

Crying Out from the Depths

Jonah 2:1-10

Last week Brian launched our sermon series in the book of Jonah. We saw from Jonah 1 the perils of running from God. We saw that Jonah ended up in the stomach of a fish because he refused to do what God told him to do (preach to the city of Nineveh). Instead of heading east to Nineveh, Jonah went west to the coastal city of Joppa and got on a ship headed for Tarshish. But running from God isn't very smart; nobody can run faster than God or farther than God. ***You can't run from God successfully.*** When a storm threatened to break up the ship, the sailors discerned that Jonah was the problem. With his permission, they threw him overboard, and "the sea stopped its raging." These pagan sailors feared God and offered sacrifices and vows to Him. We read of Jonah in 1:17:

17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

If Jonah hadn't been running from God, he wouldn't be in the stomach of a fish. And there are times when we end up in some very desperate situations because we've been running from God.

As Brian mentioned last week, "running from God" can take many different forms. Like Jonah, perhaps God has given you a difficult assignment in some area of your life – a vocation that's different from what you would have chosen for yourself, a difficult marriage, or you are required to make sacrifices that others don't have to make. I was talking with a friend this past week who said that God had given him a difficult assignment the last year and a half; if he had refused that assignment, he would have been like Jonah, running from God. Perhaps you're not submitting some area of your life to God; in your disobedience you're running from God.

Or perhaps in a very comprehensive sense you're running from God. You've never "bowed the knee" and acknowledged that He's God and you're not. Perhaps you're running from the truth that God wants us to turn from our sin and turn to Him through Jesus' death and resurrection.

And so it's possible that you are running from God in some aspect of life. It's obviously better ***not*** to run from God (that was Brian's point last week). But if you ***do*** run from God and find yourself in the stomach of a big fish, what then? Turn with me to Jonah 2 (this week's tip on finding Jonah: it's between Obadiah and Micah; actually it's on page 657 in the blue bibles.) Jonah illustrates that when you come to your senses, you can and should cry out to God.

2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish,

Jonah had been in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights. We don't know whether he knew that he was inside a fish (there's no mention of the fish in his prayer); we don't know a lot of things. We are simply told that after three days Jonah prayed to the Lord His God. This isn't the first time Jonah prayed since being thrown overboard; as we'll see, Jonah will say, "I called to the Lord" (past tense). In other words, these verses are a reflection upon Jonah's earlier prayer.

Ironically, this is what the pagan sailors had wanted Jonah to do during the storm. When they found Jonah asleep, they said, “Get up, call on your god” (1:6). In the book of Jonah those outside of Israel, the covenant community, are more sensitive to God than Jonah.

The prayer in verses 2 through 9 is really a psalm and is full of allusions to and quotes from the book of Psalms.

2 and he said, "I called out of my distress to the LORD,
And He answered me.
I cried for help from the depth of Sheol;
You heard my voice.

What’s fascinating is that while he’s still in the stomach of the fish Jonah speaks of how God has already answered his prayer and rescued him. God rescuing Jonah didn’t mean standing on dry land; in his case it meant being alive in the presence of God. God rescuing us doesn’t mean that “everything’s fine” or even that we can now see how everything is going to work out. ***You know you’ve been rescued when things are right with God*** – even if your circumstances haven’t changed.

Jonah says, “I cried for help from the depth of Sheol.” Sheol was the term used to describe “the abode of the dead” (McComiskey, *Jonah*, p. 569). We don’t know whether Jonah cried for help as he sank down to the bottom of the sea or after he had been swallowed, but he thought he was as good as dead. But Jonah’s experience confirms that ***it’s never too late to cry out to God***. At the very last moment Jonah cried out for help. And God heard Jonah’s voice and answered.

Notice how Jonah interprets what had happened to him. He understood that it wasn’t really the sailors who threw him overboard; it was actually God.

3 "For You had cast me into the deep,
Into the heart of the seas,
And the current engulfed me.
All Your breakers and billows passed over me.

Just like the land and the heavens, the seas belong to the Lord. Jonah says to God, “***Your*** breakers and billows passed over me.” The waves and the currents were under God’s authority as is the rest of the created order. The waves and currents were God’s servants who did His bidding.

