

PRAYERS OF DESPERATION

SERIES: PRAYERS FOR THE
MOMENT



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Jonah 2:1-10
Final Message
Dan Westman
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It is hard to imagine that Labor Day is here already, and that summer has come and gone. Last week at our virtual gathering for the Young Adult Fellowship, I mentioned the transition from summer to fall, and someone said, “What summer?” That sums up this past three months fairly well. It hasn’t been a typical summer. It hasn’t been a typical year, but has been a year that none of us will ever forget.

I recently heard someone say, “I could really go for some precedented times.” That’s so true, isn’t it? First a pandemic, then racial injustice and civil unrest, wildfires, hurricanes — and don’t forget the murder hornets. When I heard that there was a case of the plague reported in Tahoe a few weeks ago, I thought, “Of course, it’s 2020!” This year has been unprecedented.

For many of us, this year has driven us to some desperate places—financially, emotionally, and physically desperate.

Have you found yourself desperate this year? Maybe you’re desperate right now. If you are not, you may only be one phone call away from desperation. What do we do when we feel desperate? What do we do when we are at the end of our rope? At rock bottom?

This morning, we are going to look at a prayer of desperation. It’s the prayer that Jonah prays in the belly of the fish: Jonah 2.

Today is our final week in our series, *Prayers for the Moment*. We are all—to one degree or another—living in a moment of desperation. So we are going to look at Jonah’s prayer—a prayer of desperation—as a model of how to pray in our own moments of desperation.

In the last line of Jonah’s prayer, he sums up his prayer by saying, “Salvation belongs to the Lord.” Or, we might say, “our God saves.” That, in a sentence, is the sermon for this morning. Our God saves. In the good times, salvation belongs to the Lord. In the bad

times, salvation belongs to the Lord. In the midst of a pandemic and wildfires and lost jobs and mental health crises and whatever other this-must-be-2020 moments of desperation you are facing, hear this today: our God saves. He is the only one who saves, and he is ready and waiting to save you today.

Background

Our text for this morning is Jonah 2. Before we look at the prayer, let me remind us a little about who Jonah is and what has happened so far to bring Jonah to his moment of desperation.

Jonah is a prophet in the northern Kingdom of Israel. He lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II, which was a time of incredible prosperity in Israel. While it was an economic high point in the history of Israel, it was a spiritual low point. The people of Israel were not walking with God, and this was even true of Jonah the prophet.

At the beginning of the book, God tells Jonah to leave Israel and go to Nineveh, which was a major city in the Assyrian empire. In response, Jonah promptly got up and ran in the opposite direction. Instead of heading east to Nineveh, he boards a ship heading west to Tarshish, and he runs from God.

While at sea, a terrible storm comes up, and the sailors come to realize that this storm has come because of Jonah and his disobedience to God. They throw him overboard, and the sea calmed down.

While Jonah is in the sea, he comes to the very doorstep of death, nearly drowning, when God reaches out and saves him by sending a fish to swallow him. Jonah spends three days and three nights in the belly of that fish, and it is in that dark, smelly, disgusting place that Jonah prays the prayer that we know as Jonah chapter 2.

Cry out to God in Desperation

Jonah 2:1-2:

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, 2 saying, “I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

We learn a few important things right from these two verses. First, Jonah is praying this prayer from the belly of the fish. By the end of the chapter, he will be spat out onto dry land. But right now he is praying from the belly of the fish. For Jonah, the belly of the fish is God’s place of salvation. We are going to come back to that in a minute. For now, notice what Jonah is saying. In this prayer from the belly of the fish, he looks back on a previous prayer that he prayed in his time of distress— that is, the time when he was in the sea. It was from the sea that Jonah cried out to God in desperation.

A few verses later, we learn more about just how desperate Jonah was when he was in the water.

Jonah 2:5-7:

The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head 6 at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. 7 When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

If you have a fear of drowning, then this passage might give you nightmares. When Jonah hits the water, he begins to sink deeper and deeper, the currents driving him further from the surface. The water must have been growing darker as the light faded. He was getting tangled in the seaweed at what felt like the very bottom of the sea.

Jonah was at the very end of his life. He was beyond his last breath. That moment came and went when he was tossed into the water. Now, in his last moments of consciousness, he finally remembered the Lord and cried out to him for help.

This is the first time that Jonah talks to God in the book. When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah didn’t respond. When the storm kicked up, he didn’t call

out. When he hit the water, still no prayer. Then, finally, with his last conscious thought, he remembers God and throws out a last-ditch cry for help. And God answered.

There is part of me that wants to judge Jonah for waiting so long to call cry out to God. Why didn’t he turn to God for help sooner? But God doesn’t seem to judge him. God doesn’t give him a lecture. God saves Jonah because this is what God does. Our God saves. He saves those who cry out to him for help. He is looking for people to save, waiting for people to cry out to him. So let’s cry out to God! Let’s cry out to God in desperation. Let’s cry out to God in our moment of distress and watch as he comes to our rescue.

