

## The Healing Power Of Thanksgiving

### JONAH 2

By Phillip G. Kayser

Intro:

Today's lesson is on the healing power of thanks in Jonah's life. Before I deal with that theme, I want you to notice how bad off Jonah really was in terms of depression. If you have never experienced depression or never worked with those who are depressed, it is very hard to relate to Jonah. Many times Christians just shake their heads at Jonah and wonder why he was so hard hearted. He wasn't hard hearted. Chapter 1 shows his concern for the Phoenicians. While he doesn't want the Assyrians saved, he saves the Phoenicians. While he was insensitive to the plight of Nineveh, he was very sensitive to the sailors, teaching them about his God, so that when they pray to God they pray to Jehovah and repent of their sins. Jonah was not hard hearted; he was depressed.

Jonah shows several of the classic symptoms for depression. 1) He withdraws from people and complains of his isolation. 2) he is downcast and blue, 3) he feels overwhelmed with what God wants him to do; he just doesn't think he can do it, 4) he sleeps when he should have action. In fact, in chapter 1 he is sleeping through a ship sinking storm and the captain has to shake him awake. (However, insomnia can ironically also be a symptom.) 5) he shows no desire to eat, 6) he excuses his irresponsibility, 7) he has lost all desire for living. In chapter 1 he insists that the mariners throw him overboard. In 4:3 he says, **"Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"** 4:8 says, **Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."** He is so depressed that he feels like he can't go on living. And chapter by chapter God forces Jonah to confront the inner hurts and the bitterness which has led him to depression.

What was he bitter over? Some of the reasons for his bitterness are it hinted at in 3:8. This verse is part of the king of Nineveh's decree for repentance. **But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.** The king picks out evil way and violence. Now if you look at the Biblical and the archeological evidence of that time you will find that the evil and the violence were horrifying. Of all the ancient peoples, Assyria was the most barbaric, the most cruel and the most feared. Over the years I have subscribed to an archeology magazine, and the Assyrian artifacts that have been dug up are filled with depictions of the most barbaric tortures that they inflicted upon conquered nations. Even during their leisure time, they liked to look at statues, frescoes and toys of

torture. Some of them are absolutely horrifying. They liked to skin people alive slowly just to relish the screams of pain. They tried to drag the torture out as long as they could to get more enjoyment from the screams. You might cross reference Nahum chapter 3 where it talks about all the nations rejoicing when Nineveh is destroyed because of her cruelty.

Now here is where it hits Jonah personally. (And this is only hinted at, so I can't be dogmatic. But it seems like a logical reading between the lines.) If you read 2 Kings chapter 14, you will find that Jonah lived in Gath Hopher. Assyria had attacked the region where Jonah lived. We know how Assyria treated those they fought against – making cruel examples of what happens to those who resist, by way of torture. So here is a possible reconstruction of what had happened: Jonah was one of the survivors who had probably witnessed the cruel torture and slow deaths of many friends and family members. Burned into his memory were the screams of tortured children as the Assyrians laughed. Every time the Assyrians came to his mind his emotions churned with the memory of ghastly, demonic cruelty. And it would take a great deal to heal Jonah of this pain and to enable him to come to the place where he could love his enemy.

By the time he writes this book he has come to love his enemies and in doing so has conquered the hurts that brought on his severe depression. Step by step God brought Jonah out of his depressed state. And we can't look at all the steps that God took.

There are so many lessons that we could draw out of this book. For example, this book illustrates the principle that depressed people frequently need intervention. Jonah wanted to crawl into a hole, but God wouldn't let him. Jonah wanted to avoid his pain, God helped to deal with his pain. Jonah felt overwhelmed with the task; God took him through it step at a time. Jonah tried to avoid action, God forced him to take action. Jonah sought to excuse his irresponsibility, but God kept reminding him of his responsibility and wouldn't let him off the hook? **Is it right for you to be angry?** Jonah saw only the negative. God points out the positive sides of life, especially in chapter 4. God helps Jonah refocus the positive pity he had for a plant to having pity for those whom he hates. In many different ways God shows his love to Jonah by bringing him out of his depression. So this is a great book for training those who counsel the depressed.

