Jonah’s Prayer

Jonah 1:17-3:10

Key Verse:

Last week we studied the God of Jonah, who called to Jonah and commanded him to go to Nineveh to deliver a message of judgment. But Jonah, who was a strong nationalistic prophet, did not listen to God, but ran away from him to Tarshish, in the opposite direction from Nineveh. God did not give up on him, though. God sent a storm, and Jonah was thrown into the sea by the sailors who feared his God, the Creator of sea and heaven. If the story of Jonah ended here, Jonah might have known as a rebellious prophet and the God of Jonah as an angry and revengeful God. But the story of Jonah continues with Jonah’s repentant prayer and God’s answer. Let’s study Jonah’s prayer and God’s character as he answered Jonah’s prayer.

First, In my distress I called to the Lord. Look at 1:17. “***Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights***.” Even though Jonah was thrown into the sea, God did not allow Jonah to drown. God sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah and Jonah stayed in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. The big fish must have been a big whale that had enough space for Jonah to fit inside. Technically speaking, a man can’t survive in the belly of a fish, but nothing is impossible with the Lord. He saved Jonah’s life in the belly of the fish as he did Daniel’s three friends’ lives in the flames of the furnace. (Da 3:27)

What did Jonah do in the belly of the fish? You might think that Jonah enjoyed free sushi and seaweed soup for three days. But this was not the case. It was terrible for Jonah to stay in the belly of fish in utter darkness and with the rotten fish smell. He couldn’t even rest for a minute because the fish frequently jumped above the water and dived into the sea. He was also often baptized by the digesting fluid from the fish. He expressed his agony in verses 3 and 5. “***You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me…The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head***.” You may draw a picture in your mind and understand how terrible Jonah’ situation was in the belly of the fish.

What did Jonah do when he was in trouble? He prayed. Let us read verses1and 2. “***From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said: “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry***.” It is not easy for us to seek God in our distress. Many people lose heart and have no desire to do anything, especially to pray. Others become angry toward God and blame other people. Still others fall away from their faith. But Jonah prayed to the Lord his God in his distress. He sought God when he was in the worst situation of his life. His prayer came from his trust in God’s faithfulness and his persistent spirit. Look at verses 4,6,7. “***I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple…To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit. When my life was ebbing away; I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.***” How did Jonah act differently from Cain when he was rebuked by God? When Cain was rebuked by God after he had killed his brother Abel, he did not pray to God or did not remember God. When he was banished from the Garden of Eden, he wandered here and there with fear of death. Cain did not return to God or remember Him, either. But Jonah was different. When Jonah was in distress, when he was banished from God’s sight because of his rebellion, Jonah prayed to the Lord. He remembered God and sought God’s mercy. He cried out for God’s help. His prayer was urgent and repentant.

When we are in distress and trouble, it is the hour to seek God. Especially when we are punished by God and banished from his sight because of our sins and mistakes, it is time for us to seek him and pray. Jonah was a rebellious and stubborn self-righteous prophet. But he sought God when he was in trouble. Prayer is seeking God when things do not seem to be all right. Prayer is coming to Him whether we think we deserve it or not. David wrote many psalms when he was in trouble. He was a warrior of prayer. When he was in trouble after his sin of adultery was exposed and he was punished by God, David prayed to God. When he was in deep agony because of his rebellious son Absalom who tried to kill him, David did not give up on praying. He sought God and asked for God’s help. Are you troubled in your heart for any reason? Pray to the Lord your God and seek Him as David did. Are you in the deep realm of the dead, do the waves sweep over you, and does the seaweed wrap around your head? Pray to the Lord and seek Him as Jonah did. How did God respond to Jonah’s prayer?

Second, Salvation comes from the Lord. What did Jonah say about God when he prayed? Jonah said in verse 2, “*In my distress I cried to the Lord, and he answered me*.” God answered Jonah’s prayer. Jonah also said in verse 6. “*To the roots of the mountain I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit.*” God answered Jonah’s prayer. God remembered Jonah even though Jonah wanted to forget God. God took care of Jonah who was thrown into the sea. Our God is righteous and just, and he is also gracious and merciful. Psalm 145:8 says, “*The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.*” Jonah was a rebellious and stubborn prophet who disobeyed the Lord and ran away from Him. He wanted to die in the sea without carrying out God’s holy mission. In fact, he was thrown into the sea with the agreement of the sailors. He was such a stubborn and unlovely person. But God took care of him. He did not give up on Jonah. He answered Jonah when Jonah repented. He responded when Jonah cried out for help.

We often think that God is not with us when we are in deep trouble. Some think that God forgets them. Others think that God is angry with them and leaves them alone in the middle of suffering. Still others think that God cannot do anything in their situation. But this is not true. As God was with Jonah who was in the belly of the fish, he is with us. As God answered Jonah’s cry out for help, God listens to our prayer. As God did not give up on Jonah, God will take care of us to the end as he promised.

