

Please turn in your Bibles to Jonah chapter 2. When we last left off in this story we saw Jonah cast into the water and swallowed up by a great fish which the Lord had prepared. And this great fish was prepared for Jonah as a means of salvation from the watery grave which he had found himself in, but it was also prepared a means of discipline, to bring Jonah back to the Lord. So now this prophet is no longer in the depths of the sea, but in the belly of the fish. That is where we will pick up our reading this afternoon. So hear now the Word of our Lord from Jonah chapter 2 beginning at verse 1.

Read Jonah 2:1-5

Pray

I'm sure that most if not all of you here have experienced great times of distress, times of turmoil, times in which you were facing the biggest trial of life you have ever experienced. In those times so often we see one of two responses. Either we tend to get overwhelmed by the circumstances of life and get bogged down by what is going on so much so that it seems to be an inescapable storm much like Jonah experienced, or we tend to recognize that we are incapable of facing whatever is coming our way and we turn unto the Lord and cry out unto Him for His help. Many times both of these responses occur. We go through the first response, trying to figure out a way to make it better, trying to find a means of escape, until eventually we come to realize that we are helpless and so we cry out to God for His aid. This is essentially what we see in the actions of Jonah. This great prophet fled from the presence of Jehovah. He didn't want to obey the calling of the Lord and so he did whatever he could to ensure that he was free of the clutches of the Almighty. But the Lord would not stand for that. So He hurled this great tempest upon the sea which threatened to destroy the ship which Jonah thought was his means of escape. Then once it came to light that he was the one responsible for the great tempest, he was cast into the sea, sinking lower and lower into the depths. Jonah tried to do what he could to avoid what had been brought his way,

but he soon came to realize that there was nothing he could do to escape the calling of the Lord. And just when you thought it was the end, “Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” And here in the belly of this great fish Jonah finally cries out to the Lord. We’ll consider this by looking at first, Jonah’s prayer; next, Jonah’s experience; and finally, Jonah’s hope.

First, let us consider Jonah’s prayer. We read in the first two verses, “Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish’s belly, And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.” Jonah prayed. This is a man who has been strangely silent when it comes to communicating with the Lord. He is not just a man though, he is a prophet of the Lord. And yet through all of what happened, through all the running and fleeing, through the storm and being confronted by the mariners, never once did Jonah open his mouth in prayer; that is, until now. Finally the prophet prays. Matthew Henry writes, “He had been fleeing from God, but now he sees the folly of it, and returns to him; by prayer he draws near to that God whom he had gone aside from, and engages his heart to approach him.” How often do we find ourselves in a similar situation where so much is going on around us, so much that ought to bring us to our knees, and yet we neglect to cry out unto the Lord. It’s as though for some reason your soul would rather do anything else that turn to the Lord in prayer. I know this is speculation, but imagine if Jonah had prayed sooner. Would he have been in the situation he was in if he had prayed unto Jehovah when all the pagan sailors were praying to their false gods? We don’t know if it would have changed anything, but it is shocking that he didn’t. So often we do as Jonah and wait until the very last second to turn our hearts to the Lord and pour them out to Him in prayer. Do not wait, dear friends. Cry unto God now, before things get worse, or even now while things are going well.

And notice that Jonah prays unto the Lord in an intimate way. “Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God.” It’s not simply a cry of desperation unto the Lord, but it is a cry of faith that Jonah brings forth. He prays unto the Lord his God. He is taking possession of the Lord as his own. No longer is he fleeing from the Lord’s presence, but he now embraces the Lord’s presence. Jehovah is his God. Jonah prays by faith grounded on God’s almightiness. He prays with assurance and hope of faith, looking to God as his God; if the power of the Lord and His mercy keep Jonah alive in the fish’s belly, the same power and mercy can deliver him out of this danger, and the prophet believes he is kept there for an enlargement as miraculous as his confinement was. He says that he cried out of the belly of hell. It is very likely Jonah is taking the words of Psalm 18 on his lips, “The sorrows of death compassed me, and the floods of ungodly men made me afraid. The sorrows of hell compassed me about: the snares of death prevented me.” To Jonah the belly of this fish was the very depths of Sheol, the grave, hell. And yet even from the lowest place he prayed unto the Lord. There is nothing you are going through, no lows which you will ever experience, that would be so much as to prevent you from being able to pray unto the Lord your God. Friends, you could be in the very depths of Sheol with the sorrows of hell compassing you about, and yet you are not too far from the Lord to pray unto Him.