This morning I just want to look at one facet of Jonah's healing, and that is Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving. Giving thanks when you do not feel like it is a God-ordained means of inner healing and strength. Now it may not make sense, but it works. Many people have testified to the supernatural healing they have experienced as a result of persistent thanksgiving. In the

New Testament, Paul had commanded **giving thanks always for all things**. Paul doesn't want us to wait till the depression is over.

Now where does Jonah start? Frequently depressed people have lost so much will to live that they can't even pray. They try. Sometimes all they can do is to cry out to God, "Help me." During times like that it is helpful to read the Psalms or have someone else read an appropriate psalm to you, or to read out a prayer to God that someone else has composed. This is in effect what Jonah did in chapter 2. Almost every verse in this prayer is taken straight from the Psalms with a phrase or two added which personalizes it. Jonah had spent much time meditating on the Psalms and it is obvious that he found the Psalms to be extremely comforting. If you ever come to the place where you have a hard time praying, try praying the Psalms. It will give organization to your emotions. They can often serve as the jumping off place for a short prayer of your own. Or even pray a prayer that someone else has composed, like the *Valley of Vision* book that has a collection of Puritan prayers, or perhaps some of the Anglican prayers. Prayers that are recited from memory or read can be accepted by God as well as those that are spontaneous.

Next question: When does Jonah start his thanksgiving? He doesn't wait until he feels better. He doesn't wait until he is delivered. Verse 1 says, **Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. And he said.** He is thanking God in the belly of the whale. Verse 10 indicates that it was only after this prayer of thanksgiving that the fish spit Jonah out. The New American Standard Bible says, **Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.** The Septuagint translates it, **Upon this, a command was given by the Lord to the fish...** God wants us thanking him and praising him even while we are cast down

Two of the psalms that Jonah quotes are Psalms 42 and 43, both of which deal with depression and in both of which the author determines to praise God even though he doesn't feel like it. It's like he grabs himself by the scruff of the neck and says, "Self, stop it! Stop being moody about everything that is bad. I will still praise God! I will still thank Him!"

I've given this illustration before, but since it illustrates this issue so well, I want to use it again. Years ago my brothers and I were coming home from an all day climb in the mountains of Ethiopia and the fog was closing in on us. We didn't want to wait it out because night was coming on and the animals were starting to come out. So we were afraid and just kept going. In fact, very stupidly we started running because of fear of how close it was getting to night fall. We couldn't see but just a few feet ahead of us, but we were so confident we were on a familiar home stretch that we kept running.

All of a sudden I tripped over something that shouldn't be there, and fell down skinning my knee and hurting my hip. I got up complaining to myself, nursing my wounds and feeling sorry for myself. By the time my brothers caught up to me the fog suddenly lifted slightly and I saw that I was a few feet from a huge cliff. You can bet that I was thankful for the hard fall that I had experienced. I was thanking God over and over again for tripping me in that painful way. I just couldn't get over God's Providence. I kept saying, "Thank you Lord, thank you."

My thesis for this morning is that God wants you to have that kind of thanksgiving for your falls, even before the fog lifts; even before you realize why God has brought your pain, discouragement or difficulty. It is rare that God lifts the fog so that we can see the cliff that we avoided. God wants us to live our Christians life by faith, and not by sight. He wants us to be thankful in the fog and not just after the fog has lifted. And when we do that, God brings joy and healing and spiritual power. It may not make sense, but this is one of the steps that God has ordained to help us through our depression. Our act of thanking God when we don't feel thankful is really an act of faith that receives and channels God's spiritual provisions into our hearts. We may say that we have faith in God's purposes, but if we are unthankful, we have no faith in God's good sovereignty. The ability to thank God in all things is an indicator of whether faith in Romans 8:28 is present or not. If we really believe Romans 8:28, then we will be able to thank God in any circumstance.

What enabled Paul and Silas to thank God in prison even while the dried blood is still caked on their backs? Ephesians 5:20 is a key verse that has brought healing and strength to me during those times when I have been in the fog and had no idea why God has let me stumble into pain. But by faith I have thanked God, and He has brought His strength to deal with the pain. That verse reads, **giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.** He says there is never a time when we should lose our thanksgiving: "giving thanks always." And there is nothing that is exempted from thanks: "giving thanks always for all things." That includes giving thanks for the difficulty you have been experiencing this past week; that includes even those most wretched of times when you feel like you are in the fish's belly; that includes facing the pain of the past like God forced Jonah to do.