As a pastor, I have the privilege of being with people in some of their most desperate moments. At one of these moments, I was sitting with a husband as his wife was unconscious in the ICU fighting for her life. The doctors said her chances of survival were incredibly low. It did not look good. As I sat there with this man, terrified, lost, in shock, we cried out to the Lord in desperation. We pleaded with the Lord that he would keep death at bay. That he would intervene. That he would work a miracle. That was perhaps the hardest that I had ever prayed in my entire life.

Sometimes the easiest times to pray are the times when we can do nothing but pray.

Forty-eight hours after becoming non-responsive, the wife began to wake up. The doctors said that this kind of thing does happen in situations like hers. “One in a thousand” were their words. “No medical explanation.” Our explanation: we cried out to the Lord in our distress, and he answered us. Out of the belly of Sheol we cried, and you heard our voice.” Salvation belong to the Lord!

Where is your place of desperation? Maybe it is a relationship that seems broken beyond repair. Perhaps it a job hunt that has gone on for far longer than you had hoped. For many of you, your point of desperation is related to this pandemic—it’s toll on your mental, physical, or relational health. Whatever desperate circumstances in which you find yourself, cry out to God. Even if you haven’t talked to God for a long time, like Jonah. Even if you have never prayed before. Cry out to God, and watch as he comes to your rescue, because our God is the God who saves.

Turn to God in Repentance

Let me ask you: At what point in this story is Jonah actually saved? If I am Jonah, in the water, struggling for my life, the kind of salvation that I am looking for is my feet on dry ground. I want to get out of this water! Washed up on shore, or, better yet, picked up by a luxury cruise liner with an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Eventually, Jonah does end up on dry ground. By the end of the chapter, he is back onshore. But when Jonah prays this prayer, when he speaks of God's salvation, he is in the belly of the fish. In fact, before Jonah ever reaches the surface of the water, God has already saved Jonah in two different ways.

First, God saves Jonah from himself.

Jonah 2:3-4:

For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. 4 Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'

Do you remember why Jonah was on the ship in the first place? He was running from God! He was in a full-fledged sprint away from God! Flat out rebellion. When Jonah says in v. 3 that God cast him into the sea, he is right. Yes, the sailors threw him overboard, but the wind and the waves were from God.

In v. 4, we see that Jonah misunderstood why God threw him into the sea. He thinks that he is being driven away from God's sight; that God was pushing him away. But God was not pushing Jonah away. God was drawing Jonah in. He was saving Jonah from himself. He was bringing Jonah to a place of brokenness, a place of desperation, in hopes that Jonah would repent and turn back to him. And it worked! In v. 4 when he says, "Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple," he is turning back to the Lord. Jonah stops running away and turns to God.

After we cry out to God in desperation, we must turn to God in repentance.

Sometimes, God has to grab us by the shoulders and shake us to wake us up from our own foolishness, from our own selfishness. Sometimes God sends the wind and the waves into our lives—sometimes he throws us into

the sea—to awaken us to our need for him; to bring us to a place of brokenness and repentance.

A few weeks ago, a friend was telling me about how he came to faith. He spent most of his high school and college years running from God. He was living life his way—drinking, partying, doing whatever seemed to bring the most pleasure at the moment. By his mid-twenties, he was routinely feeling empty, discouraged, and unfulfilled. He knew of a church up the road, so he decided to check out one of their services. At that service, he heard the good news of Jesus Christ — that God loved him, that Jesus died for his sins, and that an abundant life was available to him in Jesus if he placed his trust in him. That night, a seed was planted in his heart.

But later that week, he and his roommates threw a party at their house. After drinking way too much, he got in an intense argument with a friend. He ended up walking outside and punching a fence in anger. In his words, the fence won. When he woke up the next morning, hand swollen and aching, he heard God say, "I thought you said you wanted to change. I thought you said you wanted something better." In that place of desperation, he turned to God and began a journey of faith that is now flourishing today.

Our God loves us too much to watch us run away from him without doing anything about it. He cares for us too deeply to let us go without a fight. But sometimes he has to allow us to experience some pain so that we recognize our need for him. Sometimes that pain feels like God's punishment, but it is actually God's grace. Anything that gets us to turn our eyes off of ourselves and place them on him is God's grace.

When the wind and the waves come, ask yourself, how is God using this moment of desperation as an invitation into repentance?

Recognize God's Salvation

I said earlier that God saved Jonah twice before he ever got to dry ground. First, God saved him from himself. Then, God saved him from his circumstances.