And hear the words of Jonah as a comfort to you in your lowest point as well, “I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.” The Lord hears the prayers of His people. How comforting is that. Jonah was in the belly of a great fish in the depths of the sea in the belly of hell, and yet when he prayed unto the Lord his God the Lord heard his prayers. Once again we see the words of the psalmist on his lips, this time from Psalm 116, “I love the Lord, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications. Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live. The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found

trouble and sorrow. Then called I upon the name of the Lord; O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.” And just a note here, Jonah does not have Scripture with him when he is going through the darkest time of his life, and yet it is the Psalms which are on his lips. Oh, that you would be so immersed in Scripture, so well versed in the Psalms, that when the sorrows of death compass you, and the pains of hell gat hold upon you, that it would be those words of Christ on your lips as you pray unto the Lord. And it’s important to note that Jonah writing that the Lord heard his prayers came after his deliverance from the belly of the fish. Oftentimes the Lord hears our prayers but doesn’t make it known to us in the moment. It is only after He has brought us through that we see truly that the Lord of hosts was with us through it all.

But if Jonah’s experience in the moment was not the comfort of the Lord hearing his prayer, what was his experience? We see it in verses 3 and 5, “For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me... The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.” He was cast into the deep, into the midst of the seas. The floods had overtaken him and the billows and waves had come over him. Here we see a great description of the scene which Jonah has been placed in, showing the terror of the sea and the violence which he was experiencing. And once again it is Psalm 42 on his lips in recounting this, “Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me.” He was trapped in this watery grave with no hope of escape. And as if to confirm this he speaks of the weeds wrapped around his head. It’s as though he is saying there could be no means of escape because even the seaweeds were entangling him, tying him up so as to keep him from being able to anything but sink lower and lower. And then suddenly it all ceases with the giant gulp of this great fish. But now Jonah is in the belly of hell, experiencing the closest thing on earth which would match that which he desired so greatly in the beginning of chapter one, to be out of the presence of the Lord. But we know in

reality that is not the case. The Lord was there with Jonah in the belly of the fish. He knew now more than ever the reality of Psalm 139:7-8, “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.”

And Jonah knew this even when he was in the belly of the fish. Not only was the Lord there with him, but He was the one who caused all of this to take place. Remember how I said in the very first sermon in this series that a constant recurring theme throughout this book is the sovereignty of God. Here we see it again. “For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me.” His mind does not go back to the mariners as the ones who cast him into the sea, but instead he recognizes that it was the Lord who cast him into the deep. Calvin writes, “Jonah did not then think of the sailors and the rest who had cast him into the sea; but his mind was fixed on God: this is the reason why he says, Thou, Lord, hadst cast me into the deep, into the heart of the sea; and then, Thy billows, Thy waves He does not here regard the nature of the sea; but he bestows, as I have already said, all his thoughts on God, and acknowledges that he had to do with him.” He calls them God’s billows and His waves, not only because He made them (the sea is His, and He made it), and because He rules them (for even the winds and the seas obey Him), but because He had now commissioned them against Jonah, and limited them, and ordered them to afflict and terrify him, but not to destroy him. Here we see the sovereignty of God over His creation to be used as instruments for the chastisement of His wayward children.