So the first step is to thank God where you can, even if that means reading someone else's prayer or praying a Psalm. Jonah was so depressed that he didn't know how to even word himself, so he uses the words that someone else composed in the Psalms. You can do the same.

The second step is to do it right away. Jonah thanked God before the hurt had gone away. Jonah began thanksgiving even while he was depressed, and even while he was in the fishes belly.

A third thing that can make our thanksgiving a reality is developing an eternal perspective. We so frequently measure our pains and our gains by time rather than by eternity. God shook Jonah free of that by making him face death. *That* will make you start thinking about eternity. Verse 2 says, **I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, and He answered me. Out of the depths of Sheol I cried.** [he either died or at least had a near death experience. I believe he literally died and his soul went down into Sheol below the earth. But others take it metaphorically.] **For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me; All your billows and Your waves passed over me. Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple. The waters encompassed me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head, I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; [And then verse 6 describes the rescue by the fish] Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God.**

There is nothing quite like the prospect of dying to make a person realize that his concerns, frustrations, fears, hopes and priorities in life and the things he has gotten bitter over have been totally out of balance when measured by eternity. Moments before you die you're not going to be regretting that you didn't reach your financial goals, or that somebody robbed you of \$200, or that someone embarrassed you in front of a crowd. You're not going to be saying, "Oh, how I wish I had gotten a nicer house or boat." Right before death the only things you are going to be concerned about are those things that will last for eternity. Right before death most people have regrets that they didn't spend more time with their family; they regret that they weren't involved in evangelism and that they didn't develop their relationship with God more. For once they are beginning to measure life by eternal standards. Thanksgiving helps us to do that because thanksgiving helps us look at life through God's eyes, and such eternal perspective helps us to maintain a habit of thanksgiving. It's a circular relationship where thanksgiving feeds an eternal perspective and an eternal perspective further feeds thanksgiving. And God's Word says we shouldn't have to wait for death to think about eternity. We should always have an eternal perspective. We should always measure everything we do by whether or not this will count for eternity. If you are not a believer, you are not looking at life with an eternal perspective. Jesus said, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?"

A fourth thing that helped Jonah be thankful for that slimy, mucous filled stomach of a fish was that he knew God was sovereign. You can't thank God for all things if God doesn't control all things. He knew that in the boat that this was God's storm, and he told the sailors that. He knew this was God's fish. He says in verse 3, **All Your billows and Your waves passed over me.** Jonah knew that nothing but the Sovereignty of God could have put him in the fishes belly, and nothing but the sovereignty of God would be able to get him out. But Jonah also knew the reality of Romans 8:28. He said in chapter 4, **I know that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, one who relents from doing harm.** It didn't look like God was good, but his theology enabled him to give thanks by faith.

Thanksgiving also has the power to move you from self-seeking, self-centered idolatry to servanthood. In verse 9 he says, **But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed.** Thanksgiving is hard. That is why it is called a sacrifice. But in the verse before he implies that when we only do what we want to do, when we are self-seeking, we are idolaters, and we miss out on the mercy that we desire. Mercy doesn't come to idolaters. It comes to those who seek God, not to those who are self-seeking. Thanksgiving is the very opposite of being a self-seeking idolater, and God blesses.

A further benefit of thanking God is that it helps us to focus upon the fact that our emotional security and help are totally from the Lord. So often we get down because people have hurt us or people have let us down or frustrated us. His focus on God's sovereignty helped Him to realize that God was really the one who threw him into the ocean. Verse 3 says, **For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas.** But he ends the Psalm by meditating on the realization that **Salvation is of the Lord.** He would stop looking for salvation from men and from things. Those were all bound to let him down and discourage him. He would look to the Lord alone for salvation from his problems.

One last benefit of thanksgiving is deliverance. This shouldn't be the only point that we focus upon, but it is interesting that Jonah was delivered at the very point that he came to thanksgiving. Verse 10 says, **So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.** Thanksgiving delivers. It is not always a physical deliverance, but there is always a spiritual deliverance. For forty days Jonah was emotionally stable. God's work in his life enabled him to preach for those forty days. It was only after Nineveh repented that his old thoughts and feelings began to bring on the depression again. And this can so easily happen – people will get over their depression, only to start feeling badly again because they aren't disciplining

their thoughts. I dug out an old saying that goes like this: "To praise God for our miseries - ends them. To praise God for our blessings - extends them." Thanksgiving is a powerful tool for spiritual healing, but we must use it. Just to review the steps.

