

Text: Jonah 2

Theme: Unusual Prayer Chamber

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Holy Communion Service on 14/02/2016 at 10.30am

Historicity of Jonah

Some people have argued that the book of Jonah was a fiction story for children, but that is not the truth. Jonah was a historical figure. He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II who was a king in Israel (the northern kingdom) during the first half of the 8th century BC. **(See 2 Kings 14:25)**. Jonah 1:1 also identifies the prophet as Jonah, son of Amittai. Christ also refers to Jonah as a historical figure in the New Testament. See Matthew 12:40. The book of Jonah shows us important principles about the sovereignty of God. What happens when God wants a person to do something, but the person doesn't want to do it? Jonah shows us that God has a way of bringing us to the place where we want what He wants by appreciating His grace shown to us when we least deserved it.

Last week in Jonah 1, we saw how Jonah did not go east to Nineveh on the Tigris River. Instead, he headed for Tarshish (probably in Spain). God sent a storm against the ship. When the prayers of the crew prove useless, the crew asked what might still the storm, Jonah said, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the storm will become calm for you" (1:12). Shame and remorse must have made Jonah offer himself to be thrown into the sea.

We notice that it took extreme measures to get Jonah to a place of repentance. And so, he's in a fish... been there for 3 days, and he prays and God answers. That's good news brothers and sisters! God hears the prayer of those who have run, but then repent. When you've run and run and you finally hit rock bottom and you start facing the consequences of your running, God is there waiting for you to turn to Him. You say, "Why does God wait?" Well; I'll tell you what I think. I think it's because we sometimes have to get to the point where we see the truth of the situation. You see; the reality is that we don't have any leverage with God. We don't! We don't have any leverage when things are going well, and we don't when things are going bad, but it's only in those times when things are going bad that we fully realize this truth. And here's the Biblical truth. God doesn't owe any of us His blessings. He doesn't owe any of us salvation. Someone once observed: "It's amazing that when you read through Scripture, that so few are saved." And I say, "No, it's amazing that any are saved. Because we all like sheep have gone astray, there are none righteous, no not one."

Jonah sinks in the water. And what happens?

The first thing that happens is not the appearance of a great fish to swallow Jonah; that is the second thing. Before the fish comes there was the cry of distress. Even though Jonah was aware of his guilt and that he deserved death, he had surrendered himself to the judgement of God. He's suffering the consequences of his running. He realizes that he can't blame anyone. He can't blame God. God had made it clear what Jonah was supposed to do, and so he repents and prays. And God shows Jonah grace.

However, in the moment when death was imminent, he remembered that the God whom he had served so imperfectly was still "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repenting of evil" (4:2). And he cried out to the Lord for mercy. And then the Lord appointed a great fish for Jonah's rescue. The Lord had mercy on his prophet and saved him miraculously in a fish's belly.

Chapter 2 is what Jonah prayed while still conscious in the fish. He recounts his cry of distress in the water and lifts a voice of thanks for deliverance. We will look at this chapter under six main headings:

1. **God hears His children's cry when they are in distress in spite of their guilt.**
2. **God is not only quick to hear us when we repent... He's also in the midst of the circumstances that will bring us to repentance.**
3. **God answers us and delivers us from impossible circumstances.**
4. **God answers His children's cries of distress in the nick of time.**
5. **God answers our cries of distress in stages, not all of which are comfortable.**
6. **God answers our cry of distress in order to win our undivided loyalty and thanksgiving, and in order to make us merciful like Him.**

At least briefly, Jonah was conscious in the fish - long enough to realize that God had saved him from drowning in the sea. And during that period (or perhaps periods) of consciousness, Jonah prays. Chapter 2 is what he said. So when you read this prayer, keep in mind that when Jonah refers to the distress of the past, he means the time he spent in the water, not the time he spent in the fish. The water is the threat of death. The fish is the refuge of salvation. The cry of distress is past tense (in the water!); the voice of confidence and thanks is present (in the fish). Let's look at the prayer.

Jonah 2:1, 2: "Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 'I called to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me.'" There is the simple statement that sums up what happened when Jonah sank in the water: he cried out to God, and God answered him by sending the fish. There is a lot of encouragement for us here that I want you to see.

First, God answers his children when they cry to him in distress in spite of our guilt

Jonah was not on his way to Nineveh when he fell overboard. He was running from God. He was guilty of disobedience. That's why he was in the water. Some of you are in trouble right now precisely because of your disobedience. And if you are wondering, "Is there hope? Will God have mercy on me and hear my cry of distress?" Take heart from Jonah. His distress was the fruit of his guilt, but God answered him and gave him another chance. That is not an isolated teaching in Scripture. Listen to the same scenario in **Psalm 107:10–15**. If your disobedience is the cause of your distress, repent and cry to the Lord. He will answer you in spite of your guilt.

Second, God is not only quick to hear us when we repent... He's also in the midst of the circumstances that will bring us to repentance.