Friends, I don’t know everything that you may be going through. I don’t know if what your circumstances of life right now seem as though you have been cast into the deep, in the midst of the seas. You may feel as though the flood have compassed you about and all the billows and waves have passed over you. But even that is the case I want you to know that there is nothing that you will go

through that was not prepared beforehand and sovereignly controlled by the mighty hand of God. Know that He is the one who is in control of all things. They are His billows and His waves. And if He is the one who is in control then you have nothing to fear. He will be the one to provide for you in your time of need. He will be the one to provide for you a great escape in His due timing. Trust in the Lord. Rest in His promises that He will never leave you nor forsake you. Cling to the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." Let that be your experience.

And so finally, we see Jonah's hope. Look with me at verse 4, "Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple." I am cast out of thy sight; cut off from all hope of life among men; rejected, forsaken, and as it were forgotten of my God, and left by this death to pass to a worse death. He was overcome with a sense of the present danger from God's displeasure and is almost carried away with a despair of ever seeing the face of God again with comfort. In this moment he is embodying the words of Psalm 31:22, "For I said in my haste, I am cut off from before thine eyes: nevertheless thou heardest the voice of my supplications when I cried unto thee." And yet in the midst of this despair he has hope. Sinclair Ferguson says, "Wherefore before he kicked against the pricks of conscience (which would have restrained him from his private persecution of God), and fled from God's presence (Jon. 1:3, 10), now he fled to God's presence." What and incredible account this is, that a man who once forsook the blessing of the Lord and fled from His presence, now longs for the blessing of the Lord and looks forward with anticipation to be in His presence. Oh, what a tremendous work the Lord can do the heart of a wayward child to bring him back unto Him. It is as though Jonah is that prodigal son whom the Lord used the means of his own rebellion to bring him back to the Father.

And so now Jonah has this hope, a hope that he will once again be in the presence of God. He says with longing anticipation “yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.” He is remembering the blessing he had in Israel and longing for it just as David did in Psalm 42:4, “When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday.” He says he will yet look again unto the Lord’s holy temple, because it is the temple of the Lord, the house of God (as Psalm 42 says) which is the place in which the special presence of the Lord is more intimately experienced. He is saying that now instead of wanting to flee from the presence of the Lord he has hope that one day he will get to experience that special presence once again. And so God was able to bring Jonah back from the path which led only to death and destruction and put him on the path which leads to the glorious presence of the God. And it was not an easy turning of Jonah. It took the most violent means imaginable, the most terrifying scenario he could ever have to go through, in order for the Lord to bring him back. But friends, Jehovah is faithful to His people and will always bring them back.

And so it is with us as well. God is able to use means to bring us back to Himself, whether they be undramatic means or means as dramatic as those He used in bringing back Jonah. He knows the way to bring us back. We must allow Him to be the judge of what is necessary to restore us to His presence. What is important is that He brings us back to live in His presence and to know both the shame and the joy of the restoration of His grace towards us. And so we must be convinced that what is most important to us, in our personal lives, in our corporate lives as the body of Christ, in our families, in our evangelism, and in our worship, is the presence of God. All other things are secondary and should serve this great end. Far too often the reason for our waywardness is because we have fled from the presence of the Lord. Far too often those who are experiencing the greatest storms of this life are in the midst of that storm because they have fled from the Lord’s presence, they have

forsaken His house, and they have boarded a ship bound to Tarshish. Friends, if you are His, the Lord will bring you back to Him. There is hope in the midst of the tempest. You too can say you will look again toward His holy temple. Trust in Him, and He will restore you into His presence.

Brothers and sisters, this cry of Jonah seems very similar to our own in times of distress and despair. Recognize what it is that you are going through and why it is that you are going through it. See your own fault in it if there be any. But more importantly see that you are helpless to do anything on your own. Cry out to the Lord. Pray unto the Lord your God and He will hear your prayer and answer it according to His will. Do not despair for there is hope. Find your rest in Him.