The God of Jonah is the God of Jacob. I found some similarities and common points in character between Jonah and Jacob. Both of them had strong character. Jacob in the Old Testament was a very ambitious and strong-willed person. He cheated his brother and father in order to receive God’s blessing. He spent more than 14 years in order to marry Rachael, his first love. Jacob struggled hard to become rich and independent from his willful uncle Laban. He ran away at night while his uncle was out of town. He struggled with God at the Jabbok River until his socket bone was broken in order to receive God’s blessing. God was with Jacob wherever he was. God was with Jacob when he was in his mother’s womb. God was with Jacob when he was in his father’s tent. God was with Jacob when he was alone in the wilderness. God was with Jacob in Paddan Aram, at Jabbok River, at Schechem, and at Beersheba. God showed his mercy and faithfulness, and he waited until Jacob was changed from a physical man to a spiritual man.

What was the conclusion in Jonah’s prayer? Look at verses 8-9. “***Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord.’***” Jonah repented and praised the Lord who loves him to the end. When he repented, his heart was filled with joy and thanks. He also made a vow to the Lord that he would sacrifice his life to the Lord. He came to realize that salvation comes from the Lord. When Jonah repented, his sorrow was turned to joy. When he turned his heart to the Lord, his complaint was changed to gratitude. Jonah experienced real peace in the belly of the fish.

We can’t experience real peace until we repent of our sins before God. We receive real peace when we have a right relationship with God. Even though people live in expensive multi-million dollar houses and sleep on thousand dollar sheets, they can’t sleep well when they have unceasing anxiety and fear. Even though Jonah was in the belly of the fish with no light and a terrible fish smell, he had peace in his heart when he was with God. He enjoyed real peace in his heart with joy and thanks because God was with him. Let us turn away from worthless idols and turn to the Lord God because salvation comes from the Lord. Amen!

Third, Jonah’s ministry in Nineveh. Our God is the Lord who gives us a second chance. Even though Jonah ran away from Him and was thrown into the sea, God did not give up on him. God gave another chance to Jonah to restore his calling. Look at verses 2:10-3:1,2. “***And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you***.” The fish vomited Jonah on the dry land near Nineveh. Jonah was sent to the place where he should have gone from the beginning. God sent him again to deliver the message of judgment to the city of Nineveh. No matter how far we may run away from the Lord, God brings us back to the place we should go. God gave Jonah a second chance to restore his mission. God is the God of a second chances. In the Bible, Peter made a mistake by denying Jesus three times. Jesus did not leave Peter. Rather he gave a second chance to Peter to be reinstated. God will give us a third chance when we fall the second time. God does not give up easily. He is patient with us and waits until we are ready. It is true as Paul said, “For *God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable*.” (Romans 11:29)

How did Jonah respond to the Lord’s words? He obeyed the Lord and carried out his mission. Look at verses 3-4. “***Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming. “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.***” Jonah’s message was not long, but short with a strong warning against Nineveh. Jonah might have delivered the message with a small voice. But what happened to the city of Nineveh? How did the people of Nineveh respond to Jonah’s message? Look at verses 5-9. “***The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish***.” All the Nenehvites repented from top to bottom. When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he took off his robes and covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Putting sackcloth on and sitting in the dust is an expression of sincere repentance to the ancient people in the Middle East. The king proclaimed the day of national repentance for all his people, even including animals. He asked his people to pray urgently for God’s mercy. He asked them to plead for God’s compassion. As the Bible said, the Ninevites believed God. The Nineveites seemed to be the last people who would repent. Their wickedness and evilness reached to God and brought God’s judgment. But they accepted God’s warning and turned their hearts to the Lord. While we reach out with God’s message, we don’t know how God works. We don’t know who will respond to our message. If God wants, he can open the heart of those who looked least likely to repent. When we simply trust in God and obey him, the Holy Spirit works and opens the hearts of those whom he chooses and he prepares. May God bless our outreach this semester. May the Holy Spirit go ahead of us and open the hearts of those who listen to our message. Amen.

How did God respond to their repentance? Look at verse 10. “***When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.***” The word ‘relent’ has several meanings, such as change one’s mind, ease off, compromise, yield, sympathize, and so on. God cancelled his plan to punish the Ninevites because they sincerely repented. God had watched for long time how wicked and evil they used to be. It must have been years and years. So he sent them Jonah with the message of judgment. But when they repented through Jonah’s message, God’s heart was shaken. God relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. Through this the Scripture was true: (Ex 34:6,7, Ps 86:5, 145:8) “*The Lord, the Lord, is the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin*.” No matter how far we may run away from the Lord, no matter how terribly we may sin against Him, and no matter for what reason we fall away, God is willing to forgive us and accept us. Remember how the Lord accepted Jonah and how he forgave the Ninevites when they repented. Let us turn away from worthless idols and turn to the Lord. Salvation comes from the Lord. Let us repent our rebellion and stubbornness and obey his words. May God bless all of us to experience the God of Jonah in this generation. Amen!