There is a sense in which God is always everywhere; in that sense nobody is ever far from God in this life. But geographically (and even relationally) you were never closer to God then when you worshiped Him in the temple. Therefore, geographically it’s hard to get farther away from God than Jonah at the bottom of the sea.

4 "So I said, 'I have been expelled from Your sight.
Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple.'

Jonah has had a change of heart. Even though he was expelled from God's sight – thrown overboard and falling to the bottom of the sea – he now longed to be in the presence of God in the temple. Instead of running *from* God, he now wanted to run *to* God and His temple.

In verses 5 and 6 Jonah describes being on the verge of death:

5 "Water encompassed me to the point of death.
The great deep engulfed me,
Weeds were wrapped around my head.
6 "I descended to the roots of the mountains.
The earth with its bars was around me forever,
But You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.

Jonah experienced the terror of thinking that he would drown. The weeds wrapped around his head. It was as if he were imprisoned at the bottom of the sea. "But," Jonah says, "You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God." God saved Jonah's life by appointing a big fish to swallow him. We have no medical or scientific explanation how Jonah could survive for 3 days in the stomach of a fish; we simply take it as a miraculous event.

Verse 7 describes how Jonah prayed at the last moment.

7 "While I was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
And my prayer came to You,
Into Your holy temple.

The grace of God was Jonah's only option at this point, so he prayed. Sometimes people don't want grace, though. They think, "I haven't been faithful to God during the good times, so I don't really have any right to come to God when I'm in trouble." It's true that we never deserve grace, but Jonah's experience confirms that we should pray to God anyway. God orchestrated things *so that* Jonah's only option was to call out to God for grace. Jonah says, "*While I was fainting away*, I remembered the Lord" (NIV – "When my life was ebbing away"). It is never too late to cry out to God.

God was eager to hear Jonah's last-minute prayer. We sometime feel like our prayers don't reach God, that they are just "bouncing off the ceiling." Jonah understood that heartfelt prayers always reach God. He said, "And my prayer came to You, Into Your holy temple." Jonah had the confidence that his prayers made it all the way into God's holy temple, the place where God dwelt. God hears the prayers of desperate people.

Notice how Jonah vows to worship God in the future:

8 "Those who regard vain idols
Forsake their faithfulness,
9 But I will sacrifice to You
With the voice of thanksgiving.
That which I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation is from the LORD."

Ironically, Jonah's affirmation here parallels what the sailors had already experienced. When the storm hit, they each called out to their own gods (i.e., vain idols). But after YHWH delivered them, they "feared the Lord" and "offered sacrifices" and "made vows to him." That's exactly what Jonah promised to do from the belly of the fish. The "vow" which Jonah would pay probably involved his calling as a prophet; this would mean a commitment to preach to the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Jonah concludes his psalm with the statement, "Salvation is from the Lord." From the stomach of the fish Jonah knew that God alone could save – both in time and for eternity.

Almost anti-climactically we read in verse 10:

10 Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.

God still had an assignment for Jonah so he spared his life. God doesn't always do that. The thief hanging beside Jesus, for example, cried out to God/Jesus at the last moment. He experienced salvation, but he still died that day. But as for Jonah, God commanded the fish to vomit him up onto the dry land. We'll pick up his story at that point next week.

How does Jonah's experience relate to us? There will be times when you feel like Jonah felt as he fell to the bottom of the sea. You've been running from God and you feel like He has thrown you overboard (He has every right to do that). He has created (or allowed) a set of circumstances that have made you realize that running from Him is the worst thing you could have done. In wrestling terms, God has you in a submission hold.

Of course not all trials and suffering are the result of running from God. Sometimes we experience trials that are common to everybody; sometimes we suffer for doing what is right. But there are times when God puts us in desperate circumstances so that we will come to our senses and realize that we need Him more than anything else. Like Jonah, we need to realize that ***it is never too late to cry out to God***. Even though there may be consequences of running from God, He still hears our last-minute prayers. Therefore, like Jonah, ***we should actually cry out to God to rescue us***.