We saw earlier that Jonah cried out to the Lord in his last moments of consciousness. It's at that point that God sends the fish. I'm not sure if Jonah was aware enough at this point to have any coherent thoughts, but if he were, I would love to know what was going through his mind. As this giant fish swims towards him, mouth wide open, I'm fairly sure that he was not thinking, Thank God, help

is here at last. When he cried out to God for help, this is not what he had in mind!

But this was his salvation. That fish saved Jonah's life. As he sat in the belly of that fish for three days and three nights, his eyes were opened. With every fishy breath Jonah took, he was reminded that he was, in fact, alive when he should have been dead.

Sometimes we ask God to send a cruise ship, and he sends a fish. Sometimes we cry out to God for help, and he answers our prayers in a way that doesn't look anything like we expected. After we cry out to God for help, we have to learn to recognize God's salvation. When you cry out to God in distress, God will answer because our God saves. That's who he is. That's what he does. But we have to learn to recognize his salvation. We have to keep our eyes open for the giant fish.

When I was graduating from seminary, my wife Linzy and I were searching to see where the Lord wanted us to go next. We were both offered jobs at the church where we were serving in Chicago, but we sensed the Lord telling us that he had something else for us. Not only that, but the lease on our apartment was ending in 60 days, and we felt the Lord tell us not to renew it. So we turned down the jobs with nothing else on the horizon, let our landlord know we were moving, and prayed that God would provide something else.

About a month later, I was in the final stages of the interview process at a church about 30 minutes away from us in Chicago. It was a great position at a great church, and it looked like the Lord was about to come through.

Just after what I was told was my final interview at this church, I heard back from another church that I had applied to a few weeks earlier. It was a church in Palo Alto, California, called Peninsula Bible Church. I had never been to Palo Alto before. The only thing that I knew about it was that it was way too expensive and that I could never afford to live there. So I told the search committee at Peninsula Bible Church that I was in the final stages of interviewing at another church and was no longer interested in this position.

A few days after later, I got a call from one of the pastors at the church in Chicago telling me that she was so sorry, but this position was getting cut from the budget so they would not be able to offer me the job.

I was shocked. I was disappointed. More than anything, I think I was confused. We had been following God faithfully, listening to his voice, stepping out in faith, and it seemed like he was about to provide. Then it was all taken away.

Then I thought back to that church in Palo Alto. What was it called again? Oh yes, Peninsula Bible Church. I reached out to let them know I would be interested in interviewing after all. I have to say, moving to the Bay Area didn't quite look like a giant fish, but tripling our rent and moving 2,000 miles from family didn't exactly look like a cruise liner either. But five years later, here we are! When God provided this job for me, he didn't only save us from being homeless in Chicago. He has blessed us in ways that we never even imagined were possible.

So what is the giant fish that is coming your way as you are waiting for the cruise liner? Salvation doesn't always look like we expect it to. We need to trust God to save us in the way that only he knows how.

Respond to God with Thanksgiving

As Jonah sits in the belly of the fish, realizing the wonder of what God has just done, he can't help but give thanks.

Jonah 2:8-10:

Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. 9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!" 10 And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

But I will respond with thanksgiving, Jonah says. Scholars refer to Jonah's prayer as a psalm of thanksgiving. It follows the pattern of similar prayers in the book of Psalms where the psalmist recounts their situation of need and the deliverance of the Lord all to express their thanks to God. This is what Jonah is doing. The purpose of this prayer is to give thanks to God.

But this is not just a perfunctory "thanks, God." This is a recognition that God alone is worthy of our thanks and praise. He says that those who put their hope in idols—in hunks of stone and wood, in their jobs, in their health, in their family, in their accomplishments—those who put their hope in these vain idols have no hope of

finding steadfast love. They have no hope of finding salvation. God is not just one possible solution to our problems. God is the one and only solution. Salvation belongs to the Lord. Our God is the God who saves, and he is the only one who saves.

Jonah has learned this lesson the hard way, but he has learned it nevertheless. Once he comes to understand this, he pours out his thanks to God.

Through this prayer, we are invited to do the same. We are invited to respond to God with thanksgiving.

Maybe you take a cue from Jonah and write your own psalm of thanksgiving this week. Write down how you were feeling in your moment of distress and how you saw God answer your cries for help. Then pour out your thanks to him.

Maybe you are still in your moment of distress. That, perhaps, is all the more reason to write a psalm this week. But for you, it is not a psalm of thanksgiving, but a psalm of lament. Here is the difference between the two: a psalm of thanksgiving gives thanks to God for how he saved us from our desperation; a psalm of lament is a cry for help that ends with a word of confidence in the salvation that God will bring.

Salvation belongs to our God. That is no situation that is too big for him, nor is there no person who is too far from him. If God can save Jonah from himself and certain death, he can save you from your distress as well.