The first step is to thank God where you can, even if it means reading or reciting your thanks.

The second step is to do it right away, even in the midst of the pain.

The third step is to relate what you are thanking God for to eternity. Measure it by eternity. Your thanksgiving will become a lot more real when you do that. In light of eternity, the pain you are going through diminishes. As Paul said, it is a momentary and light affliction compared to the eternal weight of glory awaiting us.

The fourth step is to remind yourself that God is sovereign over your problem. Since He is a good God, this will give you a rational basis for thanking God. Meditate on His sovereignty and include that as a reason for thanksgiving.

The fifth step is to take the effort or what Jonah calls the sacrifice to give thanksgiving. I know that you won't feel like it. I rarely do initially. It is a sacrifice of thanksgiving. It doesn't come easy. Sacrifices rarely do. But they do pay off.

The sixth step is to put aside other saviors and other sources of security and to realize that God alone is your source of salvation. Too many times we look to vitamins to be our savior, or food, or medicine or man. And though God uses means, we must recognize that salvation is of the Lord. Thank Him for that.

Having done all that, God has promised to deliver you. It may not be in the way you anticipated, but He will deliver you.

That is exactly the promise of Psalm 50:14. It says "**Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, ...in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me.**" God will bring the exact rescue or deliverance that we need, and through our thanksgiving we will honor Him. God says, those who honor me, I will honor.

We have seen many spiritual benefits to the discipline of thanksgiving and I urge each one of you to begin thanking God for all things, even when you do not feel like it.

# The Healing Power Of Thanksgiving

## Jonah 2

By Phillip G. Kayser • November 18, 2007

### Intro: **Jonah was depressed not rebellious**

- 1) He withdraws from people and complains of his isolation
- 2) he is downcast and blue
- 3) he feels overwhelmed with what God wants him to do
- 4) he sleeps when he should have action
- 5) he shows no desire to eat
- 6) he excuses his irresponsibility
- 7) he has lost all desire for living.

→ God forces Jonah to confront the bitterness that has led him to depression.

- Sources of his bitterness—hinted at in 3.8, with Nahum 3 and 2 Kings 14:

Extreme violence of Assyrian culture, which Jonah may have personally experienced in his youth when they conquered his homeland.

- Many lessons in this book—only look at one facet of Jonah’s healing, his prayer of thanksgiving.

### I. **How to pray with Thanksgiving.**

#### A. **Where to start.**

1. Cry out, “Help me.” Jonah 2.2; but don’t stop there—by faith start thanking God to change your perspective. This shifts your focus from the difficulty at hand to God and his greatness.
2. The Psalms. Much of Jonah’s prayer is from this source.
3. Others’ prayers. Ex. *Valley of Vision*, Anglican prayer book.

#### B. **When to start.**

1. Don’t wait till you feel better.
  - a. Jonah 2.1, 2.10
  - b. Jonah quotes Psalms 42 and 43—praise God even when you don’t feel like it.
  - c. Story of being thankful before the fog lifts, not just after.
    - (1). Do you really believe Romans 8.28?
    - (2). Do you really live out Ephesians 5.20?
2. Do it right away.
  - a. Before the hurt has gone away.
  - b. While you are depressed.

#### C. **What perspective to have.**

1. Must focus on the eternal, go beyond the here-and-now. Jonah 2.2
2. The prospect of death makes us confront the eternal.
3. Attitude of thanksgiving helps us see life through God’s eyes.

#### D. **What God to believe in.**

1. God is sovereign.
  - a. The God of the Bible is in charge.
    - (1). Scripture commands us to thank God for all things.
    - (2). This is a nonsensical command if God is not in control of all things.

### II. **The Results of praying with Thanksgiving.**

- A. Move from self-centeredness to servanthood. Jonah 2.9
- B. Move from dependence on self or blame of others to dependence on God. Jonah 2.3
- C. Move from despair to deliverance. Jonah 2.10

### III. **Conclusion—Psalm 50.14**