

Not Just Another Big Fish Story: Jonah 2 – “Running To God”

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from inside the fish. He said, “I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me.” Jonah 2:1

Occasionally when watching the old TV show Batman and Robin, they would have a “two-parter”. My brothers and I would be so engrossed in the “whams” and “bams” and “sockos” of another fascinating episode we’d lose all track of time. Just at a critical moment of despair for our caped and masked crusaders, within the clutches of The Joker, or the Riddler; an voice from somewhere would freeze the action, and announce: “Tune in next week to see if Batman and Robin can find their way out of this sticky web”, or some such inducement to make us come back to see if our hero’s are rescued. That reminds me a bit of where we left Jonah last week.

He was Running from God, got himself thrown overboard, and just as the episode ended...swallowed by a big fish. This morning we’ll pick up the action in this “four-parter”, and see not only if our “hero” might escape the clutches of a huge whale, but how he comes to such escape. Today we’ll consider Jonah – Running to God. Next week we’ll discuss Jonah Running For God, and then finally, Jonah, Trying to Run God. Tune in each week.

The second chapter of Jonah is a prayer...not a bad option considering his predicament. Funny, I don’t ever remember Batman or Robin employing that tactic in their arsenal of weapons. And it’s not so much of the individual elements of Jonah’s prayer that intrigue me; but how God answers Jonah’s prayers from the belly of the whale. You’ve probably heard the trite little truth that God always answers our prayers; sometimes “yes”, sometimes “no”, sometimes “wait”. In this episode, we’ll see that God does indeed answer our prayers, but not always in the ways we might suggest or assume! Here we go.

1. GOD ANSWERS OUR PRAYERS WHILE WE ARE GUILTY

I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the land of the dead, and Lord, you heard me! 2:2

The Hebrew word for trouble here is most often translated “distress”, and has as its primary meaning the pain a woman suffers during a difficult childbirth. And the Hebrew word here for *the land of the dead* is Sheol, which means literally “Hell” or the place of death, or the realm of farthest separation from God. Seems Jonah got what he wanted. His running from God didn’t end in the bough of a boat, but the bowels of a whale at the bottom of the ocean. He had to look up to see the bottom of the underwater mountains! His life was unraveling faster than he was descending to the bottom of the 17,000 foot deep Mediterranean Sea. He knew he was in trouble, he knew he’d screwed up; he knew his life was over...save for the grace and mercy of God.

God didn’t rescue Jonah because he was good – God answered Jonah’s heartfelt cry of distress, and rescued him because he was guilty! Isn’t it good to know that God loves us even when we rebel? Isn’t it good to know that God’s forgiveness is not dependent on us cleaning up our act, putting on superficial airs, making nice to earn God’s mercy? NO – God answers our prayers directly because we are guilty. And when we are able to admit that; we are well on our way to having our prayers answered.

The most terrifying aspect of Jonah’s plight is when he realizes that God almost gave him what he wanted. Jonah wanted to run away from God. But somewhere on the journey to hell, without God, at the bottom of the sea; Jonah recognizes his mistake, and cries out to God. We tend to be critical of Jonah and others, who only cry out when things get tough, or people at the end of their rope...but that is exactly where God hears our prayers and answers us...right in the middle of our guilt!

2. GOD ANSWERS OUR PRAYERS DURING OUR JUDGMENT

You threw me into the ocean depth...I was buried beneath your wild and stormy waves...you have driven me from your presence... Yet I will look once more toward your holy Temple. 2:3-4

Notice how Jonah tries to blame God for his predicament. That's stupid and irresponsible, but often entertained when we find ourselves getting what we deserve, getting what we thought we wanted, or getting the consequences of our choices, our decisions and our actions. Jonah tried to blame God, but on the journey to the bottom, came face to face with the reality that he alone was to blame for his situation. Knowing that, didn't lessen his pain, probably intensified it; but in that pain he found God answering even his prayers of blame and confession. As C. S. Lewis was fond of saying: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks into our conscience, but shouts to us in our pain." Jonah is in pain.

Even when God is displeased with us, as God was with Jonah's attempts to run and hide; God rarely brings us into affliction merely for the sake of punishment. God's purposes almost always include redemption. We may interpret his "harsh grace" as punishment, but it's really redemptive to discover God in the midst of our blaming, and even in the midst of God's judgment.

The words *I will look again toward Your Holy temple* are really a prayer of repentance and renewed faith, of turning from a life of selfish independence, to a life of dependence and submission. Jonah (like the rest of the Jews) thought God lived in the temple, and to agree to look again toward that temple, meant Jonah was willing to realign himself with God and God's will, and God's call. All this while spiraling toward the bottom of the sea. God answers our prayers even in the midst of our judgment.

3. GOD ANSWERS OUR PRAYERS WITHIN IMPOSSIBLE CIRCUMSTANCES

I sank beneath the waves, and the waters closed over me. Seaweed wrapped itself around my head. I sank down to the very roots of the mountains. I was imprisoned in the earth, whose gates lock shut forever. But you, O Lord my God, snatched me from the jaws of death! 2:5-6

Have you ever come close to drowning? I think I have. I taught myself how to swim...which for the record – is a dumb thing to do.