Neil White was a journalist and magazine publisher in Mississippi. In 1993 he was found guilty of check-kiting. As his business debts mounted, he would write checks from one bank account (for more money than he actually had in that account) and deposit it in another bank account so that checks written from that account didn't bounce. It was a bit more complicated than that, but he made it look like he had a lot more money than he actually had. Eventually that caught up with him, and he was convicted and sentenced to serve 18 months in Carville, Louisiana. Shortly after he arrived there in May of 1993, White found out that Carville was not only a minimum-security prison; it was also the last functioning leper colony in the United States.

White learned many significant lessons while at Carville – most of them from the patients suffering from leprosy. He developed honest relationships with many of them. His closest relationship was with an eighty-year-old woman named Ella who contracted leprosy as a child. With both her legs amputated, sitting in a wheel chair, she would tell him things like, "What peoples think [about you] ain't none of your business." To someone who had been obsessed with image and appearance, that lesson was profound for Neil White.

You might think that Neil White being in this federal prison/leper colony would be like Jonah at the bottom of the sea. But that wasn't the case. He didn't really feel the weight of who he was and what he had done until he received a letter from his wife telling him that she was divorcing him that she and the children were moving back to Mississippi. The prospect of losing his children is what made him hit rock bottom. Listen to how he processed his experience.

I had cost bankers who trusted me more than a million dollars. I left thirty loyal employees without any income. I put small-business owners in a deep hole. I lost most of my mother's retirement fund, money she had invested in my business. I had disappointed my friends and family. I had put my uncle Knox, Hancock Bank's lawyer, in a terrible spot. And I had allowed a woman, a single mother who couldn't afford to lose her investment, to put her money into my company. A year later, she and her two children were evicted from their home. I betrayed [my wife] Linda and left her in debt, dependent on others, drowning in the shame of all my secrets. And I left Neil and Maggie, the most important people in my life, without a father in their home.

Even incarcerated, when I should have been most humble and reflective, I held on tight to my vanity. I wanted my shirts pressed; I hoarded scent strips (from magazines) to smell good; and I imagined myself winning a press club award before I'd done a moment's work. When I should have been trying to change, I grasped on to the image I'd held so dear. And though I had publicly acknowledged some of the bad things I'd done, I had never taken an objective look at the person I had become.

Finally, in a sanctuary for outcasts, I understood the truth. Surrounded by men and women who could not hide their disfigurement, I could see my own. (pp. 168-169)

Neil White finally "came to his senses" about who he had become. Perhaps you've been running from God in some area of your life and you've finally realized that you are not at all the person you thought you were or the person you hoped you'd be. Here is *the* question for you: ***Are you now willing to cry out to God to rescue you out of your sin and out of your selfishness?*** Not everybody who sinks down to the bottom of the sea cries out to God. Interestingly, in his book it isn't at all clear that Neil White cried out to God to rescue him. It's not clear whether he really turned to God or whether he simply vowed to be a better person. And there's a world of difference between the two.

If you've been running from God in some area of your life, and if you have sunk down to the depths, and if you have come to your senses, ***are you willing to cry out to God?*** Are you willing to actually ask/plead with God to change your life (and maybe even your circumstances)? It's not enough to know that God hears the prayers of people at the bottom of the sea; you have to actually cry out to God yourself.

I have to warn you that it is relatively easy to look at others' lives and see where they are running from God. It's easy to look at a friend's life and say, "If he keeps indulging that sin, he's going to destroy his life, his family, and his career." But when it's our own sin, we have an amazing capacity for self-deception, thinking, "I'm not sinking to the bottom of the sea. I'll be fine."

And it's relatively easy (for me at least) to believe that if others cry out to God that He will rescue *them* and (over time) transform *their* lives. We can see the promises of God so clearly for others, but it's often hard to believe that God would rescue *us* from our plight. But the message of Jonah 2 is that if you're sinking to the bottom of the sea, ***God will rescue you when you cry out to Him for help.*** I don't know what it will look like for God to rescue you. But I do know that God loves to rescue us when we cry out from the depths.