

Jonah's Prayer

Does prayer come naturally to you? Do you instinctually seek God during your day? What do you pray about? Jonah was an odd man. He was a prophet and yet he desired to flee from “the presence of the LORD” (1:3,10). To his shame, a *pagan* man must urge Jonah to pray, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God!” (1:6). Later, inside a great fish, Jonah prays again. The moods and topics of this prayer are recorded in the second chapter of his short book. There are some lessons here!

1. In my distress I called... (2:2)

Inside the warm, slippery, dark digestive system of that great fish, Jonah begins to call on God. He has lost control of his life. He is desperate. This prayer marked a turning point in Jonah's life. What is needed to make you seek God earnestly in prayer?

2. I have been banished... (2:4)

Jonah wanted to run away from the Lord's presence. Now, inside the fish, he begins to experience how awful it is to feel distant, alienated, or banished from God's presence. As he prays, he listens, he thinks. He begins to see God's hand in what he is living. The sovereignty of God ceases to be a controversial academic idea. God was behind the storm. Although the sailors “threw him overboard” (1:15), he recognized that “You [God] hurled me into the deep” (2:3). In your crisis God may feel far away. But He isn't. You may think that God is not interested in your small life. But He is. Your sovereign God is closer, more concerned and more involved in our lives than what we realize.

3. I remembered you... (2:7)

As Jonah became aware that his death was near, he remembered God. Human beings are prone to be religious. We Christians are no exception. Is your heart devoted to your theology, your ministry, your church, your experiences... or to God Himself? Modern society encourages us to keep on running. There is little time and energy left to reflect on the direction of our running. The life of King Nebuchadnezzar, like that of Jonah, changed for the good when they stopped and looked up: “I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High” (Daniel 4:34). Do you need to stop and look up?

4. My prayer rose to you (2:7)

Jonah's prayer is written in Hebrew poetic form. Some refer to it as a psalm. The other three

chapters in Jonah's book are normal narrative. Jonah had no claim on God's attention. He had chosen to walk away from God. And yet he knew deep inside that He is a “gracious and compassionate God” (4:2). As David put it, “a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps 51:17). Jonah knew that his desperate prayer pleading for mercy from within the fish would not go unheard. From the depths of the sea it reached “your holy temple” – a picture of God's dwelling place. Our earnest and desperate prayers always reach our Father's heart.

5. The voice of thanksgiving... (2:9)

Jonah's prayer is desperate, it is thoughtful, it is humble, but it is also hopeful. Jonah has hope because he is pleading to a good God, a God that delights to express His grace (2:8). Knowing that he is heard moves Jonah to be thankful. The apostolic instruction is, “give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thes 5:18). Thankful people are happy people. If we only express gratitude when God responds in line with our expectations, we shall restrict our joy and happiness. Jonah began to thank God while still inside the fish. You can too.

6. I will sacrifice to You (2:9)

Once sailors threw Jonah overboard, the raging sea grew calm. “At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him” (1:16). Why did these men offer the Lord sacrifices? Were they thankful? Did they fear God's punishment? The death of Christ is the supreme sacrifice. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). Moved by *gratitude*, not fear, we can now offer Him our time, our resources, our worship, our lives.

7. I will pay what I have vowed (2:9)

At conversion we make a vow. We repent and surrender our lives to Jesus. We acknowledge that He has bought us, that our life belongs to Him – “You are not your own” (1Cor 6:19-20). It is the most profound decision we ever make. The challenge is to live in the light of that vow. When living a crisis, we may feel tempted to bargain with God. But making vows, oaths and promises to God and fellow humans can become a burdensome way to live. Aware of our weakness, the Lord Jesus encourages us to keep life simple: “But I tell you, do not swear at all... Simply let your Yes be Yes, and your No, No” (Matt 5:33-37).

Pray. He listens. And that is a privilege!