A bunch of families and friends from my home town went camping at Lake Poinsett one summer when I must have been about 13-14. Most all the other kids could swim and ski, and so I was left either to wear one of those ugly orange too-small, life preserver things...or stay safely on the beach. I was determined to learn to swim, so one morning before anyone else had awakened; I snuck out of my tent, made my way into the chilly early morning waters...determined to learn to swim. I pushed myself deeper and deeper, and kept trying my best, but it didn't happen until my legs became tangled in the abundant algae and seaweed that is constantly growing under the surface of Lake Poinsett, and my life survival instincts kicked in. At that moment I knew I was either going to drown, or learn to swim...and as you can tell...I'm a swimmer! Not really, but I can float like a champion – cause my body has its own inner tube, you see!

The point is, not until I was faced with drowning did I really learn to swim, and so it was with Jonah. Not until his situation had become impossible did he find God waiting to snatch him from the jaws of death. I know how he felt! Notice also that Jonah didn't bother to pray about God's call to go to Nineveh. He didn't pray about his reluctance or distaste of the Ninevites. He didn't even pray when the ship started sinking. He only begins to pray on his way to hell – when his head is wrapped in sea-weed, as a whale makes of him a sushi-snack, on the way to the bottom of the ocean.

We may find distasteful that only as a last act of desperation does he finally pray; but we who do so, are further along the Jesus journey than others. Most of us know that it is only in times of deepest distress or moments of desperation do we finally give a thought to God, and isn't it good to know that then, even then, especially then; that God answers our prayers – even in the most impossible circumstances?

4. GOD ANSWERS OUR PRAYERS IN GOD'S GOOD TIME

As my life was slipping away, I remembered the Lord. And my earnest prayer went out to you in your holy Temple. 2:7

Notice when Jonah finally remembers the Lord...at the very moment he felt his life was slipping away. Then he offers his earnest prayer, and God answers...in God's good sweet time. Not a moment too soon, not a moment too late. Don't you find it interesting how God answers Jonah's desperate final conscious act of prayer? God didn't calm the sea for Jonah, didn't rush him to the surface, didn't fill his lungs with supernatural breath (like he did Adam) didn't deposit him immediately and safely on the nearest shore or in the suburbs of Nineveh. When God finally chose to answer, he sends a whale to swallow his prophet.

There are times that God answers our prayers in stages. There are times if God answered our prayers completely, the way we think He should, we'd immediately forget him and resume our old ways of independent living. Jonah needed a "time out" to contemplate the goodness and severity of the Lord; it took about 3 days for him to exchange his defiant disobedience, for humble obedience.

Don't disregard the timing of God's answers; they hardly ever coincide with our own, but they are never late. At our moments of deepest despair, nearest to death, God hears and answers. Why does he tarry you might ask? To insure that we have exhausted all our other resources, and rely only and totally upon Him. God doesn't tarry to create or add to our desperation, but to add to our gratitude when we finally learn that there is no other explanation for our salvation than the grace, mercy and love of God!

5. GOD ANSWERS OUR PRAYERS TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSE

Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God's mercies. But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the Lord alone. 2:8-9

Jonah, the reluctant prophet who tried unsuccessfully to run from God, has now come full circle, crying out desperately for God to save him; from running from God to running to God.

The storm and the fish have had their appropriate affect – now, from the gastric grossness of his seaweed filled stomach environs; he now, gives thanks and promises to fulfill the vows that he has made and answer the call that God has given.

Jonah ends his prayer by contrasting those who cling to worthless idols (Perhaps referring to the sailors who had prayed to their unknown gods. Remember that Jonah would not have known that they too had turned to faith in Yahweh since they did so after he had been thrown overboard) he contrasts those who cling to worthless idols, and those who turn to the God of heaven who made the sea and the land. The former forfeit grace (favor), while the latter are filled with thanksgiving and the desire to obey.

What happens when we call on God with a broken, repentant and believing heart? We are not disappointed. Salvation came to Jonah just as it does to all who call upon God. Psalm 145:18 says: *"You brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God,"* And even more consider Psalm 50:15: *"Call upon me in the day of trouble; and I will deliver you and you shall glorify me."*

You see, God does answer our prayers, especially our desperate ones. God doesn't always answer them in ways that we'd expect (I doubt Jonah had a whale ride in mind when he was screaming for God to save him.) God seldom answers our prayers at the time we think he should. But God ALWAYS answers even from the depths of our guilt, even in the middle of our judgments, even in the most impossible circumstances; God always answers our prayers. And as I said last week; God's will is going to be done, whether we like it or not. God is going to have His way in our lives, just like in Jonah. So the whale swims next to the shore and spits the bleached white prophet onto dry land. Stay tuned to see what happens in the next episode of this gigantic fish story. And keep praying.

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