Sometimes people don't like to hear that. Go with me back to **chapter 1 and look at verse 4**, and now go on down to **verse 17**. Who was it that caused the storm? Who was it that appointed the big fish to swallow Jonah? Here's the Biblical truth—many of those circumstances we are going through, quite often God has ordained them as a means to get us back on track. So we need to understand that God will sometimes use extreme circumstances in order to get us to repent. And this should show us the ultimate value that God places on us being right with Him. There is an eternal perspective here. That's why Jesus says things like "What good is it if a man gains the whole world yet loses his own soul." That's why Paul says in **Romans 8:18** "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." In God's economy... or in God's view it would be better if we suffered the entire time we are on earth if in the end we spend eternity in His presence in glory. And that's hard for us to understand, but it's Biblical. So, here's what's happening: God is in a sense bringing judgment upon Jonah, but more importantly **God isn't so much paying Jonah back, as**

He is bringing him back. God knew what it would take to get him to stop running and to stop rejecting His rule and reign over his life, and so God allows... and even ordains Jonah's suffering, in order to show Jonah how inept he really is, and to show Jonah how much he really does need God and to help him see things the way He sees them. Jesus says, "Without Me, you can do nothing." And we don't see it when we're in the middle of it. Usually it's in hindsight that we look back and say, "Wow, God was with me through that crisis." The point is – God loves you enough to do what it takes to bring you back to Him.

Third, God answers us and delivers us from impossible circumstances.

Verses 5 and 6 describe the extremity of Jonah's plight. How terrible it was to be thrown into a raging storm with 20 or 30 foot waves and feel yourself sucked so deep that you know you're done for. And, as if that were not enough, as you struggle toward the air, you hit a mass of seaweed, and it tangles all around your head and neck. It's a terrifying scene. God let the circumstances become impossible before he delivered Jonah.

I don't know for sure why it is, but it seems that in the Christian life distresses and troubles come in batches. They don't get spaced out in proportion to our powers to cope. Often circumstances develop to the point where we can't see any way out. But then we need to remember Jonah's plight. It was an impossible scenario but not with God. (Mark 10:27)! When we cry to the Lord in our distress, he answers us and delivers us from impossible situations.

Fourth, he answers us in the nick of time. Verse 7 says, "When my soul fainted within me...God often answers our prayers at the eleventh hour. Many a saint has groaned with Habakkuk, saying, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and thou wilt not hear?" (Habakkuk 1:2). But Jonah gives us courage to be unrelenting in our prayer, to keep on crying out to God even as we go unconscious, and to believe that God will answer in the nick of time.

Fifth, God answers our cries of distress in stages, not all of which are comfortable. We must get out of our head the all or nothing notion of answered prayer. We can be fairly sure that when Jonah cried out to God, he did *not* say: "O God, put me in the belly of a fish for three days!" He probably said, "God save me, I am cast out from your presence, have mercy!" But God's answer came in stages. The belly of a fish hardly seems like salvation. But it was: Jonah is granted enough consciousness to realize he has been spared from drowning and that there is hope. He does not complain about his surroundings. He accepts God's first stage of salvation as a guarantee of dry land, and concludes his prayer in the fish's belly with the great affirmation, "Deliverance belongs to the Lord."

Don't disregard the partial works of God. If he chooses to save and to heal by stages, he has his good purposes, and we ought to be grateful for any improvement in our condition. A fish's belly is better than weeds at the bottom of the sea, even if it is not yet Palestine. God answers us in stages, not all of which are comfortable.

Sixth, God answers our cry of distress in order to win our undivided loyalty and thanksgiving, and in order to make us merciful like Him.

Verses 8 and 9. Jonah declares his commitment to God. He realizes that resisting God, running from Him - is like being an idolater.

Jonah repents from running away from God, and he turns to God with sacrifice and thanksgiving for God's undeserved mercy. He will pay his vows to God, and do whatever God tells him to do. He is now seeing things the way God sees them.

Verse 10. The LORD spoke to the fish: And so Jonah repents. He prays. And verse 10 tells us that God causes the fish to spit him up on dry land. (**Jonah 3:1**) The Word of God comes again to Jonah and it's the exact same thing God has told him before. Go! You

see; God doesn't change even though our circumstances do. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. His commands to us are always the same. We say, "God I've got this thing going on." And He says, "Go!" "God, I'm just a regular person." "Go!" "God I just got swallowed by a big fish and vomited on dry land." "Go!" And you know what Jonah did? He was like "Yes sir! Right away God! I'm going now! I'm already headed to Nineveh!" That's the lesson for us today. If God calls us to repent of something, it's best to heed that call. Repent right away, and don't delay.

The fish worked at the command of God. Just as much as the fish was under the command of God when it swallowed Jonah, it was under His command when it let him go.

Sometimes we don't have much of a choice about *how* we will be delivered. Jonah might have preferred another method, but God had a purpose in this also.

Jonah's deliverance came after Jonah's repentance was complete. Jonah wasn't just *sorry* for what he did, he was now *trusting* God again. What work of God, or aspect of His deliverance, will remain undone as long as you resist Him and refuse to trust Him?

Jonah's deliverance came after three days and nights had passed, providing a foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus said, *for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.* (Matthew 12:40).