of surrender. If it's the deceitful voice of the Adversary, whispering "Not here!" "Not now!" "Not you!", may we be ever mindful that "greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world" (I John 4:4). Claim the power and love of your great Savior, and seek His satisfying salvation in prayer (Jeremiah 